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Musings on the Place of a Space for an Archive Encounter

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There is increasing interest in the materiality of archives in the archival, literary and historical fields, matching that of artists working with archives. For me, this project raises the complexities of space and place on experiences with archives. Alfred, Lord Tennyson is one of Lincolnshire's famous sons and the archive collections held within the Tennyson Research Centre (TRC) in this small cathedral city and county town are of international importance to literary scholars. Place is particularly important in relation to this archival collection. As part of the iterative nature of the Bummock Project, this project has noticeable differences with the earlier Lace Archive residency in Nottingham. Beyond the obvious differences in the subject and nature of the archive collections, and the different artists involved, I want to consider here the difference in the place and space of the archive. The duration of Danica Maier, Andrew Bracey and Sarah Bennett's engagement with the TRC traversed a period when the Centre and its archives moved. As a result, the physical surroundings in which access to the archives took place changed substantially. As it unfolded, the Bummock residency at the TRC revealed and responded to complex relationships with place, both of the TRC with its institutional settings and of Tennyson with Lincolnshire.

As was evident with the earlier Lace Archive residency in Nottingham, a key element of the Bummock project is the multiplicity of the artists' encounters with the archive. Multiple visits enable selection through controlled rummage, affirmation of selected archival objects and an important period of *being with* the archival objects - an in-depth attention to the objects in response to experimentation in the art studio. The multiple visits to the TRC and its archive were to two different places and spaces - a return that was not a return.

The initial group visit to the TRC occurred when it was still housed at the Lincoln Central Library where it had been since the early 1960s. Housed within the dome of the building, it was a relatively informal and intimate space. Grace Timmins, the specialist responsible for the collections described the setting in an article in 2011:

"Tennyson's library lines the room alongside the libraries of his father, son and brother. Thousands of letters, proofs, manuscripts and photographs are carefully packed in boxes stacked on shelves. His furniture is dotted around the room; artefacts that graced Tennyson's home are on window ledges and in cabinets. It smells of the 19th century: the books reek of coal fires and Tennyson's indefatigable smoking. This is not Tennyson's home but it has the contents: all

the bits and pieces of his everyday life, his tobacco, pipes, quills, ink bottles, chair, desk, cloak, comb, locks of hair.”¹

This quite personal archival environment seeded the initial relationships between the artists and the archive collection. In writing of *The Allure of the Archives*² historian Arlette Farge commented on the emotional connections that researchers make with the personal stories in archives. Arguably, this intimate and personal environment in the dome of Lincoln Central Library was conducive to Bummock’s innovative methodology of controlled rummage that bypasses pre-formulated searches via catalogue queries to enable sensory and purposefully subjective selections of material from the archive. We can assume that experiencing an archive amongst the personal effects of its subject would undoubtedly encourage personal reflections and subjective connections to the archival materials.

In 2017, the TRC reopened on an upper floor of the Lincolnshire Archives. When the artists returned to access the collections, it was in this new more controlled and institutionalised archival space. As I observed when I accompanied a visit in July 2017, the artists came in very much like traditional researchers in that they knew what they wanted, and asked for specific boxes which Timmins brought to the table at which Maier, Bracey and Bennett were sat waiting. On reflection, I wonder the extent to which the more institutionalised space effected this reversion to a more traditional mode of archival access. Controlled rummage was still possible and enabled enthusiastically by Timmins; I watched Bracey spin with his eyes closed within the rolling rack shelving to select additional boxes at random. However, this took place in an environmentally controlled and thus chilly storeroom amongst almost homogeneous shelves of similar archival boxes, behind the scenes and away from the other materials in the TRC room. It seemed a sterile and controlled environment in which to search for embodied and sensory material encounters with archives. As Rawson (2009)³ has argued both environment and language shape the ways in which people encounter archives and archival collections. But then, that is part of the overall research aim of the Bummock project, to explore the possibilities and potentialities of artistic responses and methods of access with a variety of types and places of archive collections.

Whilst it changed the nature of the artists’ access, the move of the TRC definitively has had positives for the archive collections, not least of which is the improved environmental conditions for long-term storage and preservation. Timmons herself also noted the possibilities of the move in increasing the public space for open storage of materials. She admitted that the more limited space in the central library had dictated “a league table of ‘important’ parts of the collection”⁴. The move had to an extent changed the contents of the bummock of the archives collection:

“... What becomes the bummock and why, is fascinating and, most importantly, it changes. Things that haven’t been of interest move centre stage, sometimes for

that very reason: that they haven't been of interest before. It happened here in the site move. Tennyson and his family's three volume pot boiler reading, the equivalent of soaps, had been excluded from the centre in the library. Here we were able to find room alongside the other family libraries."

So, whilst the move of the TRC from one place to another can be seen to create opportunities to bring visibility to parts of the otherwise-bummock, my question remains to what extent were the artists influenced by the different approaches to archives in the spaces of library and county archives. There is difference both in terms of institutional process and access protocols, as well as the different architectural codes and physical layout of historic stone building and late twentieth century brick-built facility. The two different spaces were also very different places.

To my reading, the artists' engagement with the TRC seems to return repeatedly to relationships with place. Clearly, there is a significant importance ascribed to place for this particular collection, like many archival collections associated with individuals and local families. The archive came to Lincoln, and the TRC came to be, as a direct result of the city's 150th celebrations of Tennyson's birth in 1959. Tennyson was born in Lincolnshire in 1809 and spent his childhood in the county. He was descended from a family which had had property and businesses in the county for a few generations. However, whilst Tennyson was born and brought up in Lincolnshire, his poetry and fame came whilst he was living elsewhere. Tennyson the man is of Lincolnshire, whilst Tennyson the famous Victorian poet is both of, and yet not of, Lincolnshire.

In taking the project, and their artistic responses, out into the countryside of Lincolnshire, Maier, Bracey and Bennett responded to the complexity of relationships with place and space in this iteration of the Bummock project. The *Bummock: Tennyson Art Walk*, held as part of the North Kesteven Walking Festival in the summer of 2019, enabled the public to encounter and engage with large-scale temporary artworks that were early outcomes of the TRC residency. Both Maier and Bracey produced artworks which drew on relationships with houses and homes uncovered in archival materials relating to other, less famous, members of the Tennyson family. Situated within the countryside of the Waddington Trail these could be read as responses to ideas of home and landscape as well as to the place of these individuals within the Tennyson family. Whilst Bennett's *Bound* brought a volume of Tennyson's poems in reproduction into the place of a Lincolnshire rural village. Wrapped in archival snake weights which both constrain and reveal, it can be read in relation to the contemporary tensions of the archival space as well as the constraints of expectations of gender in both the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. In bringing the project into the countryside of North Kesteven district of Lincolnshire through the *Bummock: Tennyson Art Walk*, the archives were taken out of the institution symbolically, and somewhat

paradoxically, in doing so the othering of the concept of the archive as a sequestered 'space elsewhere' was reinforced.

In this evolution of the Bummock Project, questions continue to be asked about access mechanisms and the possibilities of the controlled rummage to enable sensory material encounters as routes into archival collections. Importantly, questions are also posed and attention drawn to the nature of the space and place in which the archives are held and the effects these might have on archival encounters.

¹ Grace Timmins, (2011) 'The Tennyson Research Centre', *NATE Classroom*, v13.

² Arlette Farage, (2015 [1989]) *The Allure of the Archives*, translated by Thomas Scott-Railton, New Haven: Yale University Press. See also Antoinette Burton, ed., (2005) *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, London: Duke University Press.

³ K.J. Rawson, (2009) 'Accessing Transgender // Desiring Queer(er?) Archival Logics', *Archivaria*, 68: 123-140.

⁴ This and subsequent quotes from Grace Timmins are taken from an interview with the author in July 2017.