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Researching “Irretrievable” Subjects: Black Working-Class Women in Southern Archives

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I want to focus my comments today on my experiences in doing research on my first book: *To Joy My Freedom* and retrace some of my steps in researching it in southern archives. In retrospect, many of the things I will say may seem like common sense now, but in the late 1980s when I began the work of the dissertation that was eventually published as a book, this was not the case. The standard wisdom at the time was that black working-class women were irretrievable subjects in the archives and thus not a promising topic of research.

Ordinary black women, the large majority of whom lived workaday lives were then absent from much of the historical literature because of the difficulty (and perceived difficulties) of finding first-hand documents of their experiences. As you are all aware, people who are illiterate, uneducated, overworked, underpaid tend not to leave behind easily accessible records for later generations to reconstruct their histories.

Although the paucity of primary documents made it exceedingly challenging to study people who are dispossessed, the problem was not one of scarce sources alone. Many historians had also made assumptions about working-class people—women in particular—that hindered research. Namely, the assumption that the women were unimportant and their lives were inconsequential to understanding the broader history of the nation. While in graduate school it was common to hear oppressed people described as “inarticulate,” even by those sympathetic to recovering their history. The underlying assumption was not that scholars may have been deaf and dumb to the voices of the subaltern, but instead, the silenced did not speak. Consequently, very few books were published on African American women's history in general and the studies that were produced mainly focused on exceptional women—middle to upper class and well-educated.

One of the major questions that we were asked to address in our papers is very pertinent to what I want to say: how do existing archival collections shape our historical production and world view? I would like to turn the question around a bit and ask: how do our world views shape our perceptions of what is in existing archival collections? How do our perceptions of what we consider to be important, unimportant, retrievable or irretrievable subjects of history shape our understandings of what constitute viable or relevant sources and influence how we process and interpret archival records?

Let me say that in addressing southern archives I am referring to public and private regional institutions, historically black and predominantly white. My research for the dissertation in southern archives

included: Southern Historical Collection, Rare Book, Manuscript, and special Collections Library at Duke University, Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center, Georgia Department of Archives and History, Spelman College Archives, Clark Atlanta University Archives, Special Collections and Archives at Mercer University, Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University, Reynolds Historical Library at the University of Alabama, Birmingham, Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia, and the Virginia Historical Society.

One of the first challenges I faced in visiting archives was to figure out how to present my topic to archivists in order to maximize access to the full range of sources available. I needed to be strategic in describing my project to make sure that my research would not be limited by the fact that none of the archives had imagined itself as a place where my subjects of interests dwelled. I wanted to avoid being told a pointed “No. We don’t have anything on that subject.” In general, I found that no one among the various archivists was optimistic that I would find much of what I was looking for. Most of them, on the other hand, were very willing to accommodate me and help me as much as they could as I went about probing collection after collection. A couple were visibly annoyed that I was taking them away from more important tasks. One, out of many, I encountered actually obstructed my work by trying to limit me to looking at only the precise documents I could identify in a collection that did not have a detailed inventory. From the mindset of a lowly graduate student I attributed this treatment to the fact that I was on the bottom of the academic totem pole—if only I had been Professor John Hope Franklin, I would have been taken more seriously. (I say this in jest, but I have certainly gotten a different reception in going to archives after my book was published, though I’m still no John Hope Franklin.)

My dissertation research began as a graduate seminar paper on the 1881 Washerwomen’s Strike in Atlanta. This was an event that previous historians had not given much credence. Howard N. Rabinowitz’s *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865–1890* discussed the strike in two pages and dismissed its significance. I was not satisfied with his interpretations and decided to look at the primary evidence, which consisted of between eight and nine articles from the *Atlanta Constitution*. What I discovered was that Rabinowitz’s account had failed to do justice to this evidence in interpreting its meaning. The washerwomen had in fact organized one of the largest strikes in the city’s history at the time and had shown a great deal of political savvy in the process, which even their most vociferous opponents acknowledged begrudgingly. Nonetheless, Rabinowitz’s account had become the standard bearer, as other historians who mentioned the strike relied largely, if not exclusively, on his conclusions, even though he had selected the evidence that fit within the larger thesis of his book and dispensed with the rest. This is not to single out Rabinowitz, but to suggest how influential preconceptions have been in consigning black working women to the margins of history.

The strike not only taught me some important lessons about principles of historical research it also inspired me to go further, to find out more about the women represented among the strikers, more about their mothers and aunts who preceded them and the daughters who filled their shoes and took over their tubs at the communal wash stands. The paper I wrote became concrete evidence I could use to convince my professors that there were possibilities yet explored. It became a point of departure for constructing a wider investigation of the lives and labors of women who were primarily confined to working for a living as cooks, maids, child-nurses, laundresses, and other specialized servants in Atlanta and the urban South. I set out to trace their hopes, ambitions, triumphs, challenges, and tragedies, by examining their lives at work, at play, in their families, and in their communities.

Writing the paper on the washerwomen also became a model for how I would begin to construct my dissertation research. First, of all I took all of the evidence that was available to me seriously. The newspaper was the only extant source on the strike, but I had been able to read it in a way that helped

to generate other sources. Several of the women strikers who were arrested were identified by name, which led me to city directories and the manuscript census in search of biographical information. There were no records of the Washing Society, the group that led the strike, but I could draw inferences from records of very similar organizations, mutual aid societies that functioned as labor unions. There were similar strikes held in other cities, which I could use to help make sense of the Atlanta strike.

I also used the newspaper as a guide for directing me to establishing relevant, but neglected connections between the strike and other events. The International Cotton Exposition was mentioned in a tiny news story after the end of the strike. The exposition was the first world's fair held in the South. The city of Atlanta had turned it into a big brouhaha and the strikers threatened to organize a general strike when it opened. Analyzing the relationship between the exposition and the strike put the entire event in a broader context of racial, class, and gender politics in the city. While other historians had looked at the strike in isolation, by following the evidence, I was able to discern its broader ramifications. I then pursued sources on the exposition, including newspaper articles, promotional material, and speeches delivered during the fair. I was able to uncover an important way in which black women were contesting the newly emergent ideology of the New South.

The pattern that I established here is how I was able to amass enough primary sources to write a dissertation and eventually a book. In general, I thought expansively about the relevance of various kinds of evidence and followed leads from the existing sources to generate more evidence and broaden the landscape of the historical context.

The research for the book was done in several stages. The first stage was obviously to produce materials for the dissertation. In terms of archival records, one would expect to find the most information about domestic workers in diaries and account books kept by employers, in which they spoke about their relationships with servants and recorded their wage transactions. These are the kinds of records that are the most prolific, though they are concentrated in the earlier years of the time period of the book and taper off for the years closer to the turn of the century. But the interpretations of even such traditional sources took on different meanings when read along with records that often brought to surface the conflict between workers and employers told from the point of view of the latter in their daily private recollections. Public records that detailed domestic workers' arrests for "disorderly conduct" for example, or petty theft, often revealed the labor issues at stake in the criminalization of black women's defiance. These records were not intended to be sympathetic to domestics, but they usually revealed the origins of their discontent and the nature of conflict within their work setting, which added greater complexity to a straight forward reading of diary entries about lazy servants or the ever-present difficulty of retaining "good" workers. Though I had started the dissertation with a paper on a strike, I knew that walkouts were rare events and did not expect to find many more of them. What I did not fully understand that emerged as I did more research, however, was that conflict and defiance that fell short of outright protests were endemic to domestic worker/employer relations. A surprising variety of conflicts were aired and exposed in different kinds of archival as well as published sources such as government documents, police records, annual reports of cities, missionary papers, and records of organizations (i.e., the Urban League).

In general, I found that collections that on first appearance seemed irrelevant (i.e. not directly related to black women) often turned out to be useful. I found imprints of black working women scattered in many different kinds of records that in isolation were not very meaningful, but when taken together they added up to quite a bit more.

When I finished the dissertation there was still more research that I needed to do, to give the women's lives more detail and rich texture and situate them more concretely in the context of daily life in the

city. I sent the manuscript to several colleagues and friends to get feedback on how to revise it. The dissertation was organized thematically, for the most part, and a couple of people noted the need for me to comment more on how things changed over time. No one suggested that I reorganize the manuscript to do so, but I realized that there was no other way to fully understand change over time without the narrative being written specifically within the progression of time.

This reorientation turned out to be extremely fruitful as it enabled me to look at old material in new ways. Suddenly, I could see connections that I had entirely missed before. Even the strike, which I had written about a zillion times, looked differently in important ways. By looking more closely at chronology of local black politics in the 1880s, I was able to see even more links not only between the strike and the politics of the New South movement and ideology, but also between the strike and grass roots and electoral black politics. It amplified how the strike had not taken place in a vacuum. It had occurred during a period following emancipation from slavery and before disfranchisement when African Americans still had political leverage at the local level. The strike was a part of a larger strategy of protests against injustices in which blacks were using their last bit of power within the Republican Party to assert their rights.

I also re-conceptualized the project by thinking of it as a study of the African American community of Atlanta from the perspective of women workers, instead of simply a study on women. Women were the majority in urban black populations, yet most studies treated them as minor players in community formation. This broader perspective also meant digging deeper into and re-imagining the use of a wide range of records. For example, in reconstructing the residential development of the city, to discuss how working women lived and worked in the city and how their work was impaired by the social and political geography, I used a host of mundane municipal records.

Another major change I made in revising the manuscript was to incorporate more research on working-class leisure and the conflicts it produced, a topic that I had not treated as extensively in the dissertation. When I wrote the dissertation, I was interested in leisure but had not been able to find much material. So I ended up with a section in the dissertation, whereas I was later able to pull together enough material to write two chapters in the book. What accounted for this disparity? This is an example of how my own perceptions had limited what I thought I could write about a topic. First, I would say, layering the research was an important part of what I had learned in the process of doing the dissertation. Because so little had been written on my subject, I had to do a lot of foundational work just to recover some basic information required for the first rendering in dissertation form. Second, once that foundation was laid I was then freer to see things I had not seen before. The *Atlanta Independent*, for example, was a source I had culled, very carefully I thought. But I went back to that source and paid more attention to often tiny bits of information I had ignored before: advertisements, social columns, and police blotters. Many more stories began to pop out about the leisure lives of black women, which were also complemented by stories that were listed in the crime sections of the *Constitution*, adding greater insight into the social dimensions of urban working-class life.

This is all a long-winded way of saying that southern archives are rich treasure troves. Though obviously more replete with elite sources from elite perspectives, they are still indispensable for retelling the stories of those who had little or no power and few material resources to leave behind in estates.

If I could have been granted the power to compensate for the restrictions that I encountered in archives, there are two things that would have been high on my wish list. First, what a difference it would make if historically black archival institutions had access to better funding for collecting, preserving, and making available records for researchers. I found some of the most interesting and

compelling documents at places like the archives at Clark Atlanta University. Yet the lack of adequate staff and resources often gave me the sinking feeling that I was only skimming the surface of possibilities.

The second item on my wish list is relevant to traditionally black as well as predominantly white archives: the acquisition and collection of more sources related to ordinary people, especially African Americans. While it is very difficult, especially at this date, to gather such sources for the nineteenth century, it is also important to note the obvious role of solicitation. The SHC would not exist without such active solicitation. The Jim Crow project, *Behind the Veil*, at the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University is one example of how we can do more to reclaim African American history.

Let me also note in closing, that there has been significant progress made in reclaiming forgotten subjects in southern archives and other institutions dedicated to historical preservation. I am a consultant for an upcoming permanent exhibition on domestic workers at the Maymont House in Richmond, Va. It has been fascinating to watch this project unfold. The Maymont mansion and grounds were willed to the city after the death of the multimillionaire owners James and Sallie Dooley in the 1920s. For the eighty-year period in the hands of city officials, the grounds have served as a public park and the house as a showplace of Gilded Age opulence and wealth. Visitors to the mansion were treated to instructions on its fine architecture, lavish furnishings, and rare objects d'art.

But curators of the site in the past several years have decided to flip the script and depict the mansion as a place of work, from the point of view of those who worked and lived below the stairs. Domestic and service workers of all kinds engaged in the daily labor that made the house into a home for its wealthy owners. They were cooks, maids, butlers, laundresses, and a host of outdoor service workers most of whom lived off the premises and left behind their families early every morning and returned to them late at night. The curators, preservationists set out to restore the service areas of the mansions. Rather than limiting visitors to tours of the upstairs residence, visitors will now see the food pantries, basement kitchen, and the quarters set aside for a maid and butler. In order to invite visitors to gain a better understanding of the totality of the workers' lives, they conducted and collected oral histories of the descendants of the servants as well as those of other Richmond domestics. Such a project of restoration and preservation would have literally been unimaginable even just a few decades ago.

The Maymont House is the same, pretty much as it always has been, but the perception of it has changed, which has resulted in the production of an entirely different history of the full range of people who passed through its doors during the lifetime of its owners. There are certainly limits on how much we can expand archival sources for studying nineteenth-century history, but there should be fewer limits on our perceptions and imaginations of how we use the resources already at hand to retrieve subjects previously assumed to be irretrievable.