

Viewing public history as “history applied to real world issues” really made history come alive for me this week in the readings (NCPH, n.d.). I read a couple of posts from the *History@Work* blog – Sacco’s post about making public history more accessible and Urban’s about the Lower Eastside Tenement Museum in NYC. Sacco’s post (2020) gave concrete examples for how public history institutions could expand access to all during the pandemic, not only for people with disabilities but also for clearer, more concise information both in institutions and online. I made sure to save the post’s reference to Clary’s “Programming for People with Special Needs: A Guide for Museums and Historic Sites” in order to review later because of its focus on universal design recommendations to change museums and historic sites from those of exclusion and limited public access to more open areas (Sacco, 2020).

The Tenement Museum had begun its unionization process when it closed due to COVID; this left workers without union protection at first, but a contract was reached in December that included recall rights for all the employees terminated when the museum closed (Urban, 2021). Like many museums, the Tenement Museum had become an employee-described “workplace under capitalism;” despite its nonprofit status, it leaned into corporate strategies to generate more revenue (Urban, 2021). Because of the unionization process, it appeared that staff were beginning to throw off this top-down corporate mindset and served as catalysts at the Tenement Museum to generate programming addressing the intersection between unionization and campaigning for racial justice (Urban, 2021). However, no tours are happening now and most employees have been laid off so it’s difficult to know whether that momentum will continue once it reopens. I believe museums can focus on their “curatorial, educational, and interpretive work” (Urban, 2021) while at the same time recognize power dynamics inherent in the board of directors’ management system and lean toward embracing social justice issues as part of the institution’s programs and procedures.

Leaning into the social justice side of public history, I was drawn to an article in *The Public Historian* entitled “‘What We Do Crosses Over to Activism’: The Politics and Practice of Community Archives” because I recognized the researchers’ names from a paper I wrote last semester focusing on how community-based archives’ non-traditional practices could be utilized by mainstream archives. Cifor et al.’s article (2020) states that community archives use activism to collaborate and empower marginalized and under-represented communities by helping them tell their stories. Using community archives as tools of power through collecting and preserving records of the under-represented, community archivists can expose the imbalances present in mainstream archives and their practices (Cifor et al., 2020). These Community archivists assert that the objective and neutral approaches favored by traditional archives are inherently biased toward those with power because marginalized stories are not prioritized there (Cifor et al., 2020).

Professional neutrality in the fields of archives, public history, and libraries is the subject of much debate. Notions of neutrality stem from the scientific process which requires an adherence to objectivity in order to maintain credibility in the field (Cifor et al., 2020). However, this fidelity to neutrality can reinforce “problematic traditions of unequal access to historical knowledge and services in society” (Cifor et al., 2020, p. 78). Community archivists view social

justice as necessary to their practices and as such treat their archives as neither objective nor neutral (Cifor et al., 2020). Instead, they focus on transparency in the process as an alternative (Cifor et al., 2020). Cifor et al.'s (2020) study confirms this premise as participants view their subjectivity, shaped by their own identities and experiences, as required to do their work as community-based archivists. Despite no direct questions regarding power in the interviews, the participants viewed "power relations inherent in every archival act" as core to their ethical archival practice which extended into community outreach and programming (Cifor et al., 2020, p. 85). Moreover, participants saw their connecting people with resources as life-changing activism: "Whatever the question is, any time you ask a question, you're not the same person that you were before you asked the question" (Cifor et al., 2020, p. 90).

This article was a lot to take in and blew my mind in a few ways because I could see how this line of thinking could extend to library practices. Libraries exist to connect their communities with resources and each other; this is part of daily library life. This makes us, as future librarians, activists! So how can we act? We can learn from community-based archives and collaborate with and empower under-represented communities by sitting with them in times of sorrow, listening to them and understanding their history and current reality, and then letting them take the lead telling us what they need from libraries so libraries can act. We can continue to work on issues regarding diversity, inclusion, and access using innovative practices and lifting up diverse voices within collections and through staffing. We can advocate for new library facilities in marginalized areas.

Finally, we can radically admit that like public historians and archival scholars, librarians aren't neutral but deeply committed to engaging our communities and doing our work in an ethical manner by naming our biases and working through them for social justice. This means challenging the power structure of knowledge itself by bringing under-heard voices to discussions and research and critically reflect on dominant ideas in the profession (West, 2019). Again, we do this by collaborating with our communities, lamenting, listening, joining in conversation, and then acting together regarding all aspects of library life, thus creating a transparent and open process for all.

Community Archives, Community Spaces provides a wealth of information about community archives, but I was drawn to the Eastorias case study for a couple of reasons – (1) the group, Stand for Democracy, meets at a Lutheran (ELCA) church in Boston and that is my Christian denomination and (2) I have done some work in affordable housing, both on the government side as well as volunteering on the community organizing side – so it hits close to home. I love how Dr. Alcalá became involved in the process because of her Latina identity and her search for community, and it led her to creating this oral archive. She took a professional interest in her personal engagements, and created an oral history archive that represented this community. What if we all could make connections like this?

Dr. Alcalá mentions that oral histories are vital to "affirm[ing] the agency of oppressed groups to speak for themselves and describ[ing] their own realities and truth as authorities" (Alcalá, 2018, p. 158). This is especially needed to counter government and politicians' promotions of

gentrification as part of urban renewal and neighborhood regeneration (Alcalá, 2018). As part of my volunteering with a justice-oriented community organizing group, I have learned the value of people telling their story – it gives ownership of their lives, reframes the narrative, and shows people with power that the storyteller’s voice matters, changing hearts and minds. The list of recommendations Dr. Alcalá delineates for community engagement to succeed are far-reaching, but possible: “mainstream cultural heritage organizations could support community archives through capacity-building based on [1] partnerships that promote[] mentoring, training, & internships to community archives; [2] accountability to community archives through the organization’s recognition and remuneration for joint funding ventures; and [3] maintaining equitable partnerships through trust building and long-term commitments” (Alcalá, 2018, p. 161). Extending this to libraries, it all comes down to connection – how can libraries work with their communities through partnerships to reinvent engagement? I plan to repeatedly challenge myself with this line of thinking as I move through my library career.

References

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