

Asymmetry in the Archives¹

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Historians and biologists have a great deal in common. We both study change over time, looking for patterns. But our methods are different because our evidence is different. Historians study the dead; biologists, if they like, can study the living. Biologists can observe organisms and they can also produce their own evidence by conducting experiments. Historians can study only what remains of the dead, what's been left behind in the trash heap that is history. We're stuck with what's been collected. Archives are scattershot and happenstance and incredibly frustrating. And, lately, archives are changing. When you think of the word "archive," you're just as likely to think about a folder on your computer, on your desktop, and that, more and more, is how libraries think of archives, too. I want to talk a little bit about that change. But first I want to talk about some ways in which I have used and thought about archives in my own work.

The historical record is not only partial and accidental but also uneven—it suffers from asymmetry. As a rule, the wealthy and the powerful leave a trail; the poor and the powerless do not. Asymmetry in the archives is something more than a burden. It is, itself, a form of inequality—it makes manifest in the present the inequality of the past. Consider how much economic inequality dominates our political conversations, how much we think about and need to think harder about racial inequality, how concerned we are about educational inequality and inequality of opportunity. All of these forms of inequality have histories, of course. But their histories are difficult to discern because of the asymmetry in the archives. How do you study how the other half lives if most libraries never collected their papers or portraits and if, in fact, the other half never had papers or portraits? Are there any solutions to this evidentiary problem, any methods that can defeat it?

Let me offer four examples, four case studies from my own work. The first concerns King Philip's War, a war between Native Americans and English colonists in New England in 1675 and 1676. The English

1 Read on 13 November 2015.

won the war, and the English recorded the war. They were quite content—it seemed altogether right and natural to them—to put words in the mouths of their enemies. For instance, the Seal of Massachusetts Bay Colony from 1629 depicts a naked Indian mouthing the words, “Come over and help us,” a reference to the biblical Macedonians. “Come over and show us the light of the Gospel, the light of Christ,” the English imagined the Indians begging them. Or consider a pair of late seventeenth-century portraits, one of Ninigret, a Niantic sachem, and one of Increase Mather, the Boston minister and president of Harvard. Ninigret is naked, standing in a wilderness. Mather is clothed, seated at his study with his books open in front of him. Even the collar of his cloak looks like an open book. The Puritans considered themselves to be draped in their literacy, the hallmark of civilization; Ninigret’s nakedness is a marker of his savagery. It was Mather who wrote the definitive history, *A Brief History of the War with the Indians*, in which he offered his interpretation of why the Indians had waged war against the English. He said God had sent them to be a rod against the English, to send a message to his followers, that they were insufficiently devoted to Christ, as if God was speaking to the English through the mouths of the Indians and saying, “Pray harder.”

This asymmetry isn’t accidental. In archives in New England, some 500 letters written by colonists survive describing what happened during the war, not to mention the stacks of books written by men like Mather. Against this stand the very limited records of New England’s native peoples, who left behind few chronicles of their lives and no real account of their version of the events of the war. To address this problem, I did two things. I looked for new sources and I paid very careful attention to the scraps that survive: I conducted close readings. It turns out that a significant number of Indians in seventeenth-century New England could read and write. Some of them went to Harvard, which had been founded in 1636 as a school for English and Indian youth. The problem was that if you learned to write as an Indian in seventeenth-century New England, pretty much your family wanted to kill you. You were also much more likely than anyone else in your family to die of disease. For Indians, literacy very often proved fatal. But many of those who survived learning to read and write fled from the English to fight alongside their families. And some of those literate Indians did leave documents behind, notes tacked to trees, for instance, explaining why they had fought. Their reasons, of course, had nothing to do with what the English believed—that the Indians were God’s mouthpieces, telling the Puritans they were sufficiently devoted to Christ. Instead, they wanted their land back.

Here’s a second case study. I worked for a long time on a book about an alleged slave conspiracy in New York City in 1741. Daniel

Horsmanden was a justice on the Supreme Court of New York, and also the editor of a book containing all of the legal proceedings relating to the investigation. The Court believed that nearly all of the adult black men in the city had conspired to burn the city down. (At the time, one in five New Yorkers was an enslaved African.) By the time it was all over—months of arrests and trials—13 black men were burned at the stake and 17 more were hanged. No witches were ever burned in Salem in 1692, but 13 black men were burned in New York in 1741. Here the asymmetry of the archive takes a particular challenging form. Although the chronicle kept by the Court, as recorded by Horsmanden, is exhaustive, not a single account written by the slaves themselves has survived. To address this problem, I turned not to close reading, the tool of the humanist, but to quantification, the tool of the social scientist. One of the surprisingly interesting documents that the Court produced was a detailed accounting of what happened to every single man in the city, since nearly every black man in the city was arrested. I used this document as the beginning of a census, and then I conducted a demographic reconstitution of the city's slave population. I also used GIS mapping to reconstruct the city's population and figure out the adjacencies, where these men lived and in whose homes, what tax rates their owners paid, what ethnicity their owners were. In the end, I was able to devise an account of what happened in New York in 1741 using this aggregate information, an account in which I tried to give equal weight to explanations for the conspiracy from the vantage of the accused.

My third case is the story of Benjamin Franklin's sister Jane. Benjamin Franklin wrote more letters to his sister Jane than he wrote to anyone else. He was six years older than her, and they were very close as children: they were close their whole lives. Franklin famously wrote the story of his life and he, too, in that same spirit of Increase Mather, liked to be portrayed as a man of letters and learning. No portrait of his sister survives, nor did she write an autobiography. But she did stitch together four humble pieces of foolscap that she called her *Book of Ages*. I became fascinated with this book because it begins like an autobiography; she's written, "Jane Franklin born March 27, 1712." I should say, the vast overwhelming majority of women in eighteenth-century New England did not know how to write. Many knew how to read, but writing was extremely uncommon among women during that time. Jane Franklin only knew how to write because her brother taught her how to write. He had a kind of commitment to this idea, which was revolutionary in the eighteenth century, that women ought to be taught to write. So Benjamin Franklin taught his little sister, who sat down and made this little book—"Jane Franklin born March 27, 1712." I spent a lot of time thinking

about this document and what my expectations were for this story of a life. An autobiography such as Benjamin Franklin's is the story of a life as a litany of accomplishments. But Jane Franklin's *Book of Ages* is instead a chronicle of the births and deaths of each of her 12 children: that is the story of her life. We know so much about Benjamin Franklin; he left such a vast and overwhelmingly fascinating trail behind of his many polymath intellectual activities. But what we know about Jane Franklin is that she understood her life as a litany of grief. Benjamin Franklin's life was rags to riches; Jane Franklin's life was rags to rags. She left almost nothing behind except for her letters to her brother and then this—a list of the births and deaths of her children, a book of remembrance. In writing about Jane Franklin, I relied on the tools I had acquired during these earlier projects. I turned especially to the study of ecology and demography, and to subjects such as fertility and infant mortality. To understand Jane Franklin's life, I used aggregate data the way I did in when researching the New York slave conspiracy, but here I used that data to illuminate the life of an individual. In this work, I also thought about the literary art of biography. A biography usually tells the story of a great and exceptional person, usually a man, but here I used the special lyrical force of biography to insist on the beauty of the life of an utterly ordinary woman.

The last of my four cases concerns a very recent obsession of mine with a man named Joe Gould. He went to Harvard in 1908 and then, in 1914, he began conducting, I think what we might call surveillance. He moved to New York and began writing down in these little dime store composition books everything that anyone said to him. And he said that he was writing a book called *The Oral History of Our Time*. He considered himself the most brilliant historian in the twentieth century. By the 1940s, the book he was writing filled hundreds of notebooks and was allegedly 9 million words long. One reason I became obsessed with Gould is that what he was trying to do, in fact, was remedy the asymmetry of the archives. He knew that only the writings of the wealthy and powerful are saved; he wanted to write down the sayings and doings of ordinary people. He wrote about it in this quite lovely description of his work in 1931:

Apart from literary merit it will have future value as a storehouse of information. I imagine that the most valuable sections will be those which deal with groups that are inarticulate, such as the Negro, the reservation Indian and the immigrant.

Gould wanted to solve the asymmetry of the archives by becoming a human tape recorder, before there were tape recorders.

But the puzzling thing about Gould is that these notebooks, these hundreds of notebooks, have never been found. Gould died in 1957. In 1964, Joseph Mitchell, writing in *The New Yorker*, claimed that Gould had only imagined that he was writing an oral history; but in fact, the oral history did not exist. I became fascinated by that question and had a hunch that it did exist. What I found out was sort of horrible. I believe that much of *The Oral History of Our Time* was Gould's writing about a woman named Augusta Savage who was the most influential artist in Harlem. Gould met her in 1923 at the Schomburg Center on 135th Street when she was giving a poetry reading with Langston Hughes and donating to the library a bust she had made of W. E. B. DuBois. Gould became obsessed with Savage and wanted to marry her. He stalked her for nearly two decades. In 1942, she left New York, leaving all of her friends behind, to get away from Gould. She moved to a very small town where she lived in obscurity and died in poverty. I suspect that Savage destroyed Joe Gould's *Oral History*. She also then made an effort at the end of her life to collect all of her sculpture and destroy it. She sent someone into the Schomburg Institute to steal the W. E. B. DuBois bust that she had made in 1923, the day she met Joe Gould, and smash it. Very little of her work survives.

What happened to Augusta Savage? What Augusta Savage did to erase herself from the historical record made me think hard about the ethical quandary of trying to restore symmetry to the archives. Who was Joe Gould to speak for Augusta Savage? Who did he think he was recording what she said against her will? What are we doing as historians? Is what we're doing any different than what the English colonists did, drawing that Seal of Massachusetts Bay: "Come over and help us"?

That leads me to a few closing reflections about the changes going on in archives. In an old-fangled archive, manuscripts and letters are carefully sorted and catalogued and stored in boxes, and you travel there to see them, and a wonderful curator brings them out to your desk, and you put on your white gloves and you page through them, and you weep and you laugh and you're in the company of another person whose remains have been given specifically to that library for one reason or another, but often by that person's family. In a new-fangled digital archive, the kind of archive that historians rely on more and more, the archive is a set of data that has often been collected unwittingly, electronically, online by a machine that follows in our digital wakes, in much the way that Joe Gould stalked Augusta Savage, writing down what she said. When the archive becomes data, the tool becomes not reading, or counting, or making sense, but searching. Where, today, could Augusta Savage hide?