Beyond digitization: Decolonizing the Archival Record by Engaging the Community

DH2020

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OVERVIEW

- Grant-funded digitization
  - Caribbean colonial collections
- Public outreach events
- Thoughts on engaging the public
- Beyond digitization
Grant-funded digitization of colonial archival collections in the Caribbean
The Barbados Mercury Gazette

Collaboration with Barbados Archives (2018)

Funding: Endangered Archives Programme (EAP1086)
Digitization of the Barbados Mercury
(Endangered Archives Programme grant)
Archival records from *Preserving and digitising the historic newspaper, The Barbados Mercury Gazette* (EAP1086)
The Barbadian newspaper

Collaboration with Barbados Archives (2019)

Funding: Endangered Archives Programme (EAP1251)
Ephemera Collection

Collaboration with Barbados Archives (2020)

Funding: Modern Endangered Archives Program (MEAP0011)

More recent material; post-independence; post-colonial

NOTE: At the time of DH2020 this project is still ongoing.
Public Outreach Events
Many ways to mine historic newspapers

Caribbean history
Slavery
British history
Maritime history
Economic history
Material culture
Social history
Colonialism
Gender etc.
1. Documents are scanned as images and are not searchable.
2. Metadata favor dominant voices and the ‘creators’ of archival collections, usually white, upper class, male in their majority.
3. Marginalized groups remain hidden, in fact “locked away” in the text or between the lines.
4. Digitized collections end up reproducing the ‘sins’ of physical collections.
1. If the archival record for marginalized populations (such as the enslaved) is missing, we need to purposefully create it.

2. If information is “locked away,” we need to locate and extract it.

3. Locating and extracting information that was not deemed “important enough” to be included in the archives can help us reconstruct the archival record about the enslaved “retrospectively.”
1. Digital humanities can help interpret silences in digitized collections, fill in gaps, and offer alternative views of the material.

2. Such methods are not easily accessible to all, beyond a small community of academics in the “Global North.”

3. It is not only a matter of training (e.g. knowing how to use digital tools), but also of access (availability of equipment, electricity, bandwidth etc.).
1. Post-custodial archival projects provide funding and expertise to process and digitize archival collections without removing them from the archives they are held.

2. Nearly all funding for digitization projects is provided by institutions located in the “north.”

3. More often than not, these projects result in digitized images that are then uploaded in institutional repositories abroad.

4. These digitized collections will benefit users in the “global north,” while local users remain most times unaware of the availability of this material.
1. Decolonizing the archival record is not a top-down endeavor.

2. Decolonization cannot happen if local communities are not involved.

3. Decolonizing the record starts by
   a. engaging and listening,
   b. not by instructing or dictating.

The people is the archives.
‘Runaway ads’ in Barbadian newspapers (1783-1838)*

* About the dates:
1783: First issue of an extant newspaper (The Barbados Mercury Gazette) that has been digitized
1838: Although the abolition of slavery took place in 1834, full Emancipation came only in 1838, after four years of an “apprenticeship” period during which we find also such ads.
Examples of “Runaway Slave Ads”
1. Ads placed by slave-holders to capture enslaved people who fled bondage.

2. The ads offer portraits and descriptions of people, their appearance, skills, profession, social networks (friends and family).

3. Although ads were a tool of the colonial slavery apparatus, they offer intimate information if read against the grain and between the lines.

4. They can help us reconstruct lives and stories that are not usually recorded in colonial archives.
Runaway ads

1. Contain life stories
2. Show choice, agency, resistance, courage
3. Preserve information about individuals
4. But also intentional silences
HUMAN STORIES

PICKED UP at Fort Royal, Martinique, on the road leading to Fort Desaix (or Bourbon), a Black Boy about 14 or 15 years of age, in a dying condition, who will give no account of himself or owner, but speaks French and English remarkably well. Any person proving him to be their property may have him, by paying all expenses incurred, on application to Mrs. Keane, at the North Battery, Saint Ann's. N.B.—Should he not be claimed in the usual time, he will be sold according to Law.

Dec. 25—2a.
DIFFERENT WAYS TO TELL A STORY
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information</th>
<th>AMBAH</th>
<th>QUASHIBA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location/slave master</td>
<td>Jonathan Perkins</td>
<td>Jonathan Perkins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>Short thick set</td>
<td>Tall slim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skin color</td>
<td>Very black</td>
<td>Yellowish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origin</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>(Barbados-born)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speech</td>
<td>Heavily accented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinctive characteristic</td>
<td>Lost fore-finger from left hand</td>
<td>Much marked w the small-pox</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>Washer-woman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Sam Cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s location</td>
<td>Sandy-Lane estate</td>
<td>Mrs. Skinner’s (Speightstown)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Quashiba, Betty</td>
<td>Dicky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Seen” location 1</td>
<td>Sandy-Lane</td>
<td>Roebuck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Seen” location 2</td>
<td>Hole-Town</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AMBAH AND SAM

Date Range: 1739-

SAM

AMBAH (50)

Sam Cook

Quashiba (30)

Betty (15)

Dicky (4)

FAMILY TREES (Genealogy)

Mercury gazette, January 3, 1789
RELATIONSHIPS & NETWORKS

Jonathan Perkins (slave master)

MOLLY ——— JEMMY

John-Jordan Griffith

“At Mrs. Skinner’s” Speightstown

Sam Cook

Quashiba (30)

Dick (4)

Dorothy Griffith, married to Isaac Skinner

Legacies of British Slave-ownership

Oliver, Monumental Inscriptions

FamilySearch, Ancestry

January 3, 1789 (part b )
Information that can form the basis of spatial humanities projects, for example:
Possibilities for collections-as-data projects, like:

http://merrick.library.miami.edu/cubanHeritage/cubanlaw/lagaceta.php

https://github.com/UMiamiLibraries/collections-as-data/tree/master/LaGaceta
Other projects based on ads

Freedom on the Move

Rediscovering The Stories Of Self-Liberating People

Runaway Slave Ads
Baltimore County, Maryland
1842-1863

Louisiana Runaway Slave Advertisements, 1836-1865

The “Louisiana Runaway Slave Advertisements, 1836-1865” collection is a comprehensive digital collection of advertisements and notices harvested from the newspapers digitized as part of the Digitizing Louisiana Newspapers Project. In these advertisements people from Louisiana and the Lower Mississippi Valley demonstrate their agency and resistance against the institutions of slavery and indentured servitude.
Creating the “Barbados Runaways Digital Collection”

PARTNERSHIP AMONG:

- Department of Archives (Barbados)
- The Early Caribbean Digital Archive (Northeastern U)
- The HeritEdge Connection (Barbados)
Retrospectively creating the archival record by:

- Making ads easily accessible and findable in one place
- Provide transcriptions
- Possibility for crowdsourcing projects
- Genealogical research
- Educational opportunities for teaching
- Engaging the public through workshops
- Allowing for filling in the gaps through
  - Local knowledge
  - Interpretation
  - Speculation
December 2017: Launch of digitization project, introducing community to physical collection
September – November 2019: Crowdsourcing workshops for transcriptions
AIMS OF THE WORKSHOPS:

• Using creative ways to tell different stories
• A space to come together
• Engage with ads (or the newspaper in general) in any way
  • Writing a story
  • Poem
  • Painting or sketch
  • Graphic novel
  • Database
  • Geolocation
  • Music…
Workshops

2020: Creative Workshops

Due to Covid-19, workshops will be conducted online.

- May 14, 2020: Genealogical research with the ads
- Jun 11, 2020: Using speculative writing to tell stories
- Jul 16, 2020: Accessing and using digital resources
- Aug 13, 2020: Creating digital projects
- Sept 10, 2020: Presentations by workshop participants
Visit the site we have put together for the workshops to find:

- Sample ads
- Links to resources
  - Other projects with ads
  - Digital archives and databases for context
  - Using different media to tell a story
  - A bibliography of books, articles, blogposts, novels about ‘runaway slaves’
- Material used in the workshops
Beyond digitization...
Digitization is secondary

More than digitization, we need inventories, catalogues, finding aids
Need for policies and funding for the protection of cultural heritage
Values, when working with communities

- Respect
- Avoid neo-colonialism
- If you are an outsider (i.e. not a community member) avoid ‘teaching' or instructing
- Instead create a safe space for discussion and engagement.
Create information that other users can use or build upon

BUT acknowledge

▪ Gaps
▪ Biases
▪ Omissions
▪ The “logics” of the data
“[T]he idea of data as fundamental & objective information, [...] obscures rather than reveals the scene of the crime.”

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THANK YOU!

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