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Imagining the Archive: Documenting GABRIELA Network an activist Filipina women's organization

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ABSTRACT

The historical record of women's activism remains grossly deficient, especially in the case of Filipinas in the United States who have organized to incite reformation, integrity, equality, leadership and action globally and locally. GABRIELA Network (GABNet) has become one of the strongest voices speaking out against the struggles that Filipina and Filipina - Americans face. During the eighteen years of its existence, the organization has amassed a vast amount of unique materials that document the organization and its members. These materials are important not only to the members of GABNet, but to women, activists and academic researchers worldwide. Preserving the organizational memory of GABNet is critical to completing the historical record; an important pluralist tenant of archiving.

INTRODUCTION

How are Filipina activists in the United States creating an archive? and why? In the following paper I discuss several of the initial approaches and research concerns in imagining and eventually building an archive for GABRIELA Network. I suggest a community-based archival approach and interrogate archival norms in favor of the community-based model. I also challenge the role of the archivist and propose future steps in this project.

A community-based archive plays by a set of rules all its own. It contests the archive as it is created. The series of negotiations made during the planning and creation of the archive expose the assumptions and failing paradigms of traditional archives, while simultaneously telling us as a feminist organization how our knowledge has left traces and will perhaps be made evident in the future to others and most importantly ourselves. Therefore, an inquiry into the concept and symbols that the archive represents in relation to feminist knowledge production supply further applications to other women's organizations.

As an archivist I am just as concerned about what the archive will contain as with how the archive will change and shape our interactions with the past. The memory that is being kept through text and traces of women's organizing is novel to the world of archives that has for so long only concerned it self with the official documents and correspondence of high power entities and

individuals. It is also a part of contextualizing feminist knowledge production and re-writing history.

I also look towards new directions in archival research that challenge and deconstruct traditional archival paradigms. Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemish call this work an "emergent area of research related to archival globalization".¹ Their view describes this new area as having the "desire to look at issues that move beyond the local – that span organizational, disciplinary, cultural, or national boundaries; and also to examine the impact that colonization, whether it be political, cultural, theoretical or practice-based, has upon different communities and constituencies".²

An "exploration of ways to diversify the archival paradigm and understand associated power and empowerment issues...[and] post-colonial issues" are among several of the topics within the concept of "archival globalization" that this discussion falls within.³

This expansion of research into theory building that re-thinks and debates the models around archival practice has been an effect of philosophers such as Foucault and Derrida on archival scholars like Upward, Cook, Nesmith, Bronthman, Ketelaar, and Harris.⁴ These particular scholars are included in what Gilliland and McKemish have called an "interpretive paradigm", which "encompasses a spectrum of approaches that are linked too constructivism, structuralization and critical theory with increasingly close ties to postmodernism. It has been linked to ideas about 'archival science' that are akin to Geertz' belief that the goal of anthropology is to act as an "interpretive science in search of meaning, not an experimental science in search of laws".⁵

Additionally, such a project as I am proposing here, comes from a community-based archiving point of view. I am especially grateful for Polly J. Thistlethwaite and others who created the Lesbian Herstory Archives. They have played a significant role in the formulation of my conception of community-based archives.

1 Gilliland, Anne, and Sue McKemish. "Building an Infrastructure for Archival Research." 4 (2004): 149-197.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Gilliland, Anne, and Sue McKemish. "Building an Infrastructure for Archival Research." 4 (2004): 149-197.

She writes: "As our contribution to our community, we decided to undertake the collecting, preserving, and making available to our sisters all the prints of our existence. We undertook the Archives, not as a short-term project, but as a commitment to rediscover our past, control our present, and speak to our future . . ."6 The development of an archive for GABNet as an organization has emerged with similar sentiment and tones. By exploring this case I might be more able to point to particular phenomena of when the archive enters the marginalized community and what kinds of plans and hopes are articulated through the development of the archive.

Therefore, in the spirit of reflexivity I include the lessons learned and to be learned; the evolving emotions and affective responses; and finally the development of the archive. Here I will explore the following claims: (1) memory keeping practices in the archive are a function of repair, rebuilding, and reflection through locating and describing the records that document such a history; (2) the archive has to be reconceived to make possible this type of function; (3) this is possible through challenging traditional archival paradigms so that they meet with the goals of feminist struggle; and finally (4) these practices of memory keeping and the women's struggle intersect during times of conflict and adversity.

THE ARCHIVE RECONCEIVED

Archiving by no means is perfectly suited to fulfill all the historical erasures produced by the "simultaneity of oppressions"7 women of color experience. There are multiple instances where the archive has failed marginalized people. Archival practices have not been suitable for the type of political feminist project the GABNet archive requires. For example, a traditional archive would stipulate ownership of the records by an institution, usually a private library or university library. The question of access to the records becomes a challenge, given that institutional or academic ownership of material, provides access to students and scholars and minimal access to the public or people in the community who do not happen to be in the university.

Additionally, when the records of an organization are handed over to the archive the archivist describes and organizes the contents. The archivist has a very powerful position. She both chooses to throw away and keep, describe and not describe, and even process the collection or not. However, these factors only speak to the practices in the archive that are bound to its paradigm, which maintains the status quo of inequality and marginality.

"Marginalised communities experience a concomitant under-representation in archives, cultural collections, and the recordkeeping and archival profession itself. The recordkeeping and archival profession, by virtue of the paradigm that has governed its theory and practice, and the profile of its membership, has been an agent in perpetuating the dominance of

the narratives, omissions and perspectives of the mainstream. Its body of theory and practice originated in Europe in order to support the bureaucratic, accountability and cultural needs of the monarchies, governments, corporations and churches, and their expanding empires."8

MEETING THE GOALS OF FEMINIST STRUGGLE

A community-based archiving approach was determined as the most appropriate for the GABNet archive given the political nature of the organization. GABNet concerns itself with feminist social movements that rely on the organization and its women to be active producers of knowledge and evidence that advocates for the position of women across several levels of marginality. Therefore all elements of the archival process are determined collaboratively among the members with guidance and advice by those members with archival education. For this reason, as a GABNet member who has professional expertise in archiving, I stand to promote an ethic much different from traditional authoritative notions of archiving. They are almost completely abandoned in order to allow new possibilities in the archive.

This process is largely inspired by the perspective of Polly J. Thistlethwaite and the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Like Thistlethwaite, I seek to show that the GABNet Archives is "an act of mothering, of passing along to our daughters the energies, the actions, the words we lived by. It is the first step in reclaiming a place in time; our response to the colonizer who makes us live on the periphery or not at all." I agree that with Thistlethwaite that, "the community should share in the work of the archive" and that our archive will be one whose "atmosphere must be nourishing" yet one in which "the archive is involved with the political struggles of the [GABNet] community, a place where ideas and experiences from the past interact with the living issues of the [GABNet] community" in the present.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives have been an exceptional resource and example of community-based archives. This archive was initiated in the early 70s by a group of lesbian activists in New York City. Their collection has its permanent home today in Brooklyn. Therefore, to better describe and define what a community-based archive looks like I turn to the guiding principles of the Lesbian Herstory Archive:

- All Lesbian women must have access to the Archives; no academic, political, or sexual credentials will be required for use of the collection; race and class must be no barrier for use or inclusion.
- The Archives shall be housed within the community, not on an academic campus that is by definition closed to many women.
- The Archives shall be involved in the political struggles of all Lesbians.
- Archival skills shall be taught, one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives.

6 Thistlethwaite, Polly J. "Building "A Home of Our Own": The Construction of the Lesbian Herstory Archives A PRESENCE IN OUR OWN LAND." In *Daring to Find Our Names: The Search for Lesbian Library History*. Greenwood Press, 1998. <http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=9804064>.

7 Mohanty, Chandra T. "Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, 1-47. Indiana University Press, 1991.

8 Gilliland, Anne, Andrew Lau, Yang Lu, Sue McKemish, Shilpa Rele, Kelvin White. "Pluralizing the Archival Paradigm Through Education": *Critical Discussions Around the Pacific Rim.* (2007).

- The community should share in the work of the Archives.
- Funding shall be sought from within the communities the Archives serves, rather than from outside sources.
- The community should share in the work of the Archives.
- The Archives will always have a caretaker living in it so that it will always be someone's home rather than an institution.
- The Archives will never be sold nor will its contents be divided.⁹

All of these guidelines are “a radical departure from conventional archival practices”.¹⁰ They are radical in the sense that they place the archive outside of the institution and into the home. Also the labor involved in creating and maintaining the archive is a shared collective task. There is also a sense that the protection of the collection in its entirety must be preserved. A final key radical aspect of this community-based archive is that skills and training will be provided to the community, so that the archivist does not absorb total intellectual and physical control of the collection. In fact, the role of the archivist is completely turned on its head. Such a role reversal is necessary to the community-based archive. Professional elitism is unwarranted in this case, therefore collaboration must be articulated in more nuanced ways than ever before.

CONCLUSION

While, the organization has expressed a desire and interest for a community –based archive, the perceptions and hopes for what the archive will become and its function are unknown. Therefore these compelling questions must be addressed: What is the function of the archive for the women of GABNet? Is it a memory keeping practice that is using/challenging/reinventing the notion of the archive? What does the archive represent? Future research should seek to explore and analyze these perspectives, as well as lead to a better understanding of what the archival function is in a women's organization and the extent to which it relates to feminist notions of the archive, evidence, re-writing history, and documentation.

9 “The Lesbian Herstory Archives: History.”
<http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/history.html#mission>.

10 Ibid.

