The Role of Libraries and Archives in Canon Formation and Establishing Literary Value: A Point of View from the English-Speaking World – Jan Horner and David Darby

Since the 1970s, libraries and archives in the English-speaking world have dealt with changes wrought by economic, intellectual, technological, and political forces. These forces in turn have had a significant impact on the role of libraries and archives in canon formation and development. This article will review how literary and critical theory, digital technology, the financial situation of universities, and changes in service philosophy have affected the role of libraries and archives in constructing literary value.

Libraries and archives often work together in English-speaking research universities and, according to a recent survey for OCLC "the institutional archives reports to the library in 87% of institutions" (Dooley and Luce 12). Traditionally archives have distinguished themselves from libraries by collecting mostly unique and unpublished works. In addition to collecting unique documents, archivists appraise and select from materials acquired or donated according to their policies and professional judgment, and thus they can be said to shape the record or the archival fonds. Librarians traditionally acquire works that have already been edited or shaped. Archivists must sometimes make decisions about whether to keep jottings, notes, scribblings when appraising personal papers, and subjective or somewhat personal factors come into play (Hobbs 130). The importance of the archivist's role in creating or shaping archives is affirmed in textbooks on archival appraisal (Craig 85). Related to their 'shaping' role, and with explicit reference to Foucault, the archive can be read as a discourse or a "practice that systematically forms the objects of which it speaks" (Codebò 13).

For this reason archives have been more of a focus for postmodern questioning or mythologizing than libraries, most famously by Derrida in *Mal d'archive* (*Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression)*. The human need – a burning passion – for archives according to Derrida (142) rests as much on the possibility of forgetting as on a sense of finitude, which forces us on an endless search for the archive before it slips away. The cause of this suffering or passion lies in the compulsion on one hand to preserve and on the other, to conceal or destroy (Paulus 942). In other words the archive can be said to "simultaneously repress and constitute our archives of memory."(Greetham 19) Archivists have acknowledged their tendency to reflect various public mores, social norms and power relationships in their construction of archival fonds (Cook 25 and Hobbs 127). Cook claims that a record of the archivists' biases and values as determining factors in their decisions regarding appraisal, acquisition and description should be documented with the collection or fonds (34-5).

Associated with the questioning of the objectivity of the archival record is an acknowledgement that archives can play a determining role in literary reputations. What archives choose to collect and select for preservation reinscribes "hegemonic decisions about what is 'good

writing'….(Tector 106)." In the case of Library and Archives Canada (where Tector works), the decision to preserve their papers can give "lesser known or even unpublished authors a second chance at breaching the walls of Canadian Literature" (106-7). In academic literary studies there are differing views: on the one hand libraries and archives are not counted as influences in forming an academic literary canon (Lecker 4) and on the other hand various authors in the collection *Re(dis)covering Our Foremothers* indicate their debt to archival research in identifying and valorizing nineteenth-century Canadian women writers (McMullen).

Canon-building by Archives and Libraries in the Twentieth Century

The literature on canon-building does provide instances of the part played by libraries and archives. Lundin and Kidd stress the decisive role played by libraries and archives at the beginning of the century in creating "canonical collections" through their collecting of texts of children's literature and giving the study of children's literature legitimacy: "The rise and sorting of the archive goes hand in hand with the articulation of a children's literature canon and field of research" (Kidd, 7). Historically public libraries in the United States played a canon-building role, for example, in the inclusion of the novels *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* in the American popular canon (Lear). Research on nineteenth-century collections reveal that, despite the controversial nature of Twain's novels and the objections of the American Library Association and respected practitioners, libraries acquired these titles, affording them a wider audience and the possibility of canonical status (Lear 218).

Research libraries in the United States played a crucial and, possibly, a decisive role in "the formulation and extension of [the twentieth] century's literary canon" (Staley 9). In the 1970s they acquired the literary papers of authors of less established reputation almost like market futures and in the process frequently solidified and enhanced them. For example, the University of Tulsa acquired the Jean Rhys archive and the University of Texas at Austin acquired the papers of Paul Scott before scholars became interested in them and before the rise of postcolonial studies. This came at the time of the great expansion of American research universities and of a developing competitiveness among them, with regard especially to collection building. It also came at a time when these institutions' finances were receiving the benefit of wealthy, educated alumni and donors. The rise of new criticism "and its attention to the evolution of the text through various drafts as it freed itself from the author" (Staley 13) also contributed to the growth of research libraries' special collections of literary manuscripts.

However, about 1990 the canon debate taking place in the academy, at least in North America, began to reverberate in the library world (Heinzkill, Cyzyk). In this context libraries were understood to have an implicitly conservative role in canon making from the outset: "libraries have always been a means for controlling knowledge and 'restricting access to it' "(Beard, 11). In the 90s and the first decade of the 21st century there followed a debate on the library's role

in canonization. They were likened to palaces of privilege, or as Harris proposes they have "always been conceived of as something like the magnificent old Grand Hotels of Europe: massive and privileged edifices in which all textual production is choreographed to some central authority" (231-2). It was also claimed that libraries have further maintained the supremacy of the academic canon through their traditional collection-building role as a support to the academic curriculum, and in order to redress that conservative approach librarians were urged to consider themselves as facilitators of exploration by collecting material that is currently non-canonical (Doherty 405). In this argument against the exclusion of non-canonical works (Komara 247, Karass) librarians and archivists were seen as "valuable interpreters of information"(Karass 125) who had a responsibility "to preserve cultural memory even if the materials are not representative of the canon" (Karass 125). However, it is also conceded that the real obstacle to more expansive collecting has been limited or reduced collection budgets (Doherty, 404).

The library literature provides examples of libraries' claims of broadening the literary and scholarly canon, or at least attempts to broaden it. Librarians have offered pragmatic advice to each other about changing or widening the canon to include more literature by Native Americans and by African women, respectively, in one instance providing information for selectors on "new up-and-coming fiction writers of Indian or mixed-Indian descent"(Kratzert and Richey 4). Another suggests that librarians can be proactive in instigating change by using non-canonical examples in library instruction, creating inclusive research guides, creating displays, hosting authors, and giving presentations to faculty on non-canonical authors and works (Conteh-Morgan 170-174). In terms of widening the academic canon a faculty member is quoted as endorsing the role of librarians: "faculty are individually and collectively ill equipped by training to do this work. In our 'cultural' investigations, not to mention those we lead or provoke our students to do, we do not know our way around. We are going to be dependent…on those whose knowledge of the bibliographies, texts, and materials of other disciplines and other subject areas is larger, broader, and especially deeper than ours… The cries you hear from faculty these days… (inevitably) they will be directed mostly to you [the librarians]" (Hunter 296).

A standard text on collection management for literature is *Literature in English: A Guide for Librarians in the Digital Age in English* (Day and Wortmann). It argues for the importance of libraries collecting and preserving more than what is popular and canonical, and furthermore that libraries should work collaboratively on these efforts, otherwise "a large chunk of our literary culture and our consequent understanding of it are in danger of disappearing" (Wortmann 51). In another essay in the same volume it is claimed that the instability of the canon is understood to be not just about pressure to include minority writing but also to include new genres such as diaries, sermons, and interdisciplinary research (Stebelman, 189).

In still another essay in the volume the authors maintain that one of the greatest factors that has changed the canon collected and taught is the increasing diversity of the students in the classroom and the library and the institution's need to engage them (Adams and Benefiel 255).

Changes in Digital Technology

In recent years libraries have been faced with significant technological shifts, changing user demands and increasing budget pressures forcing them to "adapt or risk obsolescence" (University Leadership Council 78). This change has had a profound effect on both how university libraries acquire resources and on their role in canon formation.

The traditional service of libraries (providing access to books and other physical materials and guiding patrons via a physical reference desk through research) has become peripheral. Viable alternatives in the form of Google, Amazon, Wikipedia, and, for the United States at least, HathiTrust, provide the easiest access to collections of articles, monographs, information resources and ebooks. These web- and cloud-based resources have grown tremendously and dwarf those of even the largest library collections in size and scope. Thus the importance of collection size is declining, and libraries now see their primary role as providing access to, rather than ownership of, scholarly resources. In addition, subscriptions to scholarly journals and electronic databases have steadily risen in a way many believe is unsustainable, and libraries have begun to support a transition to nonprofit, open-access journals as a means of cost-saving and in the interest of the public good. Indeed, according to Jensen in the new metrics of scholarly authority, the web and developing algorithms of usage will drive a new measure of authority in an open access publishing environment. He argues that "libraries are in the forefront of supporting open access…[and] new publishing models and thus support...new authority metrics"(B7). Usage and visibility will be a strong driver in these metrics, alongside literary or critical value: "scholarly invisibility is rarely the path to scholarly authority" (B7).

Libraries have traditionally acquired materials based first of all on their university's curriculum and research needs. Because curriculum and faculty change over time, libraries have placed an importance as well on building balanced collections that not only answer present needs but anticipate those of the future. In the first instance, libraries would support a *canon* as established by the curriculum and faculty. In the second, they have used standards of assessment involving the significance of the imprint (favouring university presses), importance of critical authors, review assessments, recommendations from faculty, the assessment of prizes and awards, and recommendations of authoritative lists or bibliographies, e.g. *Books for College Libraries* (later *Resources for College Libraries*) or journal lists in Harner's *Literary Research Guide* or *Ulrich's Periodical Directory*. An attempt, based on holdings of canonical or core materials, was made to codify levels of collection support in the Conspectus Project undertaken by the Research Libraries Group in the 1980s (Wood). Although originally created to

facilitate resource sharing, the Conspectus has been used internally by libraries for other collection-related purposes, including determining levels of collection support of curricular and research needs (Ferguson, Grant, and Rutstein 38). Finally, collecting has also followed local policy that might recognize the need to enhance existing collection strengths or preserve local historical and cultural collections, often materials already existing in the library's special collections and/or archives and which reflect a local canon of authors.

Economic Conditions and the Role of Libraries and Archives Today

Driven by the economic downturn and shrinking library budgets overall and by an atmosphere of accountability where libraries must demonstrate their value related to learning outcomes, student retention, faculty research productivity, or teaching support, libraries are placing more emphasis on services other than collection-building (University Leadership Council 78). In order to support these new liaison services, they have turned to methods of acquisition that involve less staff time, known as patron- or demand-driven or user-initiated acquisition (Nixon, Freeman, and Ward 121). Typically records are loaded in the catalogue, usually for ebooks but also for print books, and the library acquires only those titles that are used by its patrons. Some libraries opt to pay for short term loans of ebooks, only paying for the time spent in them by their patrons and they are not permanently purchased. The library typically will decide which books will be involved in their patron-driven acquisition program, targeting dates of imprint, language, publishers, subjects, price limits and thus mayrecognize canonical publishers. However, some publishers will not allow some or all of their books to be included in patron-driven programs. Some libraries have opted to base their patron-driven acquisition programs on previously established approval plans with monograph vendors, where similar parameters (imprint date, language, important or canonical primary and secondary authors, publishers, etc.) are in place. Some libraries have opted to subscribe to, rather than purchase ebook collections, collections whose titles would change or be updated over time.

In addition, in order to control spending, libraries are considering moving some access to journal literature to a pay-per-use model rather than maintaining expensive journal subscriptions, especially those presently acquired in publisher bundles.

While some money will still be spent on "core", classic, or canonical titles, in the patron-driven environment, acquisitions are driven less by determinations of *value* than those of immediate *relevance* or *application* to the user and -- in the case of ebooks, which can be used conveniently outside the library and its opening hours -- by *timeliness* and *ease of access*.

Similarly, in the vast sweep of the scanning project done for Google Books and nonprofits like HathiTrust and the Internet Archive, millions of books were scanned without regard for canonicity or literary value. While legal barriers and publisher resistance currently prevent full

access to Google Books, especially outside of the United States, a growing corpus of material is being made available to the public at little or no cost. In addition, libraries, having learned lessons from the success of social media, are implementing new catalogue systems that give users the ability to rate, review, comment-on, and tag items, thus potentially creating popular canons (Wilson 410). As a result of patron-driven acquisition and patron inputs to catalogues, libraries are being pushed out of any intermediary role in canon formation, and in fact are promoting a democratization of literary values.

Meanwhile libraries are realizing there is a high amount of duplication across research library collections (Perrault 5) or "most of what we buy is being bought by everyone" (Hickerson 5). Thus, what they may claim as valuable going forward will be their truly unique and local collections, including their archival collections. From the realization that "our archives and special collections remain our opportunity for playing a distinctive role in documenting culture, science, industry, government, and the human experience" follows a need for archivists and librarians to work together more closely (Hickerson 5). Thus research libraries will need to restructure and make their collections budget less dominant and untouchable in order to place more emphasis on special collections and archives and make them more accessible to users (Hickerson 5).

Libraries in fact are moving away from a focus on collecting 'fixed and final', published works and are becoming more interested in the process of research communication and more involved in developing new models of scholarly communication, such as digital humanities projects, institutional repositories, and publishing services to support authors and editors (Paulus 946). In other words, the mission of libraries and archives is converging as librarians become shapers and editors too.

Given space considerations and the inability of many universities and colleges to raise funds for expensive library structures including high-density storage facilities, determinations of value will focus on what must be retained from analog collections and on what from their special collections and archival fonds should be digitized and what level of preservation will be assigned to both analog originals and digital surrogates. It may be that this work will contribute to the rise of local canons, and indeed a further splintering of the canon. In conclusion, libraries and archives will continue to influence canonicity and the establishment of literary value, but their influence will revolve around their efforts to promote and make accessible their archives and special collections.

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