

The Politics of Archiving

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Abstract: Archives serve as representations of our collective historical voice. They are one of the most important sources of original materials that create the story of our past. Given this, it is critical to understand what makes up a collection and how the items, both present and not, impact our social consciousness of an event or time period.

In 2012, the author conducted a study examining the Civil Rights archives at two institutions, The University of Southern Mississippi and Queens College, focusing on materials related to a specific event - the Freedom Summer. Using political theorists (Derrida, Foucault, Searle and Chomsky) to set up a framework regarding who has the authority to speak, about what and why, the collections at these institutions were analyzed as to the types of materials present and who donated them. The findings of this study conclusively show biases present in both collections.

As the majority of both archives represent the experiences of white northerners who volunteered during Freedom Summer, the stories of African Americans and native southerners is essentially absent. These biases confirm the notion that those who have social and political capital are also the ones who get to write history. Discovering and acknowledging the disparities that exist in these collections provides researchers with information about what they will find when researching these collections and allow them to consider which, if any additional perspectives may be pertinent to their research. In addition, this may encourage curators to broaden the scope of their collections.

About the author:

Erin Wimmer graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi in 2012 with a Master of Library and Information Science and a Master of Arts in Political Science. Her research interests include equity of access to information and the politics of collection development. Currently, Erin works in the External Relations team at the University of Utah's J. Willard Marriott Library, where she engages in outreach, donor relations and grant writing. In her spare time, Erin enjoys films, baking and playing with her two standard poodles.