

Beyond Description: Revealing Institutional Values and Labor in Administrative Records

ELECTIVE PAPER – WINTER 2019

Professor Kathy Carbone
IS 438B: Archival Description and Access Systems

In this essay, I explore the ways in which the archive constructs institutional identity. I compare and contrast the archival workflows and labor practices employed in the Beyond Baroque archive, a literary nonprofit, and the University of California, Los Angeles' University Archives. I situate my experience within contemporary debates around efficient and ethical processing practices, particularly around the widespread set of practices called "More Product, Less Process." In analyzing the ways in which institutional identity is instantiated through archival description and processing, and the various labor models engaged for such instantiation, I address the issues of institutional memory loss and provide examples of potential recuperative archival interventions, both performed and speculative.

Introduction

As economic models have shifted in the neoliberal turn, so too have archives' best practices and workflows for archival description and processing. The limitations put on archival workers are compounded with the continual changing of institutional functions, practices, and structures, replete with problems of underfunding, incentivized profit motives, and resulting precarity. Archivists and record-keepers within the stewarding administrative records of arts and education institutions must still, despite these issues, develop methods to describe and process the extant collections, whether in a backlog or a storage closet. The narrowing of viable economic models for archives therefore affects the archival representation of an institution's identity and memory. This process is described in Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee's "Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field," which addresses the ethical concerns of how changing labor practices affect the archival field. In this essay, I will explore the ways in which the archive constructs institutional identity, parsing the differences between two archives, looking at their description and processing practices and its intersection with their labor structure. These archives include the Beyond Baroque archive, a literary nonprofit, and the University of California, Los Angeles' University Archives. My research will be conducted through a thorough analysis of the debates around efficient and ethical processing practices, particularly around the widespread practices called "More Product, Less Process." I will reflect on my experience and involvement with the varied manifestations of these practices in two distinct archives. In analyzing the ways in which institutional identity is instantiated through archival description and processing, and the various labor models engaged for such instantiation, I hope to address the issues of

institutional memory loss and provide examples of potential recuperative archival interventions, both performed and speculative.

More Product, Less Process

In 2005, Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner wrote the seminal article, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," which argued for a stream-lining of the methods used in description and processing, and a priority shift from preservation to user access.¹ The article was written in reaction to the significant amount of unprocessed material sitting in archives, even as time-intensive preservation practices such as removing metal fasteners and refolding twentieth-century materials were still part of the current workflow. What Greene and Meissner argue for in terms of description and processing is an adherence to a "golden minimum" that values processing productivity, and keeping description relegated to higher-levels of arrangement.²

Cifor and Lee cite MPLP as evidence for the neoliberal model archives currently inhabit, claiming that "[u]nder MPLP archivists become workers on an assembly line[,] aiming for standardization, ever-greater amounts of linear feet processed, and at increased speed."³ This claim perhaps overstates the role by which MPLP contributes directly to the atomization of labor, viewing it as cause rather than effect. However, this motivation to accelerate processing productivity does have ramifications on the labor output of archives. As the wider field of LIS has moved towards "a discursive framework in which the value of information is determined by its ability to be monetized," institutions have placed value in

¹ Greene, Mark, and Dennis Meissner. "More product, less process: Revamping traditional archival processing." *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208-263.

² *Ibid.* 255.

³ Cifor, Marika, and Jamie A. Lee. "Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field." *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 12.

the collection metrics rather than the research value of the materials.⁴ The precautionary critique is that MPLP's focus on productivity may let the more granular, detail-specific elements of archival description and processing slip through the cracks of new, heavily-standardized procedures.

Cifor and Lee continue that MPLP often supercedes "critical approaches that are social justice-oriented and that recognize heterogeneous collections and records creators as integral to the breadth and depth of archival collections."⁵ Oversight in MPLP is a concern, as efficient processing does not necessarily allow for interventions such as describing along ethical standards or conducting outreach to creators and stakeholders. This may not preclude the option, however, as Greene and Messnier do call for flexibility above all. They state that a combined consideration of both user-needs and reality of limited resources "will determine the level of descriptive detail, as it does the level of arrangement."⁶ As the archival institutions change accordingly to the squeezing of funds and the subsequent freezing on hiring new staff, awareness of the limitations of an archivist's processing labor has become essential for adapting best practices. The diffusion of skills and workload management required to keep up with institutional demands may make the option of stream-lining description and processing collections attractive, and sometimes even necessary. The Society of American Archivist's *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (DACCS) does not prescribe a one-size-fits-all level of description, but similarly allows for flexibility and agency on the part of the archivist: "Archivists should

⁴ Cope, Jonathan. "Neoliberalism and library & information science: Using Karl Polanyi's fictitious commodity as an alternative to neoliberal conceptions of information." (2014). 6

⁵ Cifor and Lee. 12.

⁶ Greene and Meissner. 216.

follow the prescriptions of their institutions and apply their own judgment in making such determinations.”⁷ Within the changing context of archival labor, description and processing practices inhabit an area of contention between the archive’s identity and values, and the limitations imposed by economic constrictions and incentives.

Processing and Narrative Power

Descriptive choices and interventions in archival processing contribute to the context built around the existing structure and contextual relationships of records. Archival description has always been about power. Luciana Duranti traces the beginning of archival description – the act of writing about records – to the “rise of the municipal autonomy in the twelfth century, that is, until there was a need to study precedents, document rights and defend the interests of the city against the central power.”⁸ As Jennifer Meehan describes of the postmodern view of archival representation: “in the course of interpreting and representing provenance and original order, practitioners are in effect creating the external boundaries and internal ordering of a body of records.”⁹ To give a brief history of this development Meehan describes, original order is a foundational principle in the archival field, established as a concept in Germany and France before being systemized by Muller, Feith, and Fruin in their 1898 *Dutch Manual* and later by Sir Hilary Jenkinson. Terry Cook describes the functionality of original order, viewing it as “designed so that archival records were arranged, described, and maintained to reflect the context of their creation, rather than rearranged (as earlier) by subject or theme or place, thereby destroying their

⁷ “Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS).” *Chicago: Society of American Archivist* (2004). 7.

⁸ Duranti, Luciana. “Origin and development of the concept of archival description.” *Archivaria* 35 (1992). 48.

⁹ Meehan, Jennifer. “Arrangement and Description: Between Theory and Practice.” *Archives and Recordkeeping: Theory into Practice*. (2014). 76-77.

contextual validity and meaning in favour of their informational content.”¹⁰ This had direct consequence on the processing of material, which to the highest priority had to preserve the contextual relationships already established by the “order” of a collection and its records.

Heretofore, archives were teleologically tied to the notions of “Truth,” and thus the role of the archivist was primarily preservation rather than interpreting and representing.¹¹ Description was tied to the arrangement of the materials, and as an archival tool was meant to reveal meaning rather than take part in crafting it. However, as the number of documents produced increased with greater administrative and media production, archivists were faced with the complex task of selecting and appraising what would be preserved. The act of archival appraisal gave pause to theorists who now had to consider the subjectivity and curation of the archive and what it represents, taking on a new constructivist perspective. Original order, while still a foundational concept, is integrated into this framework as well. Because it is not inherently a given that the archival collection will preserve the relationships of records and their context, it is important to draw attention to the curated and constructed nature of arrangement and description.

The narrative told by the records is contested within description, as Jennifer Meehan states: “In describing the content and context of the records, the practitioner is, in effect, constructing stories and names that highlight certain aspects of context, while downplaying or ignoring other aspects.”¹² The decisions made in the processing of records

¹⁰ Cook, Terry. "Evidence, memory, identity, and community: four shifting archival paradigms." *Archival science* 13, no. 2-3 (2013): 106.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 106.

¹² Meehan. 81.

will ultimately affect how users select, interact with and interpret materials from archival collections. The remedial power of description is not something that should fall to the wayside when using MPLP techniques and workflows. This power has not gone un-interrogated, as Anne Gilliland has questioned how representation occurs in archival descriptions, stating that “the metadata generated when these materials are first created and used, or by the government, academic, and other institutional repositories that later preserve and provide access to them, rarely directly or adequately addresses the concerns and needs of all parties involved in their creation and use within the relevant community of records.”¹³ Archives within institutions have a responsibility to address the address concerns of transparency, ownership and process in their archival representations, especially when external communities are affected. As archives in arts and education institutions undergo structural changes, description remains a powerful intermediary between the records and the public.

Beyond Baroque

Beyond Baroque is an independent Literary Arts Center in Venice, California. Since its founding in 1968 by George Drury Smith, it has become a cornerstone of the literary community in Los Angeles.¹⁴ Community focused events like readings and performances double as experimental space for writers and artists, as well as hubs for education for the wider public community. Beyond Baroque is also well-renowned for its weekly, community workshops that have been attended and led by some of Los Angeles’ leading literary talents. Throughout its history, the space has undergone changes along with the city of

¹³ Gilliland, Anne J. "Contemplating co-creator rights in archival description." *KO: Knowledge Organization*. 39, no. 5 (2012): 340-41.

¹⁴ Beyond Baroque. "About." <http://www.beyondbaroque.org/about.html>.

Venice, as influxes of real estate interest and capital have terraformed its neighborhoods. Its first location was on West Washington Boulevard, described as a derelict stretch for down-and-out artists and crime, it was remodeled and rebranded in the 80s as Abbot Kinney Boulevard (named after Venice's prime investor and millionaire founder).¹⁵ Now, Abbot Kinney is the city's center for tourism and luxury shopping, while Beyond Baroque inhabits Venice's old City Hall building. Herein lies the symbolic shift from outsider artist space to public arts institution. This shift is reflective of Beyond Baroque's nonprofit status, a designation that was vital to creating a distribution network for publications as a result of discounted postage rates.¹⁶ Thus by leveraging their ability to produce publications, they created a community/network of artists and writers through this production of text. The foundation of the space and the communities which circulate and revolve around it is tied indelibly to materials gathered in the archive. By moving to a nonprofit status there is more potential for varied flows of federal, state, and local funding than there was formerly, but they may also experience tradeoffs in independence from outside stakeholders. The Beyond Baroque Foundation is funded by memberships, sponsors, and grants.

The Beyond Baroque archive is housed on premises, retained within record cartons within shelved closets. With the aid of Library and Information Studies students and other area graduate students from University of California, Los Angeles, Johanna Drucker took to the task of organizing and performing minor descriptive work on Beyond Baroque's archival collections. In developing a working filing system for the purposes of keeping track

¹⁵ Groves, Martha. "Abbot Kinney Boulevard's Renaissance a Mixed Blessing." *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2013. <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/25/local/la-me-abbot-kinney-changes-20131026>.

¹⁶ Drucker, Johanna. "Fifty Years of Beyond Baroque: 1968–2018." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 5, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/fifty-years-beyond-baroque-1968-2018/>.

of the many cartons on-site, the records were split between institutional records (IR) and publication records (PR). I was brought on to assist this process in the fall of 2018, doing file level description of select cartons of administrative materials and digitization for non-unique materials such as calendars and event flyers. Beyond Baroque's managing staff did not have much interaction with the archival materials outside of storing them on premises. Beyond Baroque entered into a fortuitous, mutually beneficial relationship with Johanna Drucker and students, opening the archive for the benefit of research.

Among the graduate students assisting in the project, some joined the project on a volunteer basis and some working through the MLIS program received compensation through the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. This outsourcing of labor in the arrangement and description process allows for opportunities in research and training when using the materials, as well as offering archival expertise and work. This decision was surely affected by the current formation of the institution, as administrators and staff do not have the resources to tackle the organization and description of the materials themselves. The formation of this de facto archival processing unit reflects the structure of arts nonprofits, which traditionally select from "volunteer and paid labor pools."¹⁷ One can infer that this may be a result of the current infrastructural model, as there used to be a "librarian" position at Beyond Baroque.¹⁸ The effort to "catalog" these materials is both advantageous for Beyond Baroque as an artistic community, concerned with the preservation and curation of legacy, as well as a nonprofit organization, concerned with the upkeep, housing, and cost of labor. The end goal of the archival description project

¹⁷ Kushner, Roland J., and Peter P. Poole. "Exploring structure-effectiveness relationships in nonprofit arts organizations." *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 7, no. 2 (1996): 121.

¹⁸ Mohr, Bill. *Hold-outs: The Los Angeles Poetry Renaissance, 1948-1992*. University of Iowa Press, 2011.

is to create an inventory that can be appraised for its value, and potentially acquired by another institutional archive. With this in mind, it may not be suitable for Beyond Baroque to train or hire staff to handle and describe their archival materials. The labor structure of the archive certainly imposes limitations on the methodology of the archival project at hand.

The description of institutional records was completed on a file level at its most granular, with some cartons only being recorded for its general contents as a means of efficiency. The description process used spreadsheets to record the collection data, using a filing system designed to distinguish each record by its record carton and type of document (institutional or publication record). The metadata elements used in the description includes "Date," "Document Type," "Description," "Condition," and "Notes/Digitize." The process, while barebones in constitution, transposes essential elements from DACS and leaves the typical hierarchical structure at the wayside for a more functional model. This model does not try to define the relationships between each carton of materials beyond its generic function and designation as an "Institutional Record" or a "Publication Record." Within the elements discussed, the workflow emphasized scanning for information that would benefit research. For instance, the processing methodology privileged descriptions of events and people represented in the records rather than the genre or form. In this way, research value as determined by the archivists says something about the nature of the institution, and how meaning is derived and constructed from its records. What does it mean for a nonprofit's archive to describe their own materials, abandoning the typical hierarchical model in support of values held within the institution? And how do archival actors fulfill these values when regulated by the physical, temporal, and monetary

limitations? What results could perhaps be equated to Greene and Meissner's "golden minimum," as a flexible reaction to the limitation of resources and the needs of the users, here being Beyond Baroque's administrators and the archive's eventual appraisers. In this way, the particular methods of description and processing can be used as a lens through which one views the archive's identity. Jennifer Meehan describes the ways in which archival practices are formed by external forces:

"At any given time there are various forces... shaping what is or is not required, feasible, and/or desirable in terms of processing. Such forces include: the needs of the records as both physical and intellectual objects; the demands of archival theory (the set of ideas about the nature of the records); the practical limitations of archival methodology (the set of ideas about how to treat records based on their nature); and the even more practical limitations of available resources, systems and tools."¹⁹

It is no question that what is conscripted by an institution's mission and their labor practices will have an inevitable effect on what formation the archive takes, but I argue that there is agency within the choices made in archival processing, that distinguish the archive as subject to the present state of its institutional structure and as active shaper of the institution's memory, past and future.

University Archives

College and university archives here can be defined as the archival repository and official record holder of the parent institution.²⁰ The official records can consist of a multitude of different record types, including administrative, and historical records, or records of cultural significance. Christopher Prom describes the primary responsibility of

¹⁹ Meehan. 64.

²⁰ Maher, William J. *The management of college and university archives*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1992.

university archives to “document and provide verifiable information about its parent institution,” and thus act as an intermediary between users of the records and the institution’s records.²¹ University archives play the important role of crafting the historical record of the parent institution, a place and entity that is already suffuse with its own mythological status and lore. John Thelin in his paper “Archives and the Cure for Institutional Amnesia: College University Saga as Part of the Campus Memory,” discussed the difficulty university archives face in systematically collecting and retaining records when confronted with changing legal demands, rapidly advancing technologies and stagnant staffing practices.²² For Thelin, university archives are directly connected to the “legends and lore of campus life” as a vessel for preserving the parent institution’s identity and distinct culture.²³ It is no surprise that universities go to great lengths to develop this type of identification. Thelin describes a quite amusing and telling anecdote of this type of crafted “instant history”:

“At the new UCLA campus, opened in 1929, acres of bean fields and vacant tracts did not evoke collegiate nostalgia. First, there were no alumni yet. Second, something crucial was missing from the academic landscape. Resourceful trustees and donors had a good, prompt solution: they paid to have a huge boulder imported to the campus and immediately anointed it as Founders’ Rock.”²⁴

As the focus of my study, UCLA’s University Archives is thus continually contending with and working alongside the massive identity curated by a larger administration and the

²¹ Prom, C. (2010). Optimum access? Processing in college and university archives. *The American Archivist*, 73(1), 147.

²² Thelin, John R. "Archives and the cure for institutional amnesia: college and university saga as part of the campus memory." *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, no. 1-2 (2009): 4-15.

²³ *Ibid.* 4.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 8.

cultural understanding of the parent institution. Within this context, it is true that university archives in particular are challenged with developing dynamic systems that can collect crucial departmental and administrative materials, even while there are backlogs of material yet to be processed. This dilemma compounds itself into absences within the university archive.

One approach that university archives have developed, including UCLA's University Archives, is the MPLP method of processing. Greene and Meissner's findings on the lack of productivity of archival processing methods speak to this directly, as 64 out of the 100 archives surveyed in their report were college or university archives.²⁵ Their analysis advocates against the archive's "strong tendency to set as a benchmark the creation of a substantial, multilayered, descriptive finding aid," and to rather work with each collection flexibly, towards a processing minimum. In a statistical analysis of the findings presented by Greene and Meissner, Christopher Prom interrogates their recommendation to focus on changing processing practices in a shift towards "repository-, collection-, and series-level descriptions" of the materials in an effort to save time and labor.²⁶ His findings indicate that there is an evident, but very weak relationship between "intensive processing and slower processing speed," though these marginal differences in processing speed are because of the varying methods used by different institutions. Prom points out the widely-varying relationships that exist within the findings:

"The fact that productivity must be plotted on a logarithmic scale is sadly telling. Some archives out-process others by a factor of 10 or more. But the lack of a strong correlation between the use of intensive processing techniques and slower processing speed is even

²⁵ Greene and Meissner. 210.

²⁶ Prom. 151.

more significant. It means we must examine the whole range of archival activities, management techniques, and outside factors if we wish to improve productivity and collection access.”²⁷

In this way, Prom’s analysis points out that MPLP is by no means a blanket solution, but rather a specific tool to be used by archivists when necessary. He states that in many cases, “it will make more sense to change appraisal and reference practices, address personnel issues, or improve descriptive workflows before implementing ‘processing lite.’”²⁸

The University Archives at UCLA collects departmental and administrative records as part of the Library Special Collections. The collections are viewed in the Ahmanson-Murphy Reading Room located on campus in the Young Research Library, while collections are held in the nearby Southern Regional Library Facility. Through the Center for Primary Research and Training, a program that hires graduate students to conduct research through archival processing work, I was hired to help transfer legacy materials in Microsoft Access to the new content management system, ArchivesSpace. As institutions change, so do the technologies used to act as content management systems, UCLA has gone from using Access to Archivists’ Toolkit to ArchivesSpace in a relatively short period of time. Transference of this material has considerable effects on the labor output of archivists, though it may offer chances for redescription projects to be undertaken. Description in UCLA’s University Archive implements ArchivesSpace to write EAD that can be exported as finding aids to the Online Archive of California (OAC). A correlating MARC record is also created and hosted on an internal cataloging system Voyager ILS in order to grant access to the record series through the catalog. This transfer of archival data was not performed

²⁷ Prom. 158.

²⁸ Prom. 159.

without remediation and adjudication of form, as the archival data needed cleaning and further re-processing to remain in compliance with current institutional standards.

DACS is used as a content standard for description and UCLA-specific processing guidelines have been developed alongside guidelines created for the University of California system. The document *Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in University of California Libraries*, written in 2012, specifically cites MPLP as a methodology for drafting iterative and minimally-tasking techniques and workflows. Perhaps in anticipation of some pushback on the part of archivists, one passage invokes the reasoning of efficiency as a means to empowerment:

“In sum, the efficient processing techniques described in this manual do not devalue your work or your collections. They empower you to make complicated, informed choices about the work you perform so that you may surface more of your institution's important research material to its users. You may still take pride in all that you accomplish and all the researchers you serve when you use efficient processing techniques.”²⁹

However this language may be interpreted by an archivist, it is important to reconcile the changing institution-wide practices and guidelines with the agency behind archivists in implementing and altering these suggested workflows. MPLP is a reality in university archives because of collection policies that hyperextend the archival net and thus extend the archivists' resources and labor. In relation to this context, MPLP is one very useful tool for archivists to cut back on over-describing records and stream-lining processing practices in ways that still treat collections effectively and with care. In fact, developing standards for assessing and determining value and labor costs at several checkpoints through the

²⁹ Bachli, Kelley et al. Next Generation Technical Services POT 3 Lightning Team 2. “Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries.” Version 3.2. September 18, 2012. 8.

accessioning and processing trajectory is quite an important practice. The document does acknowledge that this is also an issue for management and curation: “Backlogs in UC special collections and archives are not merely a problem for technical services, they are also a collecting problem. Backlogs can be the result of institutions acquiring more material than their staffing and resources can handle.”³⁰

Other administrative decisions, like the changing of staffing policies and labor practices also have ramifications on a university archives’ processing capabilities. For instance, temporary archivist positions that span two years have been widely used at university archives and UCLA in particular, as a method of keeping up with backlogs while skirting the investment of hiring full-time, permanent positions.³¹ Temporary workers at the UCLA Special Collections have collectively felt the harm of these contract positions, and with the support of their union, the University Council – American Federation of Teachers, have petitioned for UCLA to end and ameliorate the hiring practice. Cifor and Lee identify this issue as a development within the pervasive neoliberal framework of the archives, and one that acts as a detriment to the preservation of materials:

“This puts the long-term survival of archives at risk, which challenges the archival paradigm of long-term preservation and historical importance. These labor models, especially of unpaid internships mean that the archival profession opens itself just to those in the privileged financial situation to be able to undertake such labors thereby replicating problematic inequalities in the profession.”³²

³⁰ Ibid. 8.

³¹ Monaghan, Peter. “Are Temporary Appointments a Threat to Archiving? |.” *Moving Image Archive News*. February 8, 2019. <http://www.movingimagearchivenews.org/are-temporary-appointments-a-threat-to-archiving/>.

³² Cifor and Lee. 13.

This current issue is reminiscent of earlier uses of temporary librarian practices used by UCLA, and the fight over the language specifying when such positions were appropriate. This practice is contextualized by the massive amount of unprocessed material retained by UCLA's archives, holding a backlog of "more than 2,000 collections that total more than 8,500 linear feet" of unprocessed materials, some accessioned decades ago.³³ Even as there is an inordinate amount of material yet to be processed, UCLA only has one permanent processing archivist on its staff, while there are five permanent, full-time curators. UCLA is not necessarily unique in this practice, as many archives have been faced with shrinking funds and increased workloads. My position as a graduate student worker was not immune to this either, as a change of scope for the CFPRT program eventually cut the University Archives Processing Scholar position short, leaving work to be done with many of the archives' unprocessed and untransferred collections. Temporary positions certainly contribute harm to the archival field, as it fosters precarity (which may also be attributed to a market saturation in the archival field), leaving archivists to hop from position to position, institution to institution. A considerable amount of training investment and institutional and research knowledge leaves with the archivist as their contract term ends.

The condition archivists work under does have an effect on the quality, efficiency and flexibility of their description and processing output. The actions taken by UCLA's temporary archivists have shown the value of their labor; collectivized efforts to coalition-build and petition the administration for change is in effect an effort to change the conditions of their labor. In creating a better environment for workers, archivists essentially create opportunities to instill processing methodologies that better reflect the

³³ Monaghan.

values of the archive. Exhibiting their agency in a myriad of ways, archivists in the university develop description and processing practices that expand the scope detailed by MPLP and UC base guidelines. For instance, the CFPRT is working on developing a Redescription Project that aims to survey existing finding aids and develop best practices for using terminology that better reflects self-description of the communities represented in collections. This project, although not completed, is yet one example of a heterogeneous method of description that is not covered in MPLP, though it can work compatibly with such practices if standardized. As MPLP was designed to mollify the issues of busy collecting and increased backlogs, it is effective in revealing the ways in which record description can be overwrought and at times inappropriate. In some cases, record series were previously over-described, going into granular item-level detail to an excruciating extent. As the truism goes, once described, a finding aid data can go from more granular to less but cannot become more granular. Therefore, it is important to develop standards to determine what level of granularity is appropriate and necessary. Because my appointment was a reprocessing project, part of the workflow included rearrangement and redescription of the records. Elizabeth Yakel espouses redescription as a necessary component of archives, recommending that “archivists ... not only be reorganizing collections and revisiting poor descriptions, but completing periodic redescriptions of entire archives to accommodate these changing meanings.”³⁴ Viewing description and processing as continuous, ongoing negotiations, the archive thus becomes a very active participant in the representation of records. Such are examples of how description and processing practices can be adapted to reflect the identity of the archive, and its values.

³⁴ Yakel, Elizabeth. "Archival representation." *Archival Science* 3, no. 1 (2003): 4.

Returning to Thelin's concept of institutional identity, we may see that the labor practices of university archives have direct effects on the description and processing of record series. MPLP may be a coping mechanism but it may also be just one tool in a toolbox. In my experience at the University Archive, working through the remediation and re-processing of record series revealed the ways in which description and processing shape an archive's identity. Of course, within the University Archive the question of a holistic identity is fraught, as an academic archive is composed of the record series of many different departments and administrations. In this way, it is not the collections themselves that define the identity of the archive, but the methods and practices of archival description and processing, which imbue the extant records series with meaning. It is in their archival representation that research-value and, indeed, narrative is held. As the work of Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Terry Cook tell us, archivist's decisions of appraisal and documentation affect the construction of history and its memory. One can see that description and processing have a hand in the artifice of the archive, as methods of inscribing records with meaning and context.

Interventions and Potentials

In making meaning from these two distinct experiences of archival practice – both constricted by their independent reactions to the same economic forces – I turn to their methodologies of archival description and processing as a means of identifying their institutional identities and value. Amongst uncertainty and fissure in the relationship of the archives to their parent institution, both the limitations and the agency of the archivist are contained within their decisions of description, communicating the values of the archives in conjunction with the perceived needs of the users. In the case of *Beyond Baroque's*

archives, emphasis on surface-level descriptions of folders and pulling out data on important community figures and events were essential to the processing workflow. Though limited in funds and physical space on-site, the symbiotic relationship between Beyond Baroque and Johanna Drucker's work was founded on a trust that the archival collection and the values of the institution contained within would be preserved in their processing.

The UCLA University Archives contained a much more codified experience of processing workflow, with conscription to industry standards like DACS, EAD, and RDA outlining what elements of description should be used and what they should look like. This is not to say that there is not relative freedom and creative license when describing university materials, though the robust system of peer-reviews provides much needed accountability in the description process. It is the modified MPLP methodology crafted from UC guidelines that archivists in the Library Special Collections developed their descriptive practices to best fit the needs of their users and potential ethical considerations. Accountability and trust are built into these archives in different ways, both as methods of inscribing checks and balances on the preservation of the archive's identity and as a constitution of the social relationship of the archives to its stewards. Both archives have systems built in to avoid the process of institutional memory loss. This can take many different forms, even creative ones such as digitization as preservation, outreach and programming in relation to the materials, write-ups, blog posts, or digital projects surrounding the records. Policies and standards can shape the way that records are retained within the archive. Records retention schedules in the university archives also ensure that some records are not held forever, rather having a determined shelf-life.

Though absences in the archive are ever-present, it is archivists' task as active-agents to "consciously creat[e] public memory" through the collections selected for preservation as Cook describes.³⁵ Description is one site of intervention through which archivists contribute to public memory.

The development of recuperative and transparent interventions for making the description standards and practices employed by archives reflective of the needs of users and the communities represented. Meehan provides suggestions for specific practices that could tailor archival description practices to process:

"To better document archival context, specifically as it concerns arrangement and description, additional information might be included in the finding aid (or other access tool) and further documentation might be provided to users that sheds light on both the institutional context of arrangement and description practices and the process of the individual practitioner."³⁶

Documentation of archival practices is a useful method for highlighting the institutions own practices, and at once reveals to the user the constructed nature of records and their descriptions. As an embedded system of accountability, documentation allows the user to come to conclusions about the archivist's decisions.

Interventions have also taken place in description to better reflect the complicated nature of provenance and creatorship of records. As Eric Ketelaar summarizes of this growing practice: "More and more, government and business archives will contain records of parallel provenance from two or more entities each residing in a different context, even when they are involved in different kinds of action, for example creation and control."³⁷

³⁵ Cook. 108.

³⁶ Meehan. 88.

³⁷ Ketelaar, Eric. "Archives as spaces of memory." *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 29, no. 1 (2008): 15.

The establishment of parallel provenance in archives offers many potentials for re-thinking the ways in which archival descriptions are made to accredit records to agents. Though typically used in archives that use the series system, exploring new ways of describing attribution and creating links between collections has become a promising development. Creating access to beneficial relationships and communities is integral to the opening of potentials for processing archivists, as Beyond Baroque did when developing a working relationship with Johanna Drucker and her students, and as the UCLA Library Special Collections staff did when taking union action in support of their temporary archivists. Community archives are an important venue for re-negotiating the terms on which archival materials are collected and owned, developing new methods of crafting archival relationships in an economic era where there is little value attributed to communities' heritage and historical materials.³⁸ How can emerging practices and structures within community archives be adapted to open descriptive practices up to participation? Does an institutional repository have a duty to co-design representation with the creators? Questions such as these have potential to guide the discourse of description practices into the future. Protection against harm and precarity and putting communities and values first in the archive is a methodology of its own. When coupled with informed description and processing practices, new participatory methods can expand the potential for the ways in which archives are currently instantiated at-large.

Conclusion

Archival description acts as a powerful tool used in archival processing practices, as a means of establishing narrative and thus distinguishing the values and identity of the

³⁸ Cifor and Lee. 14.

archive. Wendy Duff and Verne Harris speak to this process of narrativization, and how contemporary understandings of archival description can be leveraged in the future memory crafted by archival collections:

“In describing records, archivists are working with context, continually locating it, constructing it, figuring and refiguring it. Context, in principle, is infinite. The describer selects certain layers for inclusion, and decides which of those to foreground. In this process, there is analysis, listing, reproduction, and so on, but its primary medium is narrative.”³⁹

Creating context in the archival environment is thus an act of selection. Even more so, creating context is an act of direct, agentic archival intervention, as limitations imposed upon archivists relegate the possibilities in processing work. As Cifor and Lee identify, neoliberal economic models have infiltrated the archives, shaping the administrative decisions behind the policies, standards, hiring practices, and to some extent processing methods. Greene and Meissner’s MPLP remains a hugely influential piece of literature and methodology for processing collections with flexibility and efficiency. Although MPLP is not necessarily harmful to the production of ethical and responsible descriptive practices, it should not be an excuse for a one-size-fits-all finding aid description. Many archives are currently engaged in a struggle to keep up with massive accruals of unprocessed backlogs, which has a multitude of reasons for existence and effects on the condition of archival labor. When confronting the realities of the archive under neoliberal policies, MPLP is one effective method of reducing harm and keeping descriptive practices user-focused.

³⁹ Duff, Wendy M., and Verne Harris. "Stories and names: archival description as narrating records and constructing meanings." *Archival Science* 2, no. 3-4 (2002): 276.

Certainly, there is no blanket solution that can be adopted in all archives, as each archive will have a distinct set of guidelines, missions, and policies that will alter their workflow.

Within my experience at Beyond Baroque and UCLA's University Archives, the description and processing of materials manifested itself in differing ways. Whereas Beyond Baroque's archives were better suited for quick, file-level descriptions that emphasize the particular research and community values of the arts nonprofit, UCLA's University Archives has robust guidelines adapted from industry standards like DACS. Descriptive methods have multifarious effects on the ways in which users and the public interacts with archival materials; it is one way that institutional identity is inscribed in the archive. Though the subjectivity of archival description is cloaked by normalcy and previous claims to professional objectivity, postmodern critiques have illuminated the judgments that go into representing records. Although the archival practices employed were determined by the mission of the parent institution and limited by resources and labor practices, there is agency both collective and individual that can make an imprint on the archival representation. Recognizing this agency acknowledges that archivists can take part in establishing archival representations. Emerging descriptive methods and archival interventions have been developed in conjunction with the belief that archival representations hold responsibility in espousing institutional values and identity. Looking ahead, archives and archivists must determine what descriptive practices will effectively and ethically work within the structure of their institution.

Bibliography

- Bachli, Kelley et al. Next Generation Technical Services POT 3 Lightning Team 2. "Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries." Version 3.2. September 18, 2012. 1-55.
- Beyond Baroque. "About." <http://www.beyondbaroque.org/about.html>.
- Cifor, Marika, and Jamie A. Lee. "Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field." *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1-22.
- Cook, Terry. "Evidence, memory, identity, and community: four shifting archival paradigms." *Archival science* 13, no. 2-3 (2013): 95-120.
- "Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)." *Chicago: Society of American Archivist* (2004). 7.
- Drucker, Johanna. "Fifty Years of Beyond Baroque: 1968–2018." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 5, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/fifty-years-beyond-baroque-1968-2018/>.
- Duff, Wendy M., and Verne Harris. "Stories and names: archival description as narrating records and constructing meanings." *Archival Science* 2, no. 3-4 (2002): 263-285.
- Duranti, Luciana. "Origin and development of the concept of archival description." *Archivaria* 35 (1992).
- Gilliland, Anne J. "Contemplating co-creator rights in archival description." *KO: Knowledge Organization*. 39, no. 5 (2012): 340-346.
- Greene, Mark, and Dennis Meissner. "More product, less process: Revamping traditional archival processing." *The American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208-263.
- Groves, Martha. "Abbot Kinney Boulevard's Renaissance a Mixed Blessing." *Los Angeles Times*, October 25, 2013. <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/25/local/la-me-abbot-kinney-changes-20131026>.
- Ketelaar, Eric. "Archives as spaces of memory." *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 29, no. 1 (2008): 9-27.
- Kushner, Roland J., and Peter P. Poole. "Exploring structure-effectiveness relationships in nonprofit arts organizations." *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 7, no. 2 (1996): 119-136.

- Maher, William J. *The management of college and university archives*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1992.
- Mohr, Bill. *Hold-outs: The Los Angeles Poetry Renaissance, 1948-1992*. University of Iowa Press, 2011.
- Monaghan, Peter. "Are Temporary Appointments a Threat to Archiving? |." *Moving Image Archive News*. February 8, 2019. <http://www.movingimagearchivenews.org/are-temporary-appointments-a-threat-to-archiving/>.
- Prom, C. (2010). Optimum access? Processing in college and university archives. *The American Archivist*, 73(1), 146-174.
- Theelin, John R. "Archives and the cure for institutional amnesia: college and university saga as part of the campus memory." *Journal of Archival Organization* 7, no. 1-2 (2009): 4-15.
- Yakel, Elizabeth. "Archival representation." *Archival Science* 3, no. 1 (2003): 1-25.