Literature Review: Issues in Community Archives Research

Since their rise over half a century ago, community archives have filled in the gaps that mainstream archives have knowingly or unknowingly left, preserving the history of typically marginalized groups on their own terms. But it is only in the past decade or two that scholars have begun seriously contending with community archives, a timeline that perhaps not coincidentally overlaps with the archival profession's increased focus on its own role in perpetuating power relations and systems of oppression. Cook (2013) has argued that this increased attention on community archiving signifies a "paradigm shift" (p. 115) in the archival field. How has the so-called traditional archival community conceived of its relationship to both power and community archives, and what potential do community archives hold to help the archival field rectify its history of exclusion? Through a review of trends in the current literature on the topic, this paper will explore community archives as an alternative to traditional archival practice. Ultimately, this paper will argue for a reconceptualization of community archives as part of the archival continuum rather than as traditional or mainstream archives' binary opposite.

History: Archival Power and Community Archives

Since the turn of the century, there has been an increased awareness on the part of archival scholars and professionals that archives are not neutral spaces; rather, they are sites of power, exclusion, and oppression. Schwartz and Cook (2002) have argued that "[a]rchives have always been about power, whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual" (p. 13). Not only do the records held in archives shape scholarship, memory, and identity, archivists themselves "wield power over those very records central to memory and identity formation" (Schwartz & Cook, 2002, p. 2). In a call to archival professionals to adopt a social justice perspective in their work, Jimerson (2007) has written that "[a]rchivists need to recognize that their social role has significant implications and a high degree of power" (p. 270). Carter (2006) has argued that "archival power is, in part, the power to allow voices to be heard" (p. 216). Along with this power comes the power to silence, for those whose voices are not included in the archive will not be heard. For Carter, that silencing has broad political and societal implications: "Memory relies on the continuing existence of the physical traces produced by members of society in their activities. These traces are stored in archives. . . . Archival silences result in societal memory being compromised" (p. 220). The history of the archival profession can therefore be read as a history of silencing. Many marginalized groups have had their voices left out of the traditional archival record because collection policies have tended to favor those in power, due in no small part to the fact that those in power are and have

been the ones funding the archives themselves. While many have called upon the archival profession to contend with both its history of oppression and its current exclusionary practices, such a process is both ongoing and far from uncontroversial.

In response to the failures and exclusions of traditional archives, community-based groups have established their own archival spaces and collections, often entirely removed from the traditional cultural heritage sector. Growing out of the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, community archives were established by activists and community groups who recognized that their histories were either misrepresented by the traditional historical record, or entirely absent from it altogether (Cifor et al., 2018, p. 71). Community archives may be established around ethnic, racial, sexual, geographic, political, or gendered community groups; whatever the community group, for the most part, such archives have "coalesced around marginalized identities" (Caswell et al., 2017, p. 11).

Defining Community Archives

As fairly new sites of research (with much of the literature written in past decade or so), *community archives* are not strictly defined institutions. Indeed, the concept of the community archive is an ever shifting one, due in part to the fact, as Carter (2017) has noted, that "both [the] terms "community" and "archive" are open to interpretation" (p. 31). In particular, Brilmyer et al. (2019) have problematized the use of the term "community" as a static signifier, noting, "Communities are constantly being shaped and reshaped, as members negotiate the boundaries of similarities and difference within their communities" (p. 8). With these definitional limitations in mind, "community archive" tends to be an umbrella term used for any number of spaces and collections that fall outside of the cultural heritage sector as traditionally conceived. Welland and Cossham (2019) have noted four themes that unite the archival collections that fall under the community archive umbrella: community support and participation, the provision of a physical or digital space that "validate[s] and provide[s] access to community memory," collections that include items "that traditionally have not been considered archival," and a lack of "direct government funding and/or control" (pp. 624–625).

A broadly used definition of community archives comes from Flinn et al. (2009), who have defined community archives as "collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control. . . . [T]he defining characteristic of community archives is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality on their own terms" (p. 73). As for the politically charged question of what defines a community, they simply state, "A community, in short, is any group of people who come

together and present themselves as such" (p. 75). The openness of this definition is instructive: if community archives have been formed, in large part, with the goal of representing their communities in ways that traditional archives have failed to, then archival research would do well to allow these archives to self-identify as communities rather than attempt to dismantle that self-identification process by thrusting external definitions of "community" upon them.

Current Issues in Community Archives Research

The collection practices of many community archives are broadly studied as telling of the impact of a history of archival silencing. Carter (2017) has noted that "[c]ommunity archives often collect records that do not meet strict definitions of an archive, including, but not limited to, ephemera, oral histories, testimonies, photographs, objects and other records that are 'artificial' or 'constructed'" (p. 31). As Carter has written:

> [C]ommunity (or independent) archives are often engaged in the politicized act of recovering hidden stories missing from the formal archive; in this context, the ephemeral becomes all the more valuable through its rarity and the act of its recovery. These fragments provide rare glimpses into lives often undocumented, a response or provocation to the gaps and absences in the formal archive. (p. 31)

Rectifying generations of silences and misrepresentations cannot always be done through the collecting of standard or official records, because those records may very well not exist. Even if the records do exist, a lack of community access to or custodianship of "official" records may also necessitate a more creative approach to archival collecting. For example, Bastian (2002) has written of the case of the Virgin Islands, an unincorporated territory of the United States formerly under Dutch rule; records created in the Virgin Islands by Denmark and the United States are housed in those respective countries although the material of the records pertains to the Virgin Islands, meaning that the Virgin Islands community does not have custodianship over any official records of its own existence. The implications of Bastian's research for community archives are twofold: first, it suggests that even records created by a community's oppressor still make up an important part of that community's history, and to deny them access to those records is yet another act of oppression; and second, it underscores the creative ways in which community archives must collect materials in order to fill in the gaps left by lack of access.

Some scholars have suggested that incorporating non-traditional objects into an archive may also be an intentional act of resistance on the part of a community. Writing on queer counterarchives and community archives, Cvetkovich (2011) attributes the inclusion of ephemera in collections to a desire to archive *affect* in addition to traditional records. She writes, "Queer archives are

often ‘archives of feelings,’ not only motivated by strong feelings but seeking to preserve even ordinary feelings, the evidence of which is often ephemeral or embodied in idiosyncratic collections and objects” (p. 32). For communities whose histories have traditionally been marginalized or ignored, the choice to archive ephemera and non-traditional objects is thus one of both necessity and resistance: necessity, in that they may be the only objects available to archive, and resistance, in that non-traditional archives may seek to uproot traditional notions of what is “worthy” of preservation.

Regardless of the material an archive collects or the kind of community it serves, the current literature on community archives agrees that the importance of a such an archive lies in the impact it has on its users. Caswell (2014) has written on the *symbolic annihilation* experienced by members of marginalized communities when their stories are missing from or misrepresented by mainstream archives. In their interviews with community archives founders, volunteers, and staff at community archives in Southern California, Caswell et al. (2017) found that most of the respondents felt that mainstream media “excludes, misrepresents or distorts members of their community” (p. 12); several also spoke specifically of “the ways in which libraries, archives and/or museums silence or misrepresent their communities” (p. 14). According to Caswell et al. (2016), the power of community archives is to counter this symbolic annihilation with *representational belonging*, which “describes the affective responses community members have to seeing their communities represented with complexity and nuance” (p. 75). Representational belonging occurs along three dimensions: the epistemological (“we were here”), the ontological (“we are here”), and the social (“we belong here”). Juhasz (2006) expressed a similar notion of belonging in her writing on queer archive activism:

> Because we once loved, and recorded it, we have proof that we did and that others will. Because we lost but lived, we wish to spare others this pain while we take pleasure in sharing its memory. We can use archival media to remember, feel anew, analyze, and educate, ungluing the past from its melancholic grip, and instead living it as a gift with others in the here and now. (p. 326)

Community archives, then, are understood to serve their users not just by providing access to information resources but also by providing access to a history heretofore inaccessible to them. In other words, community archives serve users *as people with the very human needs of connection and belonging*, rather than users as scholars with research needs.

To return to our earlier discussion of archives and power, are community archives the answer to the archival profession’s problems? According to Welland and Cossham (2019), “[S]ome archival researchers and theorists see community archives as providing a possible answer to many of the issues facing mainstream archives” (p. 623). Flinn et al. (2009) have suggested that community archives

"offer mainstream heritage institutions not only a reminder of their obligation to diversify and transform collections and narratives but also perhaps the opportunity through equitable and mutually beneficial partnership to achieve some of that transformation" (p. 83). Two assumptions undergird such statements: first, that community archives are diverse, non-exclusionary institutions; and second, that community archives seek validation from and partnership with mainstream archives.

To address the first assumption, communities are often defined by reference to the Other, and community archives are no exception. As Caswell et al. (2017) have noted, "community archives can also symbolically annihilate those perceived to be on the margins of their communities" (p. 16). Similarly, Brown (2020) has discussed the ways in which "[h]istories of whiteness, settler colonialism, and cisnormativity within the LGBTQ2+ community archive can create the "symbolic annihilation" of trans and Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) histories within the queer community archive" (p. 1). Cifor and Wood (2017) have noted that in addition to perpetuating the symbolic annihilation of identities outside of the core community group, community archives can reproduce the very hierarchies and social structures they seek to dismantle "through their processes and interpretations of records and collections that reify damaging and unjust social structures" (p. 20). In other words, community archives are not utopic "archives for all," nor do they pretend to be; they are necessarily exclusionary, and even if they do not actively attempt to disregard or silence non-community voices, the very act of elevating certain voices inevitability silences others (Carter, 2006). To uncritically champion community archives as the singular answer to the profession's problems is to reproduce many of the hierarchies present within traditional archival work; paradoxically, the learnings of community archives cannot productively be incorporated into traditional archival practice until community archives are addressed as true members of the archival community, prone to the same problems that trouble more traditional archives.

To address the second assumption, many community archives are rightfully wary of engaging with mainstream archives and cultural heritage institutions, having been founded on the basis that such institutions could not or would not serve their communities. Cvetkovich (2011) has noted that as LGBTQ history and culture has become more acceptable in the mainstream, "LGBTQ archival visibility produces familiar tensions about how to sustain queer sensibilities in the face of conflicting desires for normalization and assimilation" (p. 32). When partnerships between community and mainstream archives take place, it is not without tension. For example, when the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives entered a three-year collaboration with the UCLA Center for the Study of Women and the UCLA library, some Mazer Archive donors refused to have their collections included in the collaboration (Cifor & Wood, 2017, p. 13). This is not to say that partnerships

have never been successful—for example, the GLBT Historical Society deposits its collections with the San Francisco Public Library (Wakimoto et al., 2013, p. 7)—but rather to highlight that community archives have very real hesitations when it comes to collaborating with groups that have historically marginalized them. Moreover, assuming that partnership with community archives will ameliorate the mainstream's historical problems with exclusionary power relations puts the work once more in the hands of marginalized groups to fix the problems caused by their own oppression.

Future Directions for Research

However, all that is not to say that community archives do not have a crucial role to play in the future of the archival profession. Before addressing that role, a review of some gaps in the current literature on community archives will be instructive.

It is clear that more research needs to be done into how the so-called "professional" archival community views community archives. Existing research seems to take as an assumption that community archives and mainstream archives are opposing poles, and that those who work at mainstream archives typically look down upon their community archives peers. For example, Welland and Cossham (2019) have written that "the attitude of mainstream archives and archivists towards community archives can seem like a somewhat defensive stance" (p. 623). Similarly, Flinn et al. (2009) have suggested that "[w]orking relations between community archivists and heritage professionals can (sometimes, not always) be subject to a number of pressures ranging from mutual misconceptions about roles and activities, differences over professional/non-professional practices, perceived lack of respect or acknowledgement of the others' skills and expertise, lack of cultural sensitivities or even racism" (p. 80). However, little empirical research seems to have been done to confirm that attitude or the reasons behind it. Additionally, much of the research on community archives comes out of Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. What research has been done in the United States has been primarily focused on Southern California. Further empirical research of community archives across the United States is necessary in order to better understand how geography (in terms of both regionality and rurality) affects community archival ideologies and practices.

Though this paper has relied at times upon the tired binary of "community archives" versus "traditional" or "mainstream" archives, the future of the archival profession may well require that we shift toward viewing these archives as components of a continuum rather than as mutually exclusive institutions. For one thing, not all organizations that fall under the "community archive" umbrella exist entirely independently from "mainstream" cultural heritage institutions; many

receive some form of financial or institutional support and are no less community-based for it (Flinn et al., 2009, p. 73). For another, much of the current discourse on community archivists versus "mainstream" archivists both positions community archivists, either implicitly or explicitly, as non-professional, and seems to assume that archivists working in the mainstream do not themselves have any marginalized identities. As Ramirez (2015) has put it, "whiteness as the "neutral" ground upon which racial difference and exclusion are determined benefits from this unquestioned status as the ultimate point of reference for normativity" (p. 348). Crucially, when we talk about archives as "neutral" spaces, this is the neutrality to which we are referring: a white, heterosexual, cisgender, male normativity. Similarly, when the literature speaks of the traditional archival professional, the unstated assumption is that that professional is a white, heterosexual, cisgender one. It is true that the archival field is an overwhelmingly white one (Society of American Archivists, 2012), yet far too much of the discourse on what archivists can do to grapple with the exclusionary power they wield assumes a white, heterosexual, cisgender normativity on the part of the archival community. None of the literature on community archives reviewed in this paper suggested a rethinking of exclusionary and hierarchical professionalization practices that pit those with degrees against those without, but such a rethinking is both long overdue and integral to the reconceptualization of community and mainstream archives as a continuum rather than as a binary.

Conclusion

As long as mainstream archives are viewed in opposition to community archives, they will remain artificially removed from the concerns of marginalized groups, including the concerns of the archivists who work at these institutions who have marginalized identities themselves. And as long as the archival profession itself remains an exclusionary one, the false binary between "non-professional" community archivists and "professional" archivists at mainstream archives will continue to devalue the very real archival work accomplished outside of the so-called traditional sector. If archives and archival professionals want to begin to grapple with their legacy of power and exclusion, rethinking how we conceptualize archival working taking place outside of the academy and traditional heritage sector is a promising place to begin.

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