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Looking Outward: Archival Research as Community Engagement

Whitney Douglas

Abstract

This article examines archival research as a generative community literacy practice. Through the example of a community-based project centered on archival research, I examine the increased possibility the archives hold as a site for rhetorical invention based on collaboration that includes contemporary community members *and* the recovered rhetoric of historical figures. I argue that archival research as community literacy practice creates conditions for a communal form of literacy sponsorship and offer a framework for approaching the archives.

Keywords: archives, collaboration, invention, sponsorship, meaning-making, solidarity

Creating with: Archival Research as Community Literacy Practice

As a graduate student at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I entered the archives with fellow graduate student Eric Turley, our interest in recovery work piqued by the women's rhetoric we were reading in a seminar. We wanted to recover the rhetoric of Doris Stevens, a prominent national suffragist from Nebraska. What we encountered was not only her national-level story, but the stories of local women who had participated in the statewide suffrage movement. After months collaboratively researching in the archives and having energetic discussions about our findings, we began to question what we were creating with the archival materials and for whom we were creating it. Neither of us were originally from Nebraska and yet we were becoming intimately familiar with a major movement in the state's history. However, envisioning something beyond academic genres—the seminar paper, an article, a conference paper, the dissertation, or a book proposal—was difficult.

While considering the necessity of sharing our archival research both in and beyond academic venues, we were introduced to Judith K. Hart (Judy), director of Angels Theatre Company and a coordinator of a grassroots organization called the DeVoted Women Project (DWP). The organization “aimed to reignite an intellectual

dialogue regarding the responsibilities and patriotism of the vote by focusing on the suffrage movement,” a vision that seemed especially important considering the continual coverage in the media illuminating low voter turnout for national and local elections¹. General low voter turnout was an issue, but the members of the DWP were most concerned by how few women were exercising their right to vote and found it critical to remind the public, especially women, that women’s enfranchisement had been a contentious political issue and not always a protected right. The DWP planned to commission a playwright to compose a play about the national women’s suffrage movement that would help them achieve their goals through promoting civil consciousness.

After meeting with Eric and me and learning about the creative suffrage activism that had taken place on the state level, Judy shifted the play’s focus to the Nebraska movement to present a more resonant argument for local audiences about the historical and contemporary importance of suffrage. Although excited by the prospect of our archival research circulating in a new way, Eric and I imagined our involvement with the DWP in a limited way: we would share artifacts we had recovered and seminar and conference papers we had written. Instead we learned that deep collaboration was central to any creative and activist work Judy did, and we worked with her, the playwright, actors, costume and set designers, and other community members throughout the drafting, production, and performances of the play *Nebraska Next!*²

In this article, I draw on my experience with the DeVoted Women Project in order to demonstrate how archival research can be a generative community literacy practice. Next, I examine two key insights the project work reveals. The first insight is that archives, as sites of collaborative rhetorical invention, can draw on the knowledge and perspectives of contemporary community members *and* the recovery of the rhetoric of historical figures. A second insight is that archival research as community literacy practice is sustained by a form of literacy sponsorship that integrates the knowledge and expertise of both contemporary and historical community members. Drawing on these insights, I end with a framework for engaging in archival research as community literacy practice.

DeVoted Women Project: Serendipity and the Archives

In *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, scholars explore archival research as a knowledge-making activity, yoking the personal and the scholarly as they document the complexities and serendipities of their research experiences and their planned and unplanned methodologies. Encountering the DeVoted Women Project was a serendipitous moment for Eric and me; we met Judy right as we were questioning what was possible for the archival material we had recovered. Our collaboration with the DWP would productively complicate our thinking about what archival research could and perhaps should be. In order to analyze the potential of archival research as community literacy practice, I will first map out our unplanned methodology that resulted from moving our research into the community.

Working with the DWP called on us to re-envision the recovered artifacts through the lens of rhetorical and literacy theories. It also compelled us to continue researching for additional material to more fully immerse ourselves in the suffrage era. For *Nebraska Next!*, we re-read artifacts alongside DWP collaborators to identify themes that reoccurred throughout the historical documents or which resonated with current discussions of political issues. We collectively decided on themes for the play that both illustrated struggles of the suffragists and reflected the present political climate in Nebraska and the nation at large, such as the rural/urban divide; civic literacy and access to information; sustaining political conversations and organizations; social class and civic participation; religion and politics; immigration; the personal and the public; and the role of technology in politics. These themes became the foundation around which the play was written, and helped to recreate and make suffragists' rhetoric accessible and relevant to a contemporary audience.

We envisioned a traveling production wherein we would enter each host community, perform the play, and engage the community in civic dialogue after the performance. Everything—including the director and actors—needed to fit in a minivan for travel across the vast state of Nebraska. The travel aspect led us to take a Brechtian approach, focusing on issues and situations with a production centered on archetypes rather than specific characters. Four actors—three women and a man—played multiple roles throughout the play. The set was minimal and relied on props and a few easels with enlarged artifacts and photographs from the 1914 suffrage campaign. The sixty-five minute play referenced the national suffrage movement and world events during the early twentieth century, but primarily focused on the activist efforts of Nebraska women and men as they worked for state suffrage.

We purposefully integrated archival artifacts into the play so audience members, in a small way, could intimately engage with the material as we had. *Nebraska Next!* included four songs wherein the audience joined the actors singing songs written to popular melodies like “Battle Cry of Freedom,” “America the Beautiful,” and “Yankee Doodle Dandy.” The songs served as transitions between scenes and simultaneously reinforced themes of the play. One scene in the play invited four audience members on stage to read short speeches. The four speeches (two pro-suffrage, two anti-suffrage) were excerpted from recovered speeches and political pamphlets. Having community members recite the speeches in lieu of actors created a break in the play where the audience was directly confronted with the rhetoric circumscribing the issue of suffrage.

At two different points in the play, the actors “campaigned” and distributed suffrage literature to the audience. Each audience member received copies of two political fliers—one that had been distributed by anti-suffragists and the other by suffragists. The fliers “Ten Reasons Why Women Shouldn’t Vote” and “Votes for Nebraska Women!” were passed out at political rallies, street meetings, and other public gatherings. The distribution of these fliers, copies of original archival material, provided audience members with tangible artifacts illustrating the rhetoric that had circulated in their communities almost a century earlier and highlighted the dissonance between suffragists and anti-suffragists.

Following the performance, a “second act” invited the audience to stay and talk about the archival material, the current political climate, and civic participation within their community. Conversations differed in every town. In some, audience members shared stories about their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers who were suffragists. Other conversations focused on the lack of women in local politics; the emptiness of contemporary political rhetoric and media coverage; abortion and women’s rights to choose; economic inequalities present in the work place; questions about the historical period and the suffragists themselves; and issues for which community members wanted to advocate. After learning about Nebraska suffragists’ strategies, some audience members considered the possibility of drawing on the suffragists’ strategies to address and advocate for contemporary political issues.

At some performances, local community members were available to facilitate the second act and share their knowledge about suffrage and civic participation in Nebraska. In towns where resources were scarce or unavailable, Judy, Eric, or I facilitated the second act. Audience members frequently expressed surprise at discovering a vibrant suffrage movement had taken place in their state. Audience members frequently asked questions about the origins of the archival material and expressed interest in knowing more about the suffrage movement and specific events and tensions surrounding it. Through *Nebraska Next!*, we were able to convey our enthusiasm for the artifacts we had recovered and direct people to the archives where they could explore the materials firsthand and ideally use the artifacts for new purposes and audiences.

Rhetorical Invention and the Archives

The turn from viewing archives as passive repositories for gathering existing knowledge to conceptualizing archives as active experiments in meaning-making and sites for knowledge creation illuminates how they are inherently dynamic (Kirsch and Rohan VII). This dynamic nature of archives foregrounds the rhetorical nature of history, compelling us to reflect on the complexities of our subjective positions as rhetoricians and the emotions that shape our research as a lived process attending to the intersection of the personal, cultural, and scholarly aspects of our lives (Kirsch and Rohan 3). A nuanced, layered research process that attends to those intersections demands that we might also think about wider audiences and purposes for our findings. If our archival research is conducted with an eye toward academic audiences only, we limit the potential for new knowledge to circulate and hinder the creation of yet newer knowledge. When approaching archival research as a collaborative act of rhetorical invention, we can create new knowledge and representations of that knowledge *alongside* community members.

Excited by our first foray into the archives and the generative discussions held during the reading through boxes of artifacts, Eric and I had agreed to always conduct our archival research in collaboration. In our roles as DeVoted Women Project collaborators, Eric and I re-entered the archives with new questions and a deeper sense of what collaborative research could be. Like the scholars in *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, we had been initially inspired by

personal attachments which cultivated the curiosity and intrigue essential for us to do committed, excellent historical research (Kirsch and Rohan 8). However, our experience with the DWP expanded our notion of attachment as we saw richer possibilities when re-visioning our existing research, conducting additional research with *Nebraska Next!* as our focus, and interweaving our personal attachments with those of Nebraskan communities, leading to engagement in collaborative new acts of rhetorical invention.

More importantly, our community attachment pushed us to think of the women whose rhetoric we had recovered as collaborators. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsch advocate that the goals for recovering women's rhetoric should be to identify them as rhetors, showcase their rhetorical contributions, and find "innovative ways to engage with these women both critically and imaginatively in order to enable a more dialogic relationship between past and present, their worlds and ours, their priorities and ours" (14). The suffragists provided us with a blueprint of how to engage Nebraskan citizens across the state, making them contributors to the project not just through their rhetoric but through their lived experiences and knowledge.

Our choice to create a traveling production was inspired by a key activist strategy the suffragists used. The novelty of automobiles at the turn of the century became a useful tool for suffragists to draw wider attention to their cause. Auto tours enabled them to leave Lincoln and Omaha and deliver their political message to communities in surrounding areas and to recruit more suffragists. Two to five decorated automobiles would travel from town to town—typically three or four per day—and deliver a short program, including speeches and songs at each location. Audience participation through singing and speaking was encouraged during presentation of *Nebraska Next!* in order to re-enact how the suffragists engaged the communities they visited as singing was an important strategy used by the suffragists to encourage participation among audiences at auto tours, rallies, and parades.

Before moving to the next town, the suffragists would engage in a dialogue about suffrage with the townspeople—part of the auto tour was reserved for local townspeople to present short prepared remarks in favor of suffrage. Like the community conversations at the end of the auto tours, the second act of *Nebraska Next!* served as impetus for dialogue with audiences across the state about the responsibility of the vote. To determine potential host communities for the play, the DWP used a campaign district map created by the suffragists. As part of their outreach, the Nebraska Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA) divided the state into 15 districts according to travel routes provided by railroads and rivers. We chose one city in each suffrage campaign district in which to perform the play.

By drawing on suffragist strategies of singing, reciting and hearing speeches, collecting and reading political literature, and dialoguing about voting today, *Nebraska Next!* circulated the spirit of women's activism and rhetoric promoted by the NWSA to communities across Nebraska. The play provided a dynamic rendering of rhetorical artifacts that could be presented to a public audience inclusively through audience participation in the theatrical performance, allowing them to draw their own conclusions about the suffrage movement, make their own connections with the

current political situation, and participate in archival research as community literacy practice in a small way.

However, the ability of host communities and their members to participate more fully merits further consideration. The DWP letter encouraged community contacts to invite schools and community groups to participate. It was often a single group who brought the production in, thus targeting their students or members. The idea of a play acting as a springboard for civic dialogue that would reach beyond the play into the community was a bit idealistic. In retrospect, the project often lacked solid community liaisons to connect the play to community groups and local concerns. Without this coordination, the play ended up being more of an event rather than part of ongoing community conversations. We recognized the importance of increased networking and inviting community contacts to become collaborators, or, at the very least, a more integral part of the invention process.

While we were able to engage a wider public audience, the audience we reached was comprised of active civic participants; most of the people who attended the performances were already committed voters more interested in learning about the history of state suffrage. The DWP was especially interested in targeting a younger demographic who, according to statistics, were not voting. Some of the performance sites were community colleges and universities hoping to draw students to the performance. The review in the *Lincoln Journal Star* indicated how the play was “preaching to the converted.” This fact pushed us to think about how a younger audience accustomed to movies, internet, podcasts, and other new media forms of communication might have been better reached through another medium. We recognize now the importance of including members of the target audience demographic as collaborators, which would magnify the archive’s inventive possibilities.

Another issue we encountered was connecting with community members in ways that would sustain ongoing conversations about civic participation, both within the community and ideally across the state. The suffragists worked to create a statewide civic dialogue and political network in the largely rural state of Nebraska and were successful in doing so. Along those lines, Inspired by their success, we too were interested in the possibility of a more networked form of civic dialogue. Originally, we hoped that the play could serve as a piece of a larger community occasion rather than an isolated event. With limited resources and a fairly small group of collaborators, there was much work necessary to revise and finalize the script, make costumes and props, establish venues, and coordinate logistics finalized prior to the performance.

Our engagement with Nebraska community members and the suffragists as collaborators provides a model for thinking about how to engage with future research subjects. If we are working to “forward an enlarged view of rhetoric as a human enterprise” (Royster and Kirsch 98), we ought to enter the archives thinking of them as an expansive site for invention that considers multiple potential collaborators in the experiment of meaning-making and creating knowledge; this includes as collaborators those whose voices and lived experiences are now housed in collections we recover.

(Re)Creating with: Sponsoring Communal Literacy

The creation and staging of *Nebraska Next!* demonstrates the potential archival research, as a community literacy practice, holds for a shift away from the hierarchical form of literacy sponsorship critiqued by Deborah Brandt. In Brandt's examination of literacy as capital, sponsorship is hierarchical, with sponsors being "any agents . . . who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (556). The sponsor lends their credibility and resources to the sponsored with the likelihood that they stand to benefit from the success of the sponsored (556). However, the sponsor loses the opportunity to gain valuable knowledge and engagement in deeper meaning-making processes, because they are sponsoring from a unidirectional stance, and contributions of the sponsored go unrecognized unless they directly benefit the sponsor.

Situating ourselves as equal collaborators on community-based projects creates the conditions for reciprocal relationships, minimizing the potential for hierarchies to form. Assuming multiple positions in relation to the central idea of the project creates a shared space for open dialogue between participants, for listening to the expertise of various collaborators, and for making possible the opportunity to negotiate ideas and commitments. The idea at the center of the project becomes the sponsor; collaborators assume flexible identities to move in relation to the center. The solidarity that emerges when a shared idea is at the core of a project encourages participants to bring their knowledge and contributions to the circle, working to erode power structures by resisting ranking and instead, aiming to forge interdependency (Cushman 20).

All DWP participants had identities we brought to the project—company director, scholar, public historian, non-profit worker, actor—but we needed to extend ourselves beyond the initial identities and commitments which drew us to the project. When we started meeting with Judy, Eric and I only saw ourselves as graduate students involved in archival research. At times over the duration of the project, we were hesitant when asked to step out of our roles as researchers to draw on experiences as theater-goers, script-readers/respondents, and women's advocates in our local community. The process of collaborative creation made it clear that flexible identities were ultimately one of the factors that brought the project to fruition, as they allowed us to pause, regroup, and loosen or even let go of some individual commitments in order to consider the whole and to create knowledge in more productive ways. Eric and I came to understand that looking out from the archives into the community also entailed a looking out to see beyond traditional notions of our work as scholars.

Each DWP collaborator had specific commitments, but made those visible and worked to acknowledge and account for the commitments of other collaborators. During the drafting of the script, Judy Hart, director of the Angels Theatre Company who forged the collaboration with the DWP, asked each of us which stories, artifacts, or ideas were most important to us. In a conference call conducted with playwright Carson Becker before she wrote a second draft, collaborators asked what her vision

was for the movement of the play as well as which artifacts and stories stood out most to her. Early in the process of imagining the narrative arc of the play, some collaborators wanted to include a scene that illustrated tension between a husband and wife over her suffrage activities. The character, as she was envisioned, would be a victim of domestic violence, adding a layer that petitioned for why women needed the vote as well as drawing attention to a contemporary issue. However, Eric and I had not uncovered anything in our archival research which showed or even hinted at such an example. We were committed to giving voice to the movement that had been sitting dormant in the archives for many years. Invested in representing the stories that emerged from the artifacts, Eric and I expressed our concern that the DWP production cast tell the story of the suffrage movement solely by drawing on what could be seen and interpreted in the artifacts.

Several scenes in the play focused on issues Eric and I didn't feel were as central to the suffrage movement as we had conceptualized it; one scene in particular felt too long and in some ways, not as crucial to the story as other shorter scenes. Yet actors and other company members saw the scene as an important moment that would stir audience emotions, and expressed excitement about it. Accustomed to writing in less overtly emotional ways, Eric and I struggled with the rendering of the scene, yet moved to consider why it might be important theatrically and reflected on how our assumptions were coming from our position as graduate students steeped in academic reading and writing. As the aforementioned examples illustrate, DWP collaborators moved back and forth in a give and take relationship with each other as well as shifted in relation to the project. Expertise was ultimately less of a focus, with collaborative contributions and commitment to the central idea being privileged.

Central to archival research as community literacy practice are Freirean notions of solidarity, which scholars like Ellen Cushman have taken up in working with community members outside the university. The work Eric and I did as collaborators on the DeVoted Women Project made possible new representations of knowledge and modes of engagement that wouldn't have emerged without the people we worked with. In the case of the DWP, solidarity existed around the idea summarized in the project's mission statement of "reignit[ing] an intellectual dialogue regarding the responsibilities and patriotism of the vote by focusing on the suffrage movement in Nebraska" ("DeVoted Women Project"). Within this mission statement, the archival research Eric and I contributed was not the sole focus, but it served to help address a local concern raised by an alliance formed of women's advocacy groups in the Lincoln community. The people involved in the planning thus generated the idea that served as the centerpiece around which the solidarity circle was formed. Had Eric and I entered the project with our own research solidly conceptualized and packaged and an unwillingness to think beyond academic genres and audiences, experimental meaning-making and knowledge creation would have been stifled, as would the potential for building relationships with community members—including the suffragists whose rhetoric we had recovered. The recovered portion of Nebraskan women's history and its rhetoric was able to expand in relation to the growing solidarity circle started by The Angels Theatre Company.

Archival research as community literacy practice enables sponsorship to become a multi-directional creative process that builds solidarity through reciprocal relationships around a central idea. In contrast to the hierarchical definition of sponsorship Brandt critiques, the DeVoted Women Project cultivated a shared sense of sponsorship that entailed a back and forth movement of knowledge sharing. In this scheme, collaborators on the DWP served as both sponsors and sponsored at various points in the project's process. While Brandt points to the success a sponsor receives through sponsoring literacy development, the goals of the DWP were not measured by capitalistic terms of success, but in our ability to reach and share with citizens across the state—to engage with the community.

Although the DWP's success was about engaging with communities, we were concerned about the issue of sustaining the project and its aim to foster civic dialogue and advocate for citizens to vote. Judy had other shows to produce and direct, the actors had other theatrical commitments, other collaborators had pressing professional commitments, and Eric and I had graduate school requirements to fulfill. The project and its challenges served as a critical impetus for me to rethink my identity as a scholar and what I want my scholarship to mean and accomplish. I would love to know on future projects in which I collaborate that the sustainability of a project is defined and viable, no matter how long the course of the project might be.

Although sustaining or even expanding the project was not possible, the DeVoted Women Project reflects the profound potential of archival research as community literacy practice. Archives exist within a community and document its histories, and as such call on scholars to cultivate habits of mind that enable us to locate ourselves within our communities. The field of composition and rhetoric has created momentum in recovering the voices and illuminating the rhetorical contributions of women excluded from the rhetorical canon; however, there is a double silence we must confront. By only moving archival work into academic forums, we risk silencing the voices of the past in our communities and from community members with whom we can collaborate and create *alongside*.

Archival research as community literacy practice urges us to look out from the archives with rhetorical awareness of our communities. Creating *alongside* others demands an openness that requires us to look out from the archives to consider what ideas, questions and concerns exist in the local community in relation to archival materials and making those considerations in conversation with community members. It asks us to consider the potential archives hold for recovery work that is conscious of its creative possibilities: the creation of possible representations of recovered artifacts and the creation of reciprocal relationships in solidarity circles.

A Framework for Approaching the Archives

The conditions for creative possibilities can be created through what Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa E. Kirsh call *strategic contemplation*, which involves taking into account as much as possible but not evaluating our research or reaching closure too soon (85). Strategic contemplation invites wonder, creativity, and inspiration into the research process and functions recursively (85)—characteristics that can

make archival research as community literacy practice as generative as possible. Approaching archival research through a stance of strategic contemplation, we can begin the process by exploring the following questions:

- What connections exist between these artifacts and current community conversations and/or concerns?
- Who in the community is having these conversations and/or addressing or working to resolve these concerns?
- Who else might have a vested interest in these conversations and/or concerns?
- What multiple forms might these artifacts assume and who might want to engage in acts of rhetorical invention to consider possibilities for making the artifacts public and visible?
- How might the community benefit from the artifacts, and in what ways?

By considering these questions, the archival researcher can begin by inviting community members into early conversation about the recovered artifacts and their creative potential, engaging in collaborative invention to determine a central idea around which a solidarity circle might form.

Archival researchers can also prepare to establish reciprocal relationships with collaborators in a solidarity circle by considering the following early in their research:

- Do collaborators foresee power imbalances in the relationships they seek to build as they begin the processes of creating alongside others?
- Where do individual commitments lie in relationship to the vision and carrying out of the project?
- What identities do collaborators bring to the project, and is there a willingness to work beyond expertise and assume multiple positions in relation to the project?

As the project unfolds, collaborators can begin to consider how to draw on the expertise and knowledge from the voices and experiences of those whose rhetoric is being recovered.

Archival research as community literacy practice asks us to reflect on the intersection of the archives, the community, and our professional identities. Rather than viewing university-community relationships as moments when academics can deliver an already theorized or historically contextualized interpretation of archival research to the public or work on a limited basis with community members from our positions of disciplinary expertise, we can instead build relationships and create new knowledge in collaboration. Archival research as community literacy practice

provides shared learning and teaching experience for *all* collaborators, laying a foundation for generating additional insights, new public texts, and even new forms of community literacy.

Endnotes

1 The 2004 presidential primary election showed only 21% of registered Nebraska voters went to the polls though that number jumped to 68% for the general election. But a quick look at the 2005 Lincoln city primary election shows that 19.55% of registered voters went to the polls, representing 11.96% of the entire city's population. The general city election was slightly better with a 29.3% turnout rate or 18.3% of the total population of Lincoln, but these numbers do not tell us how many women participated in the election. Because Nebraska does not ask for gender identity upon registration to vote, tracking voting by gender becomes difficult. The Lincoln Lancaster Women's Commission estimated that close to 66% of eligible (over eighteen and registered) women of Lincoln voted in the 2004 general election but only 16.4% of the total eligible women voted in the 2005 city election (Lancaster County Election Commissioner).

2 Our work with The DeVoted Women Project involved more than collaborating to create *Nebraska Next!*, though that is the focus of this piece. In order to raise money to pay the playwright the Angel's Theater Company performed Wendy Lil's *Fighting Days*. An equality day celebration was held at the Lincoln YWCA where Eric and I gave a formal presentation on local suffrage activity.

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