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Marguerite Harper:
Archives and Lost Agent(cy)

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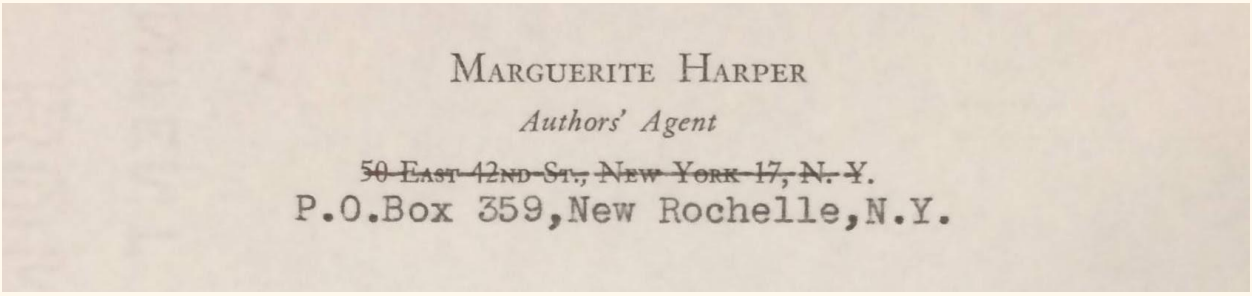

Photo from University of South Carolina Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Elmore Leonard archive

Epigraph

"The archivist's job is to organize the materials so that they serve as evidence of the different people or groups reflected in the archives" (Laura A. Millar, 2017, 215).

Presentation

A combination of social movements of the twentieth century and postmodern thought pushed many archives to begin paying attention to the histories of marginalized peoples and archivists' role in shaping histories (Millar, 2017, 43) – many of us are aware of the call among archivists in the twenty-first century to "decolonize" the archive, and the arguments that reveal how traditional approaches to archives and history are inherently imperial or patriarchal and thus

non-representative of minorities or the marginalized (Millar, 2017). Several archives were created with the sole purpose of actively preserving underrepresented histories, such as the Iowa Women's Archives or the The LGBT Community Center National History Archive. In an effort to practice the archival principle that "Historical records are important to society as a whole for understanding the past and providing guidance for the future" and that "historical records constitute an important part of the collective memory of our society and of our cultural heritage" (Dearstyne, 1993, 17), archival practices have been recently re-theorized to push archivists to examine their own biases and to ensure their collections and records reveal repressed histories. And yet, we continually find examples of how our earlier practices, our continued biases have resulted in silences, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot would call them, gaps that can never be filled because there wasn't an onus to keep track of people deemed "unimportant." Fortunately, as David Thomas noted in *The Silence of the Archive*, "it has become more accepted that archival silences are a proper subject for enquiry and to view the absence of records as positive statements rather than passive gaps" (2017, xx).

In our discussion today about inclusive metadata practices, I want to point out a concrete example of the types of archival omission that many scholars have been working to eliminate, and suggest the ways in which, while we are now working to create more inclusive practices, we must be cognizant of how our inherited understandings of what constitutes an archive or library listing in the first place can perpetuate these regimes of oppression. The example I'll use today is of a woman named Marguerite Harper whose story could have given us insight into the history of literary production but which we're missing because no one, perhaps including herself, thought

her work was worth preserving. Perhaps more importantly, I am interested in using Harper as an example of a "bundle of silences" to examine the ways in which archives reinforce narratives that silence and efface the roles of women in our history. More than just our growing awareness that actors of previous generations–whether authors, literary agents, librarians, or archivists–may have internalized cultural biases against preserving certain types of information, our philosophical understandings of the structure of the archive may perpetuate these elisions even against our best intentions.

This investigation began in the Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of South Carolina. In 2014, the University of South Carolina announced that it had acquired the personal papers of recently deceased novelist Elmore 'Dutch' Leonard and had begun archiving the collection. Leonard was and is known to many as a prolific "gritty crime" and mystery writer, and revered for the way he turned most of his novels into Hollywood fodder, gaining respectable royalties – some of his more famous adaptations include the multiple versions of *3:10 to Yuma*, *Jackie Brown,* and *Get Shorty*. Many, including Leonard himself, attribute his success to H.N. Swanson, a literary agent who focused on the sale of motion picture rights. H.N. Swanson, also known as 'Swanie,' is considered such an integral part of Leonard's career that Swanson's 1991 obituary in the *Los Angeles Times* even reads, "His clients at one time included…mystery writer Elmore Leonard, whom he took credit for discovering."

Except, Swanie did not discover Leonard; a woman named Marguerite Harper did. And not only did she discover him, she formed him into the writer he is remembered as today, but Leonard did not want to dwell on his indebtedness to a woman. Throughout the correspondence

from Harper in the collection at the University of South Carolina, there appears to be latent sexism on Leonard's part, glaring through Harper's responses and it appears he begrudgingly took her advice, usually only after she repeated it several times and when she truly began to have trouble selling his stories. In fact, Leonard takes several years to take her substantial advice to move away from Westerns and into another genre such as Crime, and Harper literally never reaped the rewards for the hard work she put into Leonard. Harper died in 1967, prior to the publication of any of his Crime novels, but she had been working on them with him – the last letter in the collection at UofSC directly from Harper refers to a novel Leonard was working on, tentatively titled *Mother, this is Jack Ryan*. That book eventually became *The Big Bounce* and had two film adaptations, one in 1969 and one in 2004. Even though she had been shopping early drafts around to publishers, because Harper died prior to Leonard completing the novel, H.N. Swanson got the credit for selling the publication and film rights and launching Leonard's career into the limelight.

So who was Marguerite Harper and how did she become a literary agent? I am able to answer only one of those questions, but here is what I know. Born January 12, 1895 in New York City, Marguerite Ethel Harper was the second child born to Canadian immigrants Philip and Lydia Harper. For reasons unknown, her parents immigrated to New York City with her brother, William, in 1894. Her family moved to New Jersey in time for the 1900 US Census, but was back in Kings County, Brooklyn, New York by the 1910 US Census, and there Marguerite and most of her family would stay until their deaths.

Harper's life went through a period of intense change between about 1920 and 1930. I have not seen personal documents from this time, but government and obituary records suggest the changes that happened. It appears her older brother had moved out of the family's residence by the 1920 US Census, and her younger sister, Phyllis, was married in 1925, leaving Marguerite to live alone with their parents. In early 1928, Harper's father, Philip died; considering he was in his 70s, it is possible that his death did not have a severe financial impact on Marguerite and her mother by leaving them without an income. However, it is easy to speculate that this pushed Harper to pursue a career, although it's very feasible that she had made such a decision prior to her father's death. Regardless, by the 1930 US Census, Harper was referring to herself as a Literary Agent.

Outside of government records such as the census, and newspaper sleuthing (mainly through the *New York Times*), I have only been able to find records about Harper through archival collections and only ever in men's records. I was the processing assistant for the Irvin Department of Rare Books and Special Collections that worked on processing Elmore Leonard's correspondence. While processing Leonard's correspondence and reading the multitude of letters from Harper to Leonard, simultaneously I realized that she had a significant impact on his career and that Leonard had narratively downplayed her importance to his success.

In 1951, Leonard was writing Western short stories as he worked in automotive advertising in Detroit. He managed to get one, "Trail of the Apache," published in *Argosy*

Magazine. Before the magazine hit the stands, Marguerite Harper was in touch with Leonard. On November 20, 1951, she wrote to Leonard:

> Dear Mr. Leonard:
>
> A day or so ago I happened to see an advance copy of the December *Argosy Magazine* and thumbing pages, before I knew it, I was deep into your Apache story.
>
> …
>
> Have been an agent twenty years plus handling a small number of authors with no assistance. Mostly I have sold their first stories and the subsequent ones and worked hard to improve their standing as writers. Do you think you could be benefited by an agent? Or have you given any thought to it? And if not, will you do so?
>
> I have Luke Short, Peter Dawson, T. T. Flynn, Marvin DeVries, George Appell, L. L. Foreman, Verne Athanas, etc. I've been an agent since the days when it was considered unethical to charge reading fees; just ten percent of sales.
>
> Do you think we could benefit one another? After all, I'm here – I know most of the editors. A line from you would be appreciated.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Marguerite Harper

At this point, based on what was in the archival collection at the University of South Carolina, Leonard had not had any correspondence with other literary agents. A copy of Leonard's response to Harper is not in the collection at the University of South Carolina, but we know he did respond because of the next letter Harper sent Leonard, dated November 29, 1951. Based on the November 29th letter, Leonard was not convinced that he needed an agent and yet the interest of an agent had bolstered his confidence in his own acumen (remember, he had only one short story pre-published at this time). Harper's response is full of advice, and advice from someone who has seen the publishing industry go through immense change over the course of their career and has an idea of where the industry will go next. In fact, as early as this second letter, Harper is both encouraging Leonard to shift genres to one that will be more profitable and to be aware of the opportunities in movies and how to take advantage of those avenues:

> The way to make any real money is to aim at the slicks. And you should know too that there are not many that use Westerns…
>
> If you can't get a slick sale the thing to aim at is short stories and one or two book lengths a year and of course, while television cannot expand now, there is still the money to be paid for movie sales if they can be made and other sales to come like radio and television.
>
> I think you are going to make your job difficult if you narrow your effort down to doing just Apache stories…

Harper's third letter (December 12, 1951) to Leonard indicates that a. he does not appear to believe or want to follow her advice in regards to genre, and b. he has cast doubts on her abilities as a literary agent. Harper once again emphasizes:

> At the risk of seeming to repeat myself I want definitely to impress on you the fact that you will run into real difficulties with editors, no matter how well you conceive and write your stories, if you do story after story based on this theme of the soldier or the scout, or the homesteader or the rancher or the miner stalking the Indian.
>
> The Western movies that have been the greatest successes have nothing to do with Indians at all. Also, as to the *Argosy* story, it is almost never that the movies buy other than full length stories. And they practically never buy pulps no matter how good they are – in fact the agents in Hollywood won't even bother with them because the studios and the directors have always been negative about them.

By December 24, 1951, Harper made her first sale for Leonard. It is, admittedly, a Western story sold to a Western magazine but considering Leonard had only given Harper Westerns to work with, we should take this in stride. The fact to focus on is that within a month of reaching out to Leonard, Harper was making him money and connections as a writer.

Over the next several years (but I am focusing my examples to letters from 1952), Harper represented Leonard to a variety of publishers; as part of her efforts to sell his

stories, she regularly suggests edits and gives writing advice based on what's sold and what hasn't. Here are a few examples:

- *January 24, 1952:* I think the dialogue in the last story as compared to the story *Argosy* rejected shows how it tends to lighten up a story.
- *Feb. 25, 1952:* It is just that most of what you have written that he has seen is almost without a life anywhere for the reader. A great dramatic situation doesn't necessarily mean that everything must be downright morose, disagreeable, and depressing. In particular a story should end with some kind of satisfaction to the reader – either actual or implied. …I think what you need most to put your sights on is the reason for fiction. Its primary aim is ENTERTAINMENT. It's to write about characters who can be made believable, whose behavior is something that a normal human can readily understand.
- *May 14, 1952:* These last stories have been passable but fairly pulpy I think. How about something with more feeling, aimed at the slicks; bearing down a little more on character and interesting plot.
- *May 20, 1952:* Snap this one up a bit – it moves very laboriously – so much so the reader sometimes wishes the Indians would come on scene and raise some real life hell!

These and letters from their later correspondence show that Harper knew she had knowledge of the industry to share and saw herself as a mentor to Leonard and was, quite literally, invested in his improvement as a writer. Additionally, many of the suggested changes are mirror images to the accolades Leonard would later receive for his writing. Take for instance, this quote from a review of Leonard's *Fifty-Two Pickup* in 1974: "Leonard is a very good writer; he manages to

get into his characters and ***build a believable situation.*** The dialogue reads in a natural manner, and is certainly tough enough" (emphasis added). Or this review of Leonard's *Unknown Man No. 89* from 1977: "He has a wonderful ear, and ***his dialogue never has a false note.*** He avoids artiness, ***writes clear expository prose*** and has the ability to create real people. It is not High Literature, nor does it pretend to be. Leonard is primarily ***an entertainer***" (emphasis added).

Leonard did eventually take Harper's advice and began writing longer stories and began his foray into the genre of crime and mystery. Leonard did not take this advice for almost their entire working relationship, though, and Harper died prior to the sale of the crime novel that would launch Leonard into the limelight of the genre. Regardless, Harper worked hard throughout their time working together to advance Leonard's career. Most importantly, Harper was aware in the 1950s that rights to stories could be sold to Hollywood and had her own contact there – H.N. Swanson, who would later get the credit for discovering Elmore Leonard. Harper introduced Leonard to Swanson (via letter) in 1954, at which point Harper and Swanie worked together to sell the rights to Leonard's stories to publishers and Hollywood, respectively.

And yet, despite this overwhelming evidence that Marguerite Harper played as instrumental and important a role as H.N. Swanson, if not more so, in the development of Elmore Leonard's writing style and career, the University of South Carolina's catalog record for the Elmore Leonard Archive does not mention Marguerite Harper, and the only time she is included on the Finding Aid is in the Correspondence section of the collection (which I must disclose I wrote). In contrast, three other author's archival collections I

have found with connections to Marguerite Harper *do* include her in the biographical section of the collection, singling her out as an important part of the authors' histories. For instance, the biographical description of Frederick Glidden's papers (nom de plume, Luke Short), reads thus in regards to Harper: "Glidden's writing career began in earnest when he started submitting western stories to pulp magazines while living in Santa Fe. Once he took on an agent, *Marguerite Harper*, his work began to sell" (emphasis added). Even a collection of unprocessed archival records for author Verne Athanas, has a note about her involvement in his career – "The papers include Athanas' professional correspondence with publishers, editors, agents, other writers, and readers. There is a major file of letters to and from Athanas's agent, *Marguerite Harper*" (emphasis added). I cannot say why the University of South Carolina decided not to include details about Marguerite Harper in Leonard's archive, but I can speculate that the narrative Leonard told about himself was the one that was given preference when it came to cataloging the records. I have read many interviews with Leonard and articles about him in an effort to learn more about Marguerite Harper; Leonard rarely mentions Harper or the ways she started his career.

Simon Fowler touches on the difficulty of eliminating silences in the archive in his chapter in *The silence of the archive*, saying, "In truth, none of us can really know what is likely to be of importance in the future, but the archivist must make shrewd guesses" (Fowler, 2017, 16), and it is true that dealing with silences in the archive starts with deciding what to seek out and retain. But we must carefully examine how we

approach metadata once archival materials are under our purview. Harper's records were deemed worthy enough to be kept and arranged, but the archival record or catalog is preventing her from being found or connected to a larger history. How do we approach the construction of records, then? Laura Millar's 2017 book, *Archives: Principles and Practices* provides a baseline for descriptive instructions: "the following historical information [should be] captured as a minimum: names and vital events; place of residence; education; occupation, life and activities; and other significant information" (Millar, 2017, 220).

My intention here is not to critique the University of South Carolina's cataloging practices so much as to reveal how Harper's elision likely stems from a philosophical assumption that has underpinned archival practice for quite some time: the primary subject's narrative takes primacy. Unfortunately, when we allow ourselves to be swayed this way, we erase the fuller picture and make it near impossible to put it together later. "Currently, much of the focus of discussion in the field of archives is about the role of archives in promoting social justice. However, …there can be no social justice while voices are suppressed" (Moss and Thomas, 2021, v). As we meet here today to discuss a more inclusive future for metadata practices, it is important that we take time to interrogate the assumptions we have inherited from a bygone era as to what the primary focus of an archive or library record should be. What information is worthy of preservation, and what can permissibly be elided? Can we in good faith continue to allow the exclusion of pivotal actors like Marguerite Harper?

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