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Resistance, Empowerment and Pedagogical Possibilities in Public Spaces: Student Archival Learning with Mervyn M. Dymally, The Bridgebuilder of Los Angeles

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Abstract

This essay describes the organic and intuitive collaborative effort in the university archives between Dr. Dawn Amber Dennis, and Azalea Camacho, and undergraduate students from two history courses at Cal State LA that began in fall 2019 with the processing of photographs and correspondence from the Mervyn M. Dymally collection, and culminated nearly two years later with a Cal Humanities quick-grant funded virtual exhibit, public-programming with the Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership, and the development of K-12 curriculum with the Education Department at the Autry Museum. We employ a culturally responsive pedagogy that reframes the learning experience where students become archivists, historians, and narrators of their community stories. This essay argues that the university archives can be a site of learning and resistance to the dominant historical narrative, and we highlight the pedagogical possibilities of challenging archival silences and the "master narrative" of American history in a digital humanities project that developed counter-narratives from primary sources. The semester-long project of processing archival materials focused on the practice of counter-storytelling to dismantle settler colonialism, to challenge the exclusionary archival practice, and to reclaim the practice of preservation and an unfinished story that is written by the outsider, the colonizer that is a gatekeeper of stories, that otherizes Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. As a pedagogical tool, counter-storytelling uncovers the silences of the past and draws upon our work and shared commitment to student-driven and community-centered restorative histories in public spaces, and the recovery of archives as living artifacts.

Keywords: Active-learning, pedagogy, community-based learning, archives, first-generation, incarceration, Mervyn M. Dymally, prison, reentry, recidivism, healing, trauma, public memory, Los Angeles, Southern California

Introduction

What does belonging look like in history? When we preserve, research, and write history, where do we see ourselves, our students, and communities? As noted by Haitian scholar Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2015), the idea of "belonging" is a contested space, and history has proven that laws, policies, and practices have excluded and othered people in public spaces that were sites of segregation and violence. Who collects history and decides which story is told in our classrooms? California as subject is the story of success and failure, power and oppression, coalition building and conflict, and environmental conservation and destruction. Yet, the story of California taught to us in K-12 was a sanitized "master narrative" of history that focused on a few key European men while omitting the development of a racial caste system, the diverse racial make-up of the first settlers to El Pueblo de Los Angeles. the genocide of Indigenous communities, racial violence, and the exclusion and removal of Indigenous, Black, Latinx, and immigrants from the state. In his groundbreaking text *A Different Mirror*, ethnic studies scholar Ronald Takaki (2008) demands that the creation of a counter-narrative grounded in truth and reconciliation must develop in collaboration between students, the community, and educators. The process of challenging the master-narrative in the classroom and college archives is "delinking that leads to de-colonial epistemic shift and brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 453)

How can educators cultivate belonging in spaces for first-generation students through university archives and digital humanities projects that honor the stories of underrepresented individuals and communities? Trouillot (2015) writes that, "history is the story of power…" (p. 30). As history is written on the landscape, how is the narrative preserved in public space and in the archives? What is remembered, what is distorted, and what is silenced? Trouillot adds that "each historical narrative renews a claim to truth," and yet institutions in this nation often remain divided on how to interpret the past (p. 17). The importance that is placed on a story comes from who that story benefits, namely those who oversee society and those who have the power to control the collection, preservation, and writing of the narrative.

How can educators decolonize the archives and the learning process for first-generation undergraduate students? Schultz (2011) asserts, "the archive also creates within it implications extending to an exercise of power and social control" (p. 108). The archive should not be an exclusionary space not made accessible by undergraduate students and their communities. Shayne et al. (2016) reminds us that "the production of knowledge is an academic enterprise and has been controlled and contained within predominantly White, elite, and middle- to upper-class institutional structures" (p. 49). The word "decolonize," entered the U.S. lexicon in the 1930s and by the Cold War period historians were actively seeking out stories of underrepresented groups in the United States. E. P. Thompson's 1963 publication of *The Making of the English Working Class* created this sense of urgency for historians to collect stories of under-represented groups. The history of "Great Men," was decentered to make way for the work of social historians to reassess source materials, and focus on oral narratives, personal collections, newspapers, court records, and ephemera (Gomez, 2019). Emerging from the global social unrest of the 1960s, a decolonizing pedagogy developed alongside abolitionist movements within the United States and connected to the broader anti-imperialist and liberatory movements that emerged in the Global South. Students and community members demanded inclusion of histories and Indigenous paradigms that centered

on race, culture, power, and identity (Acuna, 1996).[1] The Society of American Archivists defines the meaning of decolonizing institutional space as a process of collaboration with Indigenous peoples "to implement greater Indigenous control over records, to provide a voice to those peoples through records, and to recontextualize the records and institutions created and interpreted by settler populations." [2]

This essay describes the organic and collaborative effort between Dawn A. Dennis, Azalea Camacho, and undergraduate students from two history courses at Cal State LA that began in fall 2019, and culminated nearly two years later with a Cal Humanities quick-grant funded virtual exhibit, public-programming with the Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership, and the development of K-12 curriculum with the Education Department at the Autry Museum. This article is written in collaboration with Lynn V. Dymally and four students that worked on the processing of one series of the Mervyn M. Dymally collection leading to the 2021 virtual exhibition *Mervyn M. Dymally: The Bridgebuilder of Los Angeles*. An alum of Cal State LA, Dymally was a Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) educator, and served as California State Assemblyman for the 52nd and 53rd District, State Senator for the 29th District, and the first Black Lieutenant Governor of California.

This essay argues that university archives can be a site of learning and resistance to dominant historical narratives, and we highlight the pedagogical possibilities of challenging archival silencing and the 'master narrative' of American history in a digital humanities project that developed counter-narratives from primary sources. We employ a "culturally responsive pedagogy [which] advocates for situating student culture and funds of knowledge at the center of the curriculum" (Tintiangco-Cubales, et al., 2015, p. 113). The semester-long project of processing archival materials focused on the practice of counter-storytelling to dismantle settler colonialism, to challenge exclusionary archival practices, and to reclaim the practice of preservation and an unfinished story that has been written by the colonizer as a gatekeeper of stories, that others Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities. Our pedagogy draws from the work of Paulo Freire (1970) and the focus on a humanizing pedagogy in developing assignments and activities that can lead to "meaningful social change…that are tied to the needs of marginalized students" (del Carmen Salazar, 2013, p. 126). As a pedagogical tool, counter-storytelling uncovers the silences of the past and draws upon our work and shared commitment to student-driven and community-centered restorative histories in public spaces, and the recovery of archives as living artifacts. The development of a digital humanities semester project using 21st century technology that focuses on community-based archival work operates with an active-learning environment that shifts the balance of power to support student inquiry in spaces not normally reserved for first-generation undergraduate students. Through the use of primary sources to increase student engagement, critical thinking, and digital skills, students become archivists, historians, and narrators of their community stories.

We seek ways to collaborate with our students as co-creators of knowledge that challenge the digital divide and unequal landscapes with digital humanities projects. As Carpio (2018) suggests, "uneven access to digital literacy training has created a critical ground for American studies and

[1]See also Reed, 2020; Miller, 2008; Prashad, 2007.

[2] SSA Dictionary. https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/decolonize.html

ethnic studies students to apply engaged practice in order to investigate the power relations embedded in the digital realm" (p. 614). In dialogue about the course syllabi and scaffold project activities, we wanted to bridge this digital divide that impacts our working-class, commuter, majority first-generation, and ethnically and racially diverse students. As Morias (2018) argues, "both the use of technology and experiential learning activities can further these types of skills in students" (p. 50). We employ a pedagogy grounded in Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, which identifies six forms of cultural capital that our students experience during college: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational and resistance.

When preparing for this semester-long project, we considered the exclusionary past of archival studies and historical research prior to the 1970s, re-reading Howard Zinn's 1977 scathing critique of both archivists and historians at a meeting of the Society of American Archivists, where Zinn (2008) "argued that archives had long neglected large segments of society and privileged the rich and powerful" (p. 549). [3] As Zinn and contemporaries assert, the archives are classist and racist, with no focus on Black, Indigenous, working-class communities. Zinn implored the Society of American Archivist to broaden their collection focus to include social history, ethnic history, and LBGTQIA histories. There remains a power imbalance as archives can still dehumanize, control, and reproduce inequities in society, and we continue to seek ways to dismantle these inequities that impact our communities beyond the cracked-ivory towers. As Jimerson (2007) asserted,

> Archivists can thus contribute to a richer human experience of understanding and compassion. They can help to protect the rights of citizens and to hold public figures in government and business accountable for their actions. They can provide resources for people to examine the past, to comprehend the present, and to prepare for a better future. This is the essence of our common humanity. It provides archivists with a sense of professional purpose and a social conscience (p. 253).

The department of Special Collections and Archives within Cal State LA's University Library has created a social-justice landscape in areas of collection development and access that aims to decolonize the traditional archival spaces and practices. The department's mission is to work with the campus community to document, preserve, and make accessible the historical narratives of the diverse lives of Cal State LA students and the campus community. The reading room, a space where students read materials pulled from the college archives, is open to undergraduate students and the public. Cal State LA's Special Collections and Archives also practices the post-custodial method in its collecting efforts and stewardship. This method allows archives to be stewards of records instead of institutional custodians. The method moves away from traditional practice and challenges the power dynamic of archives by removing the value of archival records from the institution and prioritizing the communities that created them in the first place.

Processing the Collection in the Archives

Who is Mervyn Dymally? Where are the Special Collections and Archives? In fall 2019, undergraduate students in two sections of History 2050: Race and Ethnicity in U.S. History asked an assortment of questions at the first course meeting about the semester project that would take them from the classroom and into the Special Collections and Archives at Cal State LA. Building

[3] See also Daniel, 2010.

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from Freire's (1970) notion of praxis, this semester project was grounded in "community responsive pedagogy" that connected classroom learning to address social issues [and create] opportunities for students to apply what they learn in the college archives to their own communities. The focus of this project-based learning experience was to cultivate critical thinkers about history using inquiry-based learning, information literacy, and research skills. Equally important is equity of access to research spaces by having undergraduate, underrepresented, and/or first-generation students work in the archives.

Figure 1. Student boxes of correspondence processed in 2019. (Photo Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)

The History 2050 (Race and Ethnicity in U.S. History) course focused on race and ethnicity intersections with culture, gender, and socio-economic class in American history. Students in two lower-division sections of the same history course, taught through the Honors College and the other through the Department of History, learned how to process and interpret correspondence in the Dymally Collection. These were the first two undergraduate history courses at the University to process eighty-two out of the nearly three-hundred boxes that make up the Dymally Papers.

The use of primary sources found in the Dymally collection encouraged curiosity and inquiry about race and ethnicity in history beyond the classroom setting. Select course readings covered the origins, growth, and challenges in archival research. Students constructed their own arguments based on evidence and connected primary sources to the context in which they were created. Dawn relied on materials that were developed by educators at the National Archives and Records Administration to help create the project template. To prepare for the processing, students attended three workshops and were provided with an archival processing handbook. Dawn and Azalea created assignments and rubrics that accessed student's work in the archives; the midterm, which focused on the history of archival collection in this nation, and the mid-semester reflection essay, in which students were asked to identify academic and transferable skills learned from processing the collection. Students also completed inventory worksheets for each box and submitted an exhibit worksheet at the end of the course. The inventory worksheet was created for students to keep track of the folders they were going through and alphabetizing each of the photographs or correspondence they were going through. As they processed, students also kept track of documents and photographs in the Dymally papers that they connected with the themes they were learning in their class with assigned readings.

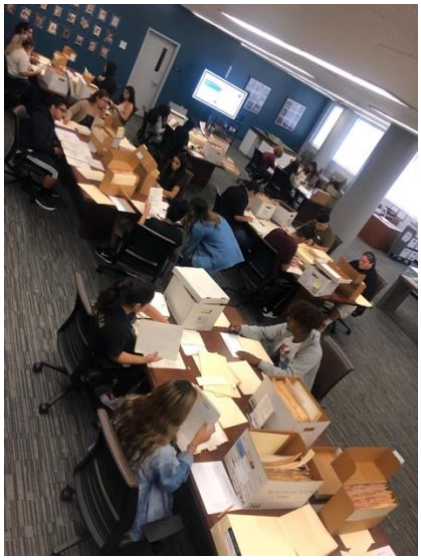

Figure 2. Students in History 2050 processing assigned boxes from Mervyn M. Dymally Collection in 2019. (Photo Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)

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Valerie Lopez, a student, spent each week processing her box in the college archives. Valerie recalled:

> *This was an amazing experience, and we were assigned one box to organize as our semester project. We were asked to select one or two documents that were of interest to us; what resonated with me was Dymally's work in education. When I went to elementary school, history was not my favorite subject, and I am not sure if it was the teaching style or topic. This experience in the archives related to my culture, my history, and my past. I was engaged. There is a quote from Dymally that really impacted me: 'It is your responsibility to document the facts not only for today's generation but for tomorrow's children.'*

History 2050 students wrote a final primary source analysis essay that used their own research and secondary sources from the course readings. As Donghee Sinn (2013) makes clear, a "hands-on practices within a curriculum can increase the quality of learning when they are well designed for student learning objectives and outcomes" (P. 243). Former student Ivan Rodriguez Garcia discussed the impact of Dymally on his own educational goals. Ivan authored a counter-narrative research paper about Dymally from a feminist lens to explore how Dolores Huerta challenged patriarchal spaces in the labor movement in the late 1960s and 1970s. Not recognizing Huerta's labor movement efforts results in historical erasure of the role of Latinas in the struggle against settler colonialism. It is important to emphasize and to recognize her works in the movement at the time and Ivan's research amplified her contributions to be recognized in this exhibit. Ivan's paper represented the major shift that takes place when communities of color write histories for themselves as counter-narratives, thus resisting the longstanding tradition of how those in power have written stories about communities of color (stories not by them but for them).

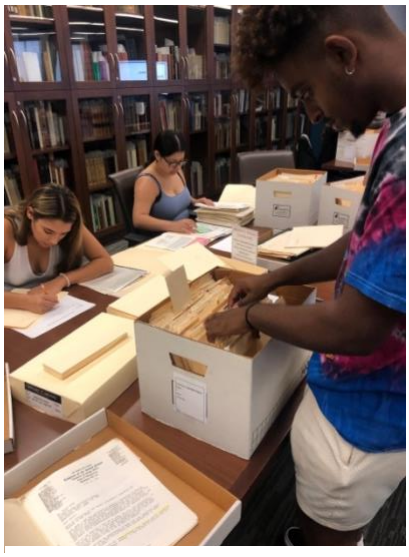

Figure 3. Valerie Lopez and classmates work on assigned boxes in fall 2019. (Photo Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)

It is important to understand that this course went beyond the one-time introduction sessions in special collections and archives and provided an engaging opportunity for students by embedding the archivist in the lesson planning beyond the inception of the syllabus. Azalea's pedagogical approach is centered on constructivist learning theory. As described by Vong (2017), constructivist learning theory is built on the notion that students construct their own meaning from their learning environment by being actively involved in the process of creating knowledge. Vong further explains that the teacher's role is to provide a safe environment for learning and guidance. Providing a space for learning and guidance is key when working with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) students. Students worked alongside the archivist, reading room personnel and the social science librarian to engage in archival work as part of their learning. Students were guided step by step through archival processing and the curation process, which were introduced to students through a scaffolding method. Vong states, "By scaffolding concepts and content, setting up socially interactive activities, situating the students through applied practice, and

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encouraging students to reflect on the learning experience, it created a comprehensive and engaging research experience in the special collections and archives" (p. 166). Both classes met weekly in the college archives for the entire semester. It is important to acknowledge that creating a project with multiple parts like this takes time to develop a genuine partnership. This collaboration was not something that happened overnight, as Dawn and Azalea were working well before the start of this project and collaborated on a couple of in-person exhibitions in previous semesters.

We introduced students to the college archives collection to spark inquiry and teach specific skills, such as reading primary sources, organizing information, and writing descriptive content as outlined in the framework for this project. We found that with the semester-long active learning experience, students met the shared learning outcomes. Equally important is the equity of student access to learning distinct skills. As Bay (2006) asserts, "the importance of service-learning (rests) in building students' confidence and acclimating them to an environment outside of academia" (p. 139). Undergraduate, underrepresented, and/or first-generation students should learn research skills earlier in their college academic careers.

Figure 4. Archivist Azalea Camacho works with Honors College students in processing images from the Dymally Collection. (Photo Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)

The course and module learning outcomes for the "processing in the college archives," semester-length activity included:

1. *Students will recognize the value of sources; how primary and secondary sources are used, diminished, or silenced through a series of collaborative activities with public institutions, like the college archives.*
2. *Students will learn about archival practice, the steps of archival processing, and the importance of preservation in developing a counter-narrative.*
3. *Students will learn how to organize different forms of historical evidence found in the college archives.*
4. *Students will develop the ability to describe primary sources by using primary-source analysis worksheets from the Library of Congress.*
5. *Students will explain how community practitioners and historians in different eras/decades record events, trends, and people in history.*
6. *Working in collaboration each week, students will explore weekly historical theme/topics that connect to the processing work in the college archives.*
7. *Students will construct and articulate written and oral arguments using the analytical tools of the historical method, which include context, contingency, and change over time as to capture the evolving and interconnected nature of lived experiences, identities, and institutions in U.S. history.*

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The extensive work and speeches of Dymally is not included in any undergraduate history textbooks or K-12 curriculum; yet the materials found in this collection cover specific themes in California history, like medical neglect, the carceral state, educational disparities, coalition building with different ethnic groups, and foreign policy. Student interns working in the college archives discussed the significance of the items/collection, historical context, and their research process. As education scholar Tara Yosso (2005) reminds us, their lived experiences are community cultural wealth and serve as testimonios to foster change to the unjust justice system. USC (University of Southern California) graduate student and special collections and archives intern at Cal State LA, Julian de la Pupa, stressed how deeply moving it was for him, and how empowered he felt as a bi-racial Black person, *"to work on creating the historical narrative of a collection that celebrated the life and works of a Black educator /politician."*

Figure 5. Students in History 2050 (fall 2019) celebrate processing boxes from the Mervyn M. Dymally Papers. (Courtesy of Dawn A. Dennis)

The living archives and the co-construction of knowledge by our students of color at Cal State LA is a significant shift in not only the way archival content is re-presented but in how it is re-interpreted and re-purposed in curriculum. Isiah Andalon, now a graduate student in the Latin American Studies program recalls his experience working in the college archives.

> *While diving into Mervyn Dymally's world via the archives, I came to the realization of a couple of things: 1) history is more important now than ever and 2) history needs to be a holistic perspective of the truth. Little did we know that the curation of the Dymally collection in 2020 was important work. History often only tells the story of one side, and the processed materials are the counter-narratives not taught in the classrooms. The Mervyn Dymally collection shows the power of unity and collaboration in our communities. As we developed the collection, it became clear that the many stories of Mervyn Dymally needed to be a part of historical narrative. The project itself has more than a dozen people and students from several history courses working on tasks from unboxing physical documents to writing labels for digitized documents. Having the Mervyn Dymally (collection) curated exclusively at Cal State LA will allow for the more personal documenting of a key political representative native to the area.*

Dymally's advocacy for an ethnic studies model curriculum and education resonated with student curator Rigoberto Garcia, who is now a graduate student in the Latin American Studies department at Cal State LA. Rigoberto writes,

> *In the Fall Semester 2020 I had the opportunity to be able to work as a student-curator for the online exhibit, and his legacy has impacted my work as a new graduate student in the department of Latin American Studies. It was eye-opening because prior to the exhibit I had no idea about the legacy that he left behind. The public educational system that helped mold my upbringing in California never once mentioned his name. Having access to the archives as an undergraduate exposed this once restricted discipline to me. Allowing me to handle digitized*

primary documents and being able to paint a picture of Dymally's legacy. This only reinforced my desire to study migration and how migrants impact the communities that serve here in the United States. Thanks to him many barriers have been torn down and allowed future generations like me to flourish and have the option to maximize our potential.

K-12 Curriculum

Image Source: Autry Museum Education Department

In the summer of 2021, the Education Department at the Autry Museum collaborated with students in Dawn's History 2080: California History course to create lesson-plan proposals about Mervyn M. Dymally that K-12 teachers can incorporate into their existing history-social science curriculum. Students enrolled in this course were interested in teaching social science in K-12 schools and were part of the Urban Learning Program in the College of Education at Cal State LA. Jason Wollschleger (2019) noted that the "practices like community-engaged learning or community-based research projects provide students with real-world experience with classroom subject matter" (p. 314). To prepare for the development of K-12 lesson-plans, students were asked to reflect on their own experiences in education and the learning of California history. As C.T. Mohatny (2003) reminds us, a decolonizing pedagogy critiques the impact of capitalism on education, as the counter-narrative develops as an act of resistance to settler colonialist educational curriculum. By using a culturally responsive pedagogy in the development of lesson plans, students "see themselves, their families, their communities, and their histories in the curriculum and practices of the classroom, as multiple sources of knowledge and cultural experiences are validated and celebrated" (Tintiangco-Cubales, Allyson et al., 2015, p. 14).

During the summer semester, HIST 2080 students were divided into groups of four to develop Mervyn M. Dymally lessons for either grades K-2, 3-5, 6-8, or 9-12. Each group completed a lesson proposal draft and a lesson mock-up. Each group met with Autry Museum and Cal State LA staff during class meetings to discuss their lesson proposal draft. During the two feedback forums, the Autry Museum staff gave each group feedback to revise the Mervyn M. Dymally lesson proposal draft.

In the lesson-proposal template created by the Education Department, students were asked to create a lesson title, a lesson target audience (Specific grade, K-2, 3-5, 6-8, or 9-12), relevant history-social-science content, and standards for California public schools. Students developed a lesson objective, lesson summary, lesson resources, lesson needs, and a lesson format that provided a general description of what the K-12 students will do in each part of the lesson plan, such as activities like analyzing, creating, hypothesizing, looking, matching, reading, thinking, and

writing. During this activity, History 2080 students were asked to include a brief description of any glossaries, grade-level content, graphic organizers, guiding questions or prompts, primary sources, sentence stems, and simple directions. Students were also asked to think about how lessons connect to K-12 students, and to make personal and/or present-day connections to the content in this lesson.

These grade-level appropriate lessons available online satisfy California learning standards and facilitate educators in Los Angeles and beyond to incorporate Dymally's story, California History, and civics into their classroom. Each group created a lesson mock-up based on their lesson proposal draft. Students presented their work at two feed-back forums with the Autry Education Department, Lynn V. Dymally, and the college library. In July 2022, the Education Department at the Autry Museum published curriculum based on the online exhibition *Mervyn M. Dymally: The Bridge-Builder of Los Angeles* and developed K-12 standards-based lessons featuring Mervyn M. Dymally.

Conclusion

This digital project was born from an organic collaborative effort between faculty and undergraduate students at Cal State LA, the Education Department at the Autry Museum, and the Los Angeles Regional Reentry Partnership. Our collaboration with students in the college archives shifted the balance of power in learning so that students were co-creators in their own educational journey. We meet students where they are and build upon their knowledge and lived experiences that shape our classroom learning communities. Students took collective ownership of the class and the semester-length project in the archives. The college archives created a social-justice landscape in collection and preservation policies that aim to decolonize the archival practice. By working closely with community members that contribute research and oral histories, students supported a holistic digital project that challenged archival silences and enhanced the understanding of Dymally's work in the United States and abroad, and his legacy in the city of Los Angeles.

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