

NOT YOUR REGULAR ARCHIVE

Students and Librarians Exploring Records of Lives Suppressed

Alisa Sopova

“When I started working here in 2003, collecting this type of material received relatively little interest and attention,” says Fernando Acosta-Rodríguez, the Librarian for Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Studies at Princeton University Library, pointing at the assemblage of posters, leaflets, and bumper stickers at the table in front of him. Now, this collection of ephemera from Latin American countries is a valuable component of the Princeton University Library’s collections, and librarians responsible for other parts of the world are in the business of establishing such collections too.

Printed materials like flyers, posters, or tickets are called ephemera because they are not meant to last long. However, when treated not as disposables but as artifacts, they are capable of telling important stories, often the ones that would otherwise remain obscure. Conventionally, archives have been dominated by the materials produced by the rich and powerful, from 18th century slave owners to the modern government agencies. In the meantime, common people have no chance of leaving their trace in the official depositories of collective memory, except when mentioned in state records. Recently, librarians like Acosta-Rodríguez and scholars who work in the archives have been increasingly calling for more inclusive and true-to-life archiving practices.

The archival silences and the alternative bodies of knowledge that allow to access and preserve the experiences of the populations which are mis- or unrepresented in the traditional record-keeping are the focus of the graduate-level “Insurgent Archivings” class taught by Professor João Biehl in the Department of Anthropology. On September 14, 2021, Professor Biehl and his students visited the Special Collections division of Firestone Library where Acosta-Rodríguez spoke about the history of various collections and shared many insights. Apart from fascinating pieces from the Latin American Ephemera Collection, he showed previously secret documents

from the Documenting the Peruvian Insurrection collection which were preserved thanks to a collaboration between the Peruvian journalist Gustavo Gorriti and Princeton. He also shared some more conventional archival materials acquired by the library decades ago. Many students were impressed by “Codex Aubin,” a chronicle of Aztec history probably created in the late 18th century written in Nahuatl and Spanish with hand-painted watercolor illustrations.

Professor Biehl’s group was also introduced to Kelly Bolding and Phoebe Nobles, the processing archivists who presented on their ongoing work of revising the Princeton libraries’ classifications and item descriptions in order to make them more equitable and acknowledge contributions – or even basic humanity – of those who have been omitted and disregarded by the conventional classificatory practices. Some of Bolding and Nobles’ contributions include adding names and other biographical details to the descriptions of documents related to slavery (for example, “Minnie, a girl born into slavery” instead of simply “Slave child”) and acknowledging women as co-authors of some collections (traditionally, a collection of letters between two spouses would be branded simply as, for example, Mr. John Smith’s letters, without mentioning the wife). The members of the archive team also encourage all the library users to offer their corrections through the online tool available in the Princeton Library web catalog.

Political justice in library classifications is not as a narrow problem as it may appear at first sight – it shapes the ways we understand the world far outside library stacks. For example, according to the scholar of library and information science Melissa Adler, it stands behind racist biases in Google search results (such as image search for “three black teenagers” that retrieves mugshots). Online search engines like Google are organized according to the same principles as library catalogs and other databases – the principles that imply unequal power relations. Fernando Acosta-Rodríguez believes that students should be exposed not only to library collections but also to the stories and logic behind them. Teaching library practices, like João Biehl does in the “Insurgent Archivings” class, may serve as an excellent point of departure that allows students to be more self-aware and question assumptions behind knowledge production.

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