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The hours are short and restrictive, the materials under lock and key, the room watched by a disinterested attendant.

When first entering an exhibit addressing claims to authority, one must ask who has laid claim to the exhibit itself. For whom are these materials presented? How do marble floors and dark wood shelves situate a discourse on ownership and narrative?

The room is centered by an original copy of the Declaration of Independence. While the document does not seem to be explicitly part of the exhibit, it is the most recognizable claim to authority in the Special

Collections. Its imposing case immediately draws the attention of visitors, introducing the library as a place that holds items of great import.

While the document itself makes a powerful statement, its encasement reminds the viewer that the archive itself holds the power associated with its collections.

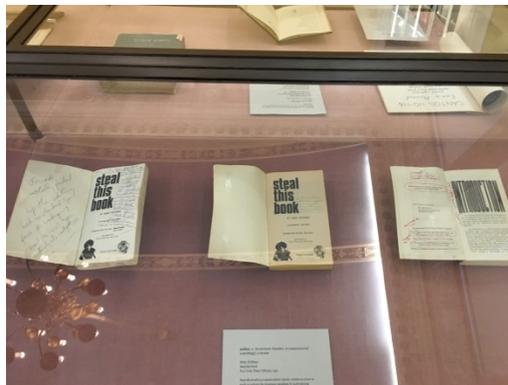
The exhibit itself further reflects this centralization of power. Each of the documents is held static--books are opened indefinitely to a single page and removed from their viewers by a pane of glass. Each section of the exhibit is accompanied by a word and its

definition. Particularly resonant was “representative,” which is defined alongside John Hawkesworth’s prototypical ethnography, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the order of His Present Majesty*. While the curators contextualize the work with a description of how indigenous peoples were represented by western explorers, it also raises questions of representation in the archive. The documents are

presented only as the curators of the exhibit intend, not as the authentic statements on authority that they were created to be.



Panitch’s discussion of a *tabula rasa* in archiving¹ has particular relevance here. While the documents displayed do not work to eliminate the oppressive past of the narrative of authority, their display functionally removes their own history. While they still serve as authentic representations of authority and its historical manifestations, these documents have been made static in this exhibit.



To further follow Panitch’s interpretation, this exhibit seems to fall victim to the limitations of history,

¹ Judith Panitch, “Liberty, Equality, Posterity?: Some Archival Lessons from the Case of the French Revolution,” *The American Archivist* 59, no.1 (1996): 44.



working to “analyze, totalize, and make sense of” the documents it contains.²

This exhibit thus becomes a “site of memory,” a static representation not simply of the documents included, but rather of the curator’s understanding of the information they contain. The exhibit becomes a manifestation of the authority of the archivists beyond its depiction of historical narratives of authority.



² Pantich, 46.