Archival Interventions: Anti-violence and social justice work in community contexts

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ABSTRACT

This panel invites participants and panelists to consider together how archives and other information institutions might work with and engage communities experiencing ongoing and extreme (neo)colonial violence and oppression. We begin from a perspective that suggests that community and/or autonomous archives that reflect community perspectives and histories may indeed have the potential to support the efforts of these same communities to grapple with complex and violent (neo)colonial histories and experiences and to re-story dominant narratives that serve to stigmatize and marginalize them. This panel explores both the possibilities and limitations of anti-violence archival interventions from a number of angles, including: interrogating the role of the archivist in community archiving; reflecting on how partnerships can be built between archival institutions and communities; and considering how anti-violence, anti-racist, decolonizing, and feminist theoretical frameworks can aid archival interventions that speak to the efforts of communities aimed at overcoming structural violence and erasure. Drawing on the archival experiences and practice of panelists, this panel poses a series of questions to the audience to generate discussions aimed at drawing connections between relevant theories, and practical and technical considerations in the service of anti-violence archiving.

Keywords
Archives, archivists, violence, colonialism, justice; community archives; autonomous archives; ethic of care

INTRODUCTION

This panel invites participants and panelists to consider together how archives and other information institutions might work with and engage communities experiencing ongoing and extreme (neo)colonial violence. We begin from a perspective that suggests that community and/or autonomous archives that reflect community perspectives and histories may indeed have the potential to support the efforts of these same communities to grapple with complex and violent (neo)colonial histories and experiences and to re-story dominant narratives that serve to stigmatize and marginalize them. Nonetheless, the realization of this potential may be constrained by a myriad of social and structural factors both within the archive and external to it. This panel explores both the possibilities and limitations of anti-violence archival interventions from a number of perspectives. Broadly, we consider how anti-violence, anti-racist, decolonizing, and feminist theoretical frameworks can aid archival interventions that speak to the efforts of communities aimed at overcoming structural violence and erasure. More specifically, we interrogate the role of the archivist in community archiving and reflect on how partnerships can be built between archival institutions and communities that foster decolonizing and anti-racist archival spaces and practices.

PANEL FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

This panel will engage participants and panel members to reflect on the interconnections between archives and anti-violence work, and draws on discussion and insights from archival science, feminist, critical race, and Indigenous studies scholarship, panel participants, and the experiences of panelists working on social justice and community oriented archival projects, including A People’s Archives of Police Violence in Cleveland and the Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities (DAMC) project at the University of Manitoba. In the process, this panel will explore a series of interconnected questions, including: what is (can be) the role of archives and archivists working to collect, describe and make accessible difficult knowledge under conditions of ongoing violence, conflict and insecurity? What is an ethical archival praxis when working with marginalized and/or independent communities? How
can/should archivists partner with communities to create anti-violence archives? The panel explores these questions specifically in relation to community, autonomous, activist, and other non-normative archives, though we encourage audience members to draw from their engagement with a variety of information institutions and technologies.

This panel will be broadly divided into three parts. Each part will include opening remarks by a panelist as well as observations from panelists’ own archival practice. The sections are designed to move from broad to specific, and to encourage participants to draw connections between relevant theories, and practical and technical considerations. The first section sets the stage by considering archival practice within a (neo)colonial landscape across diverse sites. The latter two sections consider the practical implications of doing archival work within this context, including thinking through relevant interventions, frameworks, approaches, and tools. Following each panelist’s intervention, structured discussion will facilitate the sharing of perspectives and experiences of audience members. A series of questions will be posed to the audience who will be invited to respond to any of the questions and/or add their own experiences and reflections on the matter. Through this exercise, we seek to develop with the audience members a critical stance towards the frameworks we use that is grounded in practical archival experiences of both success and failure, so as to explore the potential (and also the limitations) of operationalizing an archival practice committed to the well-being of suffering human beings. Afterwards, the panel discussion will be written up and circulated to all participants interested in a summary of the discussion. Professional organizations for archivists, such as the Association of Canadian Archivists and the Society of American Archivists, have codes of ethics to guide the work of members. However, these statements do not address the unique and complex ethical concerns of working with communities undergoing violent trauma. This discussion and the resulting summary will contribute to a necessary conversation about constructing ethical frameworks for information professionals engaged in this work.

**Part 1: Setting the stage - Archiving difficult knowledge in situations of ongoing violence and insecurity**

This panel is situated within a rich history of archival science scholarship that critically explores the ethical, political, epistemological and ontological dimensions of archives, collections and archival practices. Such scholarship, for example, considers how archives play a role in supporting various social justice and liberatory efforts, as when records are mobilized in exposing historic wrongs, and in seeking redress and restitution for victims of human rights abuses and other grave injustices (see, for example, Laberge, 1987/88; Roberts-Moore, 2002; Jimerson, 2007; Duff et al., 2013; Caswell, 2014; Strauss, 2015). In turn, archival science scholars have drawn on a range of critical theories, including postmodern, deconstructionist and postcolonial frameworks and perspectives so as to interrogate the notion of archival neutrality, and to highlight the crucial ways in which archival practices shape archives and, by extension, the stories that can or cannot be told through archives. While advocating for more inclusive notions of provenance, archives and record-ness, such inquiries have underscored the inevitability of archival silences, omissions and distortions (see, for example, Harris, 1998; Brothman, 1999; Bastian, 2002; Evans, 2014). In other instances, scholars have focused our attention on how archives impact the construction of collective and individual memory and identity, as well as how community archives and participatory and inclusive collecting and appraisal strategies may lead to more representative and diverse archives (see, for example, Hedstrom, 2002; Flinn, 2007; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007). Scholars who

Recently, Punzalan and Caswell (2016) consider some of this scholarship. Tracing the concept of social justice in the archival science literature, they identify a tendency to adopt a legalistic, human-rights framework that does not sufficiently take into account non-western perspectives. The authors call for a move away from a human rights rhetoric by drawing on feminist, queer and/or critical race studies. By bringing such bodies of knowledge into conversation with archival science, the latter can develop scholarship that clarifies the systemic barriers to archival justice, such as white privilege, heteronormativity and economic structural inequities. Punzalan and Caswell’s work encourages scholarship and research that moves the archival conversation away from a politics of recognition and attendant notions of inclusivity and diversity. While these have exposed how archives, with their grounding in western traditions, perpetuate the othering of diverse communities, experiences and ways of knowing, they have not effectively challenged or altered the archival status-quo.

With such issues in mind, Beverly Butler has reconceptualized the archive within a broader heritage dignity paradigm as archival memory that offers a means to give access and recognition to tangible and intangible knowledge resources as crucial to memory and identity work. Working in a Middle Eastern context, she explores a “‘healing mode’ of thought and aspiration, that is neither naïve nor uncritical, but bound up in a belief in the capacity of archival memory […] to bring comfort, cure and healing to situations of conflict, containment, displacement and exile.” (Butler, 2009, p. 58) At its core, this panel aims to identify the potential of archives to address the paramount need for spaces of recognition, commemoration, mourning, transition and hospitality experienced in situations of conflict and (neo)colonial violence (Butler, 2009, p. 68). By extension, it considers how the task of caring for suffering
human beings can be prioritized within a reconceptualized archival imagination that can address the need for an operational practice committed to human well-being (ibid).

This framework encourages us to consider what archives mean in situations where the most pressing need to collect and recover lies not only in the professional fields concerned with preserving and organizing heritage, but perhaps more so in attempts at objectifying and sustaining a presence for those people, places and objects lost, destroyed or erased by past and ongoing violence (see, for example, Shabout 2012). Against this background, this panel elaborates the archival conversation by considering how we can recognize ongoing structural barriers, and incorporate that awareness into archival practices.

Questions that panelists and the audience might consider together include:

- How can we recognize ongoing structural barriers, and incorporate that awareness into archival practices?
- How do we acknowledge not only the benefits but also the dangers of making information about vulnerable groups accessible?
- What are some ways in which the archival enterprise is altered, or can respond to, a situation of ongoing violence, conflict, war or other forms of severe insecurity?
- What happens when we prioritize well-being and/or justice as integral outcomes of archival practice?
- What archival ethics can accommodate the challenges facing archivists doing this kind of work, particularly in (neo)colonial or conflict situations?

**Part 2: Developing an archival ethical praxis**

Individual information professionals working to support autonomous community archives that collect and provide access to records about violence and trauma must carefully consider the ethical implications of their position. Ethical frameworks developed for managing archives located within institutions such as universities and government offices are insufficient to address the unique challenges posed by community archives, especially those devoted to difficult or traumatic knowledge. This section of the panel considers some of these ethical issues in the context of a digital archives project recently developed as a partnership between activists managing the collection, and professional archivists providing support, guidance, and resources.

The People’s Archives of Police Violence in Cleveland (<archivingpoliceviolence.org>) (PAPVC) was founded as a partnership between a group of professional archivists throughout the US and activists in Cleveland during the 2015 meeting of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in the city. The group collaborated during the conference to build a content management system for digital records, and to collect oral histories from people whose lives had been affected by police brutality. Following the conference, the activists retained control of the archives, and they continue to develop its trajectory, both as an archival collection and as a digital space for sharing stories about police brutality and the trauma it causes. There is also an advisory board consisting of four professional archivists, who assist the activists with complex legal issues like copyright, technical problems with using the Omeka platform that contains the archive, and fundraising.

As PAPVC has evolved, significant ethical challenges have arisen for the archivists who advise and support the project, which are common for those in institutional positions who support community archives. These challenges are particularly complicated in a project that seeks to document and expose knowledge and memory of trauma and violence. Independent archives like PAPVC are often seen as an alternative to collections built by institutions using paternalistic and colonialist archival methodologies. However, professional archivists working from within such institutions may be in danger of recreating these paternalistic methodologies in their attempts to support independent archives.

This panel argues that information professionals who support autonomous archives need theoretical frameworks through which to develop ethical praxis. One model for such a framework is the “ethic of care” developed by feminist theorists. Thinking about the relationship between care and justice can help us position ourselves in relation to these projects, seeking to understand the needs of the communities we support through empathetic and active listening, while maintaining the critical distance necessary to avoid replicating paternalistic approaches to collecting and organizing information in the form of digital archives. Bethany Nowviskie (2015) has recently written about the potential for humanist scholars to use an ethic of care as a framework for developing digital library structures that resist patriarchal and white supremacist modes of organizing and describing information. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor call for archivists to use an ethics of care to situate themselves within “interlacing and ongoing relationships of mutual obligation that are dependent on culture and context.” (Caswell & Cifor, 2016, p.29). We argue that this theory can also be used to guide the interpersonal interactions and challenging decisions that archivists and information professionals must make when working with marginalized communities from relative positions of power and privilege. In exploring how the archivist can negotiate and work through their personal and institutional position when practicing in autonomous or community settings, this section sets the stage for discussions on how partnerships can be built to bridge the institutional-community divide and build relationships.
Questions that panelists and the audience might consider together include:

- What is the role of the archivist in community archiving contexts?
- How can information professionals provide needed assistance while respecting the autonomy and unique needs of the community managing such collections?
- Communities are not monolithic. How should archivists position themselves when navigating disagreements between community members?
- How can an ethics of care framework be applied to a variety of information professional roles and contexts?
- What other ethical frameworks can archivists draw from?

Part 3: Trust and building community partnerships

At the heart of engaging in community-based archiving are fundamental and critical questions about how archivists and community members might best partner, often connecting within and across diverse political and social locations. The archival literature points to several models and frameworks that work to unpack and/or propose implementations of the participatory processes (Flinn, 2011; Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007; Stevens, Flinn, & Shepherd, 2010). In practice however, engaging in these processes, as panelists (and we suspect participants) will describe, has proven to be fraught, complex, and sometimes uncomfortable. Thus, the final section of this panel raises discussion about the development of partnerships between community members, archivists, and researchers. This section is considered in the context of a developing activist digital archives project entitled the Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities (DAMC) Project.

The DAMC is an interdisciplinary research project that is developing three separate but related digital activist archives using indigenist, feminist, and participatory design processes with stakeholder groups. Principle investigators of the project are Dr. Shawna Ferris and Dr. Kiera Ladner. Working titles for these archives are: the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Database (MMIWD), Sex Work Database (SWD), and Post-Apology Residential School Database (PARSD). Overarching objectives for this research project are: to create and mobilize—via multiple forms of digital media—knowledge that contests and re-envision conceptions of violence against certain people as normal; to actively engage in decolonization; to build bridges and dialogue between academic and non-academic stakeholder communities; and in doing so, to create community-based archives that preserve community-identified records in a way that “resonates with community understandings and knowledge” (Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007, p.96).

Participating in the DAMC project is a constellation of actors, characterized broadly as activists, archivists, community members, and academics (though these roles intersect and overlap in a variety of ways). While the project was initiated by academics and in an institutional setting, community control of archival records and representation is sought out, valued, and enabled through an ongoing collaborative process that seeks to embed relationships between actors in mutual goals of social activism and social justice objectives. Indeed relationship building is at the heart of the DAMC participatory process.

To date the DAMC has established preliminary partnerships with activists and academics in cities across Canada. An important feature of these relationships is that they are defined and strengthened through their associations as activist allies, and the mutual goals shared as allies working towards common outcomes. For activist archives such as the DAMC, trusting relationships with communities emerge from practices that have very little to do with archiving. Instead they develop through shared goals, mutually agreed upon benefits for all parties, and a demonstrated support of community activism. We invite participants to discuss both strategies and challenges related to fostering trusting relationships among diversely situated stakeholders engaged in a diverse range of archival and information related social justice projects.

Questions that panelists and the audience might consider together include:

- How might archivists and community members develop trusting relationships in the service of creating community archives?
- What complicates these partnerships? And how might we work through these complications?
- What strengths do archivists bring to these partnerships? What are our limitations? What can we learn from communities with whom we work?

Summary

Before concluding, our panel discussions will be drawn together and summarized for participants. Discussion themes and lessons learned through participants’ professional practices will be highlighted. Afterwards, the panel discussion will be written up and circulated to all interested participants.

CONCLUSION

Through this interactive panel, audience and panel participants will further their understanding of various facets of working with community and activist archives in the context of ongoing violence and inequity. We hope to demonstrate that an archival praxis that is committed to addressing the needs of, and working with, communities dealing with ongoing distress and difficult histories is
holistic and multifaceted. It considers practice in a manner that is informed by theoretical and research insights, while having the benefit of experience derived from archival practice. In turn, it is self-reflexive, and adopts a critical stance that does not shy away from acknowledging and being critical of the varying positions and power differentials invariably involved in every archival encounter.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
The Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities project gratefully acknowledges funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

PANELISTS
Jamila Ghaddar is a doctoral student at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information, where she graduated with a Master of Information specialized in Archives & Records Management. Jamila holds a Bombardier SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship, and recently completed a Library & Archival Fellowship at the American University of Beirut’s Jafet Library. She has also archived at the Nelson Mandela Foundation’s Centre of Memory in Johannesburg, and with a community-based project with the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto and University of Toronto. She is currently part of the research team of the SSHRC-funded Archives & Social Justice Project (PI: Profs. W. Duff & H. MacNeil). Before joining the iSchool, Jamila worked for many years in the social service and NGO sector.

Melissa A. Hubbard is the Head of Special Collections and Archives at Case Western Reserve University. She previously served as the Rare Book Librarian at Southern Illinois University, and the Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Digital Projects Librarian at Colgate University. She is currently a member of the advisory board for A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, which seeks to offer members of the Cleveland community a safe space to share personal stories and documentary evidence of police brutality and its impact. Melissa holds an Master of Science in Library Science from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, and a Master of Arts in English from University College London. Her current research interests include pedagogical uses of special collections and archives, feminist leadership in libraries, and community archives.

Danielle Allard is a postdoctoral research fellow with the Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities (DAMC) project at the University of Manitoba. She recently acquired a PhD from the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto entitled “Living Here and There: Exploring the Transitional Information Practices of Newcomers from the Philippines to Canada”. Danielle’s postdoctoral research considers how digital information systems and archival platforms can be used to create activist participatory archives that challenge violent, colonizing, and stigmatizing representations of Indigenous peoples - especially women and girls - and of sex workers.

REFERENCES

