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The Making of an Archive

Jacqueline
Hoàng Nguyễn

Edited by Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn,
Vanessa Kwan, Dan Pon

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MAIKO TANAKA

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It's never not personal
A conversation with
Tara Robertson and Dan Pon

D

I wonder if we should start by talking a bit about terminology. As information science folks, we obviously have a very specific idea of what “archive” means, as well as various responses to its colloquial use. The impulse is maybe to be critical, but there is a value in letting go of the professional ownership of our vocabulary, mostly as a means of decentralizing the perceived authority that we as librarians or archivists have.

We talk about “our” collections, but a project like *The Making of an Archive* is a really good reminder that ownership is pretty complex. This material comes from a place where we don't, and is understood in a way we can't: that is to say, it has so many layers of relational meaning that are stripped

away when it's accessioned and becomes a digital object within our structure. The interview can address this but often with a kind of limited perspective that comes from designating one person (who may have been very young at the time or not even present) as the authority source. So I guess this is a means of asking what "archive" means to you in the context of this project or how you would unpack your relationship to this term.

T

When I hear the word "archive" I think of it both as a noun and a verb. The noun conjures up both an institutional archive where there are finding aids, where you need to make an appointment many weeks in advance, wear gloves and follow all the other rules that have been determined by the professionals. It also makes me think of community archives that are held in an underfunded community space where so many treasures are packed into a small space, where there might be a spreadsheet of a high level of the inventory but to really find stuff you need to talk to the person who has lovingly hoarded and protected these gems. I know archives can be digital too, but my mind first goes to the physical archive when I hear this word.

The verb "archive" on a basic level makes me think of saving important stuff, whether that be in acid-free archival folders, in a box in your closet, on an external hard drive, or in the cloud. When I think of the verb "archive" it makes me think of other verbs:

to accession, to process, to preserve. A friend who is a professional archivist told me they rarely use it as a verb.

I'm not sure why, but the first things that come to mind are not digital archives. Even though most of my work is digital, I wonder why my mind starts with analogue here?

What does "archive" mean to you?

D

It's one of those questions that I think I could go on and on about, but maybe is equally satisfying to just think of as some mass (tangible, digital, or otherwise) of stuff that is thought of by someone as a collection, or really just belonging together for some reason. From a professional standpoint this is obviously reductionist thinking to a fault, but it doesn't take many steps outside this small world to see things get pretty loose in terms of verbiage and standards. I might raise an eyebrow at someone's toting of their "archive" of social media posts or whatever, but if that is the terms of how they, the expert, are thinking of their own material presence, then really who am I to question?

As to your impulse to think first of the analog, the gloves, and such, it seems pretty relatable...We all have this idea of what an archivist looks like and does, whether or not that factors in when we talk about our own archives. It's a pretty charming

trope when you operate under the assumption that everything there is (to know) is readily accessible and well intentioned in its delivery via a commercial search engine mining an often proprietary body of data. Which of course I do every day even though I know better.

I think what you are talking about really starts to get at some of the fundamental questions that make this project so vital to me. In this murky framework of distributed authority there are opportunities for new narratives to emerge, or maybe it's new ways of telling old stories to new audiences. Jacqueline has called it a "counter-archive" in the past; to me it's a nice ambiguity if that means counter to the voice of the state constructed archive, or counter to the notion of archive we are talking about, or both. We know that these lived experiences exist, that they are valid beyond their current state of representation, and that they are vulnerable to erasure or manipulation in crafting a narrative that hijacks their agency.

It's interesting to me that the impulse to apply an archival approach to this charged and timely act comes from a place in contemporary art, but I wonder if we can take a step back and talk about the intersection of information science and social justice which of course has been a huge focus of your work over the years. Can you speak a bit about the work you are doing these days and how librarianship, especially critical librarianship, has

evolved as a practice for you, both professionally and as an activist pursuit?

T

I was a librarian for twelve years. Recently I changed careers to do diversity and inclusion in the tech sector. I did technical work in libraries and spent five years doing accessibility work. In my own research I explore ethics in the digital world, especially digitization. I've always been interested in power and am often asking "who decides?"

I came to libraries through activist feminist libraries, so I have always known that systems of organizing information are not neutral, rather they have the values of the people that made them baked in. Are you familiar with Hope A. Olson's work on feminist classification theory? She was one of the reasons I picked libraries and I got to take an online class with her before she retired. I haven't been to many of the #critlib Twitter chats, which are regular conversations on Twitter about different aspects of the theory and practice of bringing social justice principles to library work.

I had a good chat with a friend who has been having a rough time. One of her family members died and she was sorting through their papers and photos. Her approach to this was to sort into 3 boxes: yes, no, and I don't know. The yes box were photos of people she knew or knew were part of her genealogy. She told me about a bunch of photos that were in the

I don't know box that moved into the yes box when she realized the unknown woman was a relative who she had never met. I don't have an interest in researching my family history. I associate this with the white people in my family who like to talk about the one elder who was a judge. In my family a lot of this family tree stuff is about finding posh people and I think implicitly claiming some of that lineage, which is not my thing at all. If I was faced with a bunch of boxes of family photos, I'm not sure how I'd approach sorting them. I think I'd pick a small number, like 10, or 20 photos, and then get rid of the rest. I'm not very sentimental or nostalgic about my family.

D

Critical librarianship was something I discovered kind of tangentially to my formal studies; mostly I owe this to my classmates and friends as we were definitely not reading Olson in my classification and cataloguing courses. Which strikes me as odd and kind of frustrating given that texts like "The Power to Name"¹ were Canadian scholarship and at that time just past high noon in the literature cycle. That is not to say that we weren't exposed to anything progressive, it just took a little active pursuit. I had to go look Olson up when you mentioned her, but reading some articles I realized that I was aware of what she was talking about, albeit in a kind of blurry and inarticulate way. I got serious about libraries while working in immigrant and refugee services in Seattle, so I had a pretty good sense of service models that centred marginalized populations —

the tensions that exist doing this work within the larger library bureaucracy — and had already encountered some deeply embedded and problematic ideas about who libraries are for. The productive popularity of #critlib is a nice bit of punctuation on Olson's ideas toward ameliorative change, although a solution via 'redemptive technology' conjures a bit the metallic taste of neoliberal do-goody in my mouth. She does pragmatically point out that these master's tools (at the time a fresh-faced Library 2.0) are in themselves insufficient and may in fact have more than one sharp edge.

I guess that is one of the things that makes your work really inspiring to me, that you negotiate this landscape and affect real change under the shadow of a technocratic system that is still governed by the same old power structures. Taking sketchy tools apart, interrogating the utopian, and building this network of like-minded practitioners that is somewhere between under- and overground...it all has this dogged futurism to it, it's pretty cyberpunk.

It's interesting you bring up the anecdote of your friend with her three boxes of photos and your own response in thinking about your family history. Even for those of us well equipped to handle this kind of thing, the decision of what (not) to collect, and how, is so subjectively personal. I think I'm with you in the minimalist approach — I mean, if saving 10 or 20 photos of the lot is weird, then what does that say about keeping them all? I also have a kind

of detached relationship with my family history: I wonder how much is due to being a halfie and responding to the stickiness of ‘family heritage’ by taking a sharp left turn?

T

I haven’t heard the word “halfie” in a long time. I wonder if being mixed race feeds in to my lack of interest in family photos. The white side of my family are the ones who are interested in genealogy, and perhaps because I don’t see myself when I look at those photos I’m not very interested in them. I’m slightly more interested in the photos of my Japanese grandparents. The photo of my Grandpa, from when he immigrated from Wakayama Japan—he looks so handsome!

D

That makes a lot of sense. For me, I think my dad especially was over the heavy patrilineal dome of the Chinese family coming from a place he was too young to remember and growing up in the time of the counterculture and the freedom it promised in North America. So we kind of did our own thing as a family, though I would be remiss not to mention the effort my mom made to learn some of those stories and bridge those gaps while the older generation was still around. Perhaps predictably it is these stories I am most interested in as an adult, especially living in Vancouver and becoming increasingly aware of what it means to be Guangdong diaspora and reading about the changes happening in Hong Kong as continuity under the Basic Law² approaches its

half-life and the mounting threat to that regional culture as it has existed.

I think there is a lot of amazing work coming from the arts, activist, and academic sectors on this idea of the Cantosphere, a kind of distributed cultural/ linguistic identity produced in specific places at specific times, at risk of becoming frozen in time in a way. It’s great to see younger people taking active steps in preserving and activating this identity in multiple and intersecting ways — it could be centring elders in Chinatown housing justice movements, or UBC students airing and discussing the Pender Guy³ tapes, or a Hong Kong Exile theatre performance. There are a lot of threads of community-based memory at play here. Maybe it could be *The Making of an Archive* for someone? There are a lot of potential access points, which is super important.

In my work on *The Making of an Archive* so far, I have seen so many different and often really complicated relationships that people have with their family history as embodied in photos and sharing our experiences conversationally as well: the process of donating forces one to confront all these happenings, places, and people from the past. A photo has a lot of power to summon tangential memories and expand beyond the frame, but also to essentialize and create a kind of canned moment. I think the negotiation of how a person views the image going forward can be a really tricky thing.

T

One of the conversations that I've always wanted to have with my family is about the Japanese-Canadian internment. This is something we do not talk about. Maybe that's why I'm really interested in the historical photos and recordings of the Japanese internment in Canada and the US. These have a huge impact on me. This is one of the topics that is never talked about in my family and I'm hungry to know more. Public archives and art projects activating archives have nourished me. Also the Japanese-Canadian activists who fought for redress and for our human rights inspire my activism.

D

These kind of barriers and the tendency to silently accept history and soldier on seem to be really common, I think especially among immigrant families, so naturally one might look for an external community of support. It makes me wonder if there is a place in the project for exploring the story of your chosen family through the still image. Many people are as much or more a product of these alternative networks as they are of blood relations, though to call them alternative or even simply friendships seems reductive and plays back into the presumption of false universality that Olson warns us about. I wonder if you could speak around the idea of collecting the material history of these networks and the types of ethical or political considerations that pop up when you formalize, digitize, or make

accessible these collections? I know it has been a big part of your work in the past.

T

For me as a queer person, chosen family is really important to me. As some queer people are pushed out by their biological families when they come out, chosen family is about survival and support. How we document our queer lives is an act of resistance and celebration.

Mainstream libraries and archives don't always do a great job of digitizing our history in an ethical way—like if someone chose to live their life in the closet, I don't think their image should be digitized and put online in a big gay digital collection. I've seen transphobic subject headings attached to content about trans people. I see these things happening in other areas where libraries and archives should be collaborating with the communities where this content comes from, obtaining consent, and respecting their desires.

There's many examples of libraries doing a poor job of this, but I'd rather hold up two examples of groups who are doing a great job. First, Murkutu is an open source platform built with Indigenous communities to “empower communities to manage, share, and exchange their digital heritage in culturally relevant and ethically-minded ways.”⁴ Second, Documenting the Now⁵ is a project developing tools and building community

practices that support the ethical collection, use, and preservation of social media content. It started around collecting tweets about #blacklivesmatter and the folks involved are leaders in libraries and archives on ethics and technology. These projects are also asking my favourite question—“Who decides?”—and privileging voices from community over institutional academic opinions.

D

Vanessa and I were both really taken by your words at the BC Libraries Conference last year. I think the combination of yours and Jarrett M. Drake’s presentations was a really impactful moment in our thinking about *The Making of an Archive* in the context of conversations in our field about liberatory archives. Drake describes liberatory archives as spaces that foster intersectional and meaningful belonging as well as believing. Believing in the sense that they treat the past not as an ossified quantity but as part of a living and ongoing story that resists the politics of power by attacking problematic memory that legitimizes and upholds ongoing structures of inequality.⁶

I am not sure that our project has achieved this goal to date, but I do see in its design the potential to do so or become something that does so. Archiving as art practice offers a lot of ways to disrupt the imposed silence, solitude, and surveillance of traditional archives that are so troubling to Drake.

But contemporary art-making is certainly subject to all of the same ingrained hegemonies as information science. It’s not enough to simply do the work if you want things to move forward. I like that Drake demands this accountability from self-described community archives.

T

I know that we both love that *The Making of an Archive* disrupts our ideas of what an archive is. It’s incomplete, inaccessible to the public on the web, but leaves the participants with digital copies of their images which they can choose to share with their loved ones. This respects people’s agency and allows people to define their own narrative and choose a level of participation that they’re comfortable with. It’s not all or nothing, there are no institutional copyright release forms—it’s more about the process than the end product. This doesn’t adhere to professional best practices or any recognized standards. I love that this is about the conversations and network of connections rather than attempting to build a proper archive. X

Notes

- 1 Hope A. Olson's "The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogues" was published in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* in 2001 and offers an early intersectional feminist critique of foundational library classification schemes that disenfranchise marginalized users/ subjects and create barriers to knowledge description via dominant language and hierarchies.
- 2 The Basic Law sets the terms of governance for the Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong and the basic rights and freedoms of its residents as distinct from those of mainland China. Enacted upon the British handover in 1997, it promises a continuance of capitalist ways of life until 2047.
- 3 Pender Guy was an English-language radio program by and for the Chinese Canadian community. It aired on CFRO 102.7 FM Vancouver from 1976 to 1981.
- 4 <http://mukurtu.org/>
- 5 <https://www.docnow.io/>
- 6 Jarrett M. Drake, "Liberatory Archives: Towards Belonging and Believing," Community Archives Forum Keynote (October 2016), <<https://medium.com/on-archivy/liberatory-archives-towards-belonging-and-believing-part-1-d26aaeb0eddd1>>

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JESSICA MACH

The Making of an Archive
A project initiated by Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn

grunt gallery
116-350 East 2nd Avenue
Vancouver, BC
Canada
V5T 4R8
grunt.ca

Edited by Vanessa Kwan, Jacqueline Hoàng
Nguyễn and Dan Pon
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in collaboration with Maiko Tanaka
Archivist Dan Pon
Copy editor Hillary Wood
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