

EPHEMERAL MATERIAL:  
DEVELOPING A CRITICAL ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

DISSERTATION

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By

Alana Kumbier, B.A., M.A., M.L.I.S.

The Ohio State University  
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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Maurice E. Stevens, Adviser

Professor David Horn

Professor Leo Coleman

Professor Timothy K. Choy

Approved by

---

Adviser  
Comparative Studies Graduate Program

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## ABSTRACT

In its examination of critical archival practices developed by a variety of actors – artists, documentarians, researchers, genealogists, geneticists, activist-archivists, drag kings, and even ghostly historians – this dissertation considers how archives function, and what they mean, beyond their role as repositories for historic records. The critical archival practices I explore emerge in response to specific political, social, and cultural situations. They take a variety of forms, including exhibits, documentary films, online archives, genetic test results, oral history collections, and zines. These projects have distinct affective dimensions – they are motivated by a range of feelings, desires, and needs, and in some cases, make their appeals to and through affect. They demonstrate how archives matter at the level of the public and the private, in the making of collective histories and to the articulation of personal identities. They also show us how archives are relevant to (or can even be instruments in) struggles for social transformation, social justice, and self-determination.

Whether they engage the archives as researchers or critics, or as creators and custodians of their own collections, critical archival practitioners make archives, themselves, objects of investigation. Most of the critical archival practitioners I write about explicitly challenge the myth of archival neutrality and objectivity, and

denaturalize archival practices by drawing attention to logics that underpin them. While some practitioners destabilize these logics as they introduce alternative forms of evidence, others – particularly those invested in genetic genealogical research – call upon them in order to make claims about origin and identity. In addition to investigating archival logics, critical practitioners explore power relations in archives by attending to specific issues researchers encounter while doing archival work – navigating the archives’ organizational systems, gaining access to archives and records, negotiating security protocols, recruiting participants for oral history and other documentation projects, or (for prospective participants) deciding whether or not to participate in those projects. Their critiques suggest that projects to document and collect the records of historically underrepresented communities and constituencies can – and should – be participatory and collaborative endeavors.

Dedicated to April, Erica, Erin, Ruby, and Tom

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Though the fifth chapter of this dissertation has a single author, it is truly the product of my conversations with fellow IDKE participant-archivists Julia Applegate and Christa Orth. The chapter also manifests my extended collaboration and close friendship with Cristina Hernandez Trotter. Cristina had the idea for the New Orleans Drag King Collection Project, and I was honored when she asked me to be her partner in that endeavor. I'm happy to have had a terrific excuse to make research trips to New Orleans to visit her and to spend hours working in the library together. I hope her importance to this project, and her contribution to my thinking, is clear.

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## VITA

April 11, 1976.....	Born – Buffalo, New York
1998.....	B.A. English, Missouri State University
2000.....	M.A. Comparative Studies, The Ohio State University
2003.....	M.L.I.S. Library and Information Science, Kent State University
2003-2007.....	Graduate Teaching Associate, The Ohio State University
2007-present.....	Research and Instruction Librarian, Wellesley College

## PUBLICATIONS

### Research Publications

1. Kumbier, Alana. "Performing Community." *Moon City Review*. 5.1 (2004): 125-133.
2. Kumbier, Alana. "One Body, Some Genders: Drag Performances and Technologies." *The Drag King Anthology*. Eds. Donna Troka, Kathleen LeBesco, and Jean Noble. New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002. 191-200.

### Alternative Press

3. Kumbier, Alana. "Sick Lit: Teen Trauma Fiction." *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* 27 (2005): 73-77.

4. Kumbier, Alana. "Wedding Bells and Welfare Bucks" *The W Effect: The Bush Administration's War on Women*. Ed. Laura Flanders. New York: The Feminist Press, 2004. 70-78.
5. Kumbier, Alana. "Zine Libraries: Building collections, building community." *Punk Planet* 55 (2003): 118-120.
6. Kumbier, Alana. "Liberating Information: Radical Librarians Shelve the Status Quo." *Punk Planet* 52 (2002): 86-90.
7. Kumbier, Alana. "Testostifyin'." *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* 12 (2000): 54-57; 79.

## FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Comparative Studies

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Theory and practice

*Theory* is a troubling term for American archivists. In the United States, archival theory is something one *learns*, as well as something one *has a position on*. Some American archivists believe that theory is “largely irrelevant to archival work, promotes an undesirable stratification within the profession, and is intellectually frivolous” (Roberts 67) while others posit that “without any commitment to the development of theory, the archival community lacks one of the essential features of a profession, and weakens its incentive for improving practice and even meeting its mission to document society” (Cox 314-15)<sup>1</sup>. While students conducting archival coursework will likely be exposed to the theory that informs archival practice, a sustained engagement with theory does not characterize American archival work. Instead, American archivists tend to focus on pragmatic concerns, and to “work from practice to theory,” instead of the other way around (Eastwood 138).

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of debates surrounding the relevance of theory to archival practice, see “American Archivists and the Search for Professional Development” in Randall C. Jimerson’s *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*.

It might have helped me to know all of this in the spring of 2003, when I was trying to devise an acceptable research paper topic for my M.L.I.S. program's introductory course on archives. I couldn't seem to come up with a topic that my professors didn't deem inappropriately critical, theoretical, or otherwise impractical. Before entering the library and information science degree program, I'd conducted graduate work in an interdisciplinary cultural studies program. In that context, I'd come to understand knowledge as situated, partial, and always already *from* somewhere. I'd learned to critically evaluate the systems and practices with which societies organize, order, and structure access to information –and identified situations in which these systems and practices have material effects. And I'd done all of this with the help of critical theoretical work by scholars in queer studies, cultural studies of science and technology, gender studies, visual cultural studies, and American studies.

I had high hopes for the archives course. The readings on the syllabus suggested we'd be having discussions that explicitly addressed how conceptual matters – like the endurance of collective memory, the mutual constitution of archives and nation-states, or the definition of uniqueness – translated into archival practice. What's more, we'd get to write a research paper at the end of the term (this was exceptional in my program, where an emphasis on practical training, combined with large course enrollments, a reliance on distance education, and a small teaching faculty, meant that we were most often evaluated through exams, standardized reports, and task-oriented homework assignments). Through a series of email exchanges, my professors and I negotiated an appropriate topic for me my research paper; my proposals to write about the relevance of post-colonial studies, or Foucault's theorization of bio-power, or indigenous



epistemologies to archival scholarship were designated as too theoretical and abstract, beside the point, or ill-suited for the focus of the course. I learned that I was expected to draw upon archival literature – not on critical theoretical texts or interdisciplinary investigations of “the archive” (i.e, the archive as a conceptual entity) – and my paper needed to address a specific archival practice or professional issue, or to investigate the history of a particular archive or archival tradition.

Once I recognized that a successful proposal was one that would signal a willingness to be disciplined, I limited my search for articles to databases indexing library and archival literature. In those databases, I entered my key terms – power, memory, forgetting, Foucault, discourse, colonial\*, subaltern, indigenous, community – and was surprised to find a small group of archivists writing about power relations, national memory, social memory, state-sanctioned forgetting, and accountability. These archivists were, for the most part, not working in the United States; they were practicing and theorizing in South Africa, Canada, and the Netherlands. Several of them were publishing in a recently-established journal from the Netherlands, *Archival Science*, not (only) in the two prominent North American archival journals: *American Archivist* and *Archivaria*. Most importantly, my search brought me to a body of work by South African archivist Verne Harris, whose investigations of archival practice during and after apartheid illumine the relevance of – if not the pressing need for – a critical, reflexive approach to archival work. Harris’s analyses were developed in relation to a place (South Africa) and archives in that place. The situation of his work made mine possible: my professors agreed that “an overview of South African archival practices during and after apartheid” constituted an appropriate subject of investigation for my research paper.

I continue to situate my work in relation to Harris', and also in relation to work by scholars who have engaged archives from (inter)disciplinary locations in queer studies, performance studies, American studies, visual cultural studies, and from many communities of practice – artistic, documentary, queer performance, and genealogical research – to name a few. The project at hand is aligned with these other projects – those instigated by archivists searching for ways to develop theoretically-informed practices (specifically, South African archivists in the wake of apartheid), and projects by academics, artists, activists, filmmakers, and others who both engage archives as-they-are and propose alternatives to traditional modes of archival practice. After providing an overview of the scholarship that most directly informs my own, I define this dissertation's aims, and present a summary of the chapters that follow.

## 1.2 Refiguring archives

Harris's accounts of state archival practices in apartheid-era South Africa remind readers that while archives are supposed to perform certain functions, this is not always the case. Archivists and their constituents – researchers, donors, and members of the states, institutions, organizations, or communities to which specific archives are accountable – expect archives to support the collective memory of the societies they represent, and expect that this memory accurately represents subjects' experiences and histories. We expect archival records to provide evidence for the articulation of authoritative historical accounts. We expect records to function primarily as evidence, to represent things that “really happened” to “real people” – in other words, to be nonfictions. We expect archives to make records accessible; to provide finding aids and accurate descriptions of record series, to allow researchers to consult records (at least

those without legally- or donor-imposed restrictions), and to preserve archival material. And we imagine that archives are objective, value neutral spaces, in which archivists act without bias, according to professional standards for archival practice and codes of ethics. While many constituents of archives might not realize that archivists make choices about materials' disposition (their destruction or transfer to an archives), those who do presume archivists to make those decisions on transparent, systematic, and ethical terms. And, perhaps most importantly, we tend to imagine archives as bounded entities: clearly-defined collections and places, rather than as nodes in a network, or as sets of practices that articulate with other collective memory practices.

Archival practices in South Africa, both during and after apartheid, challenge these expectations. In the four decades during which the apartheid system was in effect, the state (and compliant citizens) secured and maintained a hegemonic position. As Harris argues, a "key element in this exercise of hegemony was the state's control over social memory, a control which involved both remembering and forgetting" ("Archival Sliver" 69). This method of control was manifest in different practices and sites: through the replacement of English-language public service to Afrikaner public service, and through networks of state-controlled media and institutions, including radio, television, press, and state-funded libraries, museums, monuments, art galleries, and archives. The state bureaucracy also functioned as a site for documentation and memory, as government offices documented "racial classification, employment, movement, association, purchase of property, recreation, and culture, [and] sport" (69). Surveillance documents (both those generated by state entities and those confiscated from individual citizens and citizen groups that opposed apartheid) were also collected by the security

police and related intelligence offices. As Harris notes, the bureaucratic memory generated through state policies of record creation and collection was tightly controlled:

Interlocking legislation restricted access to and the dissemination of information on vast areas of public life. These restrictions were manipulated to secure an extraordinary degree of opacity in government, and the country's formal information systems became grossly distorted in support of official propaganda. This obsessive secrecy was served not only by legislation, but also by a range of judicial and executive tools. The most effective tool to ensure secrecy, ultimately, was the selective destruction of public records...All records confiscated by the security police from individuals and organizations opposed to apartheid were destroyed before the 1994 election. (70)

The state archival system in place during apartheid (the system implicated in the destruction of records described above) was the State Archives Service (SAS).

Established in 1922, the SAS served as the custodial coordinator for the archives of central and provincial government offices, and in 1962 was granted responsibility for all local government offices. Offices and functions under SAS's custodial mandate included the South African Defense Force, the homelands, and the "offices of record" (71). The SAS collected both public and non-public records, and after the passage of the 1962 Archives Act, was also responsible for records management.

Under the apartheid system, information essential to the functions of a participatory democracy was withheld from citizens, and because of this, any hope of government accountability (for which at least some degree of transparency of operations in necessary) was foreclosed<sup>2</sup> (Harris and Merrett). In offices and archives where records

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to operating against (or within) the apartheid government's system-wide disregard for archival mandates and accountability, the SAS also operated within a system of severely flawed archival legislation. Through apartheid's archival legislation (the 1962 Archives Act), many state offices were excused from reporting relationships to the SAS; the definition of "archives" and "public records" were vague enough to provide the government with room for exploitation. The punishment for destroying a public record was minimal -- approximately a \$24 U.S. fine; this has been replaced by a penalty of a "fine or imprisonment for a period not exceeding two years or both such fine and imprisonment" (Act Number 43 of 1996, ss 16 (1)). Additionally, there existed no means for ensuring "accountability and transparency

were maintained, public access to records and information on the following subjects was restricted (though as Harris and Merrett note, the limitations on access were not uniform across subjects): business, foreign trade, and sanctions; capital punishment and racial bias in sentencing; conscientious objection to military services; corruption and fraud; detention without trial; treatment of detainees; liberation movements (including their activities and policies); mental health institutions; military relations with Angola and Namibia; nuclear power and nuclear proliferation; oil supplies; police repression in South Africa; prison systems; and territorial consolidation of the bantusans.

These limitations to access – combined with the other abuses of power enumerated here – challenge traditional (positivist) conceptualizations of archives as neutral custodians of records, of public archives as the repository for records pertaining to national history and public information (records to which the nation’s public should have access, with reasonable restrictions), and of the ability of records to accurately and objectively reflect a reliable narrative of national history (rather than serving as a site for propaganda serving those in power). The apartheid system and SAS’s status as a state organ had the combined effect of shaping many of the Archives’ services into tools for

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in the selection of public records for preservation by the director of the archives” (Harris “They Should Have Destroyed More” 225). The destruction of public and organizational records, a purge that began in 1990 (as negotiations for transition commenced), was widespread throughout the offices of the apartheid bureaucracy: the National Intelligence Service, the Security Police, the South African Defense Force, and the National Security Management System all engaged in massive records destruction. When Brian Currin, then National Director of Lawyers for Human Rights, challenged the widespread destruction of records by government offices, the new settlement’s resulting amendment to the Archives Act was largely ignored (2002).

In 1996, the National Archives Act of South Africa was enacted, providing the legislative framework for a new national archival system (Harris 2002 77). Under the terms established by National Archives legislation, the National Archives is still mandated to collect and preserve official (public) and non-public (private) records, and receives assistance from an advisory council. According to the 1996 legislation, along with its advisory functions, the council is supposed to perform executive functions that include “promoting the coordination of archival policy formulation and planning at national and provincial

the system. While the archives were, in theory, open to all South Africans, they were used disproportionately by white South Africans. This disproportionate use may be due to systemic barriers experienced by black South Africans – high illiteracy rates, low educational standards, language competencies in areas other than the official languages of record (English and Afrikaans), and geographic isolation from city centers – barriers the SAS did little to mitigate or overcome. In its outreach efforts, the SAS targeted white academics, until the 1980s, when its focus shifted to white users in the general population (Harris “Archival Sliver”). The SAS was also complicit in maintaining the apartheid system through its records management function (which, according to Harris, effectively “oiled the wheels of apartheid bureaucracy”), and its relation to the bantusan (black homeland) archives services, characterized by an inability to fully support the archives (which would have further enforced the apartheid system) or to “cut them loose” (which would have contributed to bantusan underdevelopment) (71).

While these characteristics and practices seem to implicate SAS as fully supporting the apartheid system, Harris notes that SAS was not well-positioned to resist the system, given its “junior status” in the government hierarchy and the apartheid government’s overarching disregard for accountability (“Archival Sliver”). During apartheid, several government offices (including the national Intelligence Service, the Security Police, and the National Security Management System) refused to cooperate with SAS’s requests to analyze, appraise, and transfer records into SAS custody (“They Should Have Destroyed More”). This refusal was buttressed by vague legislation (i.e., the Archives Act of 1962) that left room for loopholes and bureaucratic resistance to SAS

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levels,” as well as the maintenance of the National List, a list of non-public records that cannot be

policies, legislation that survived until human rights lawyer Brian Currin successfully challenged it in 1993, by agitating for a more precise definition of “public records” in archival legislation (214-15). When members of the SAS staff attempted to intervene in records destruction between 1990 and 1994, these interventions were effectively ignored, as SAS leadership refused to act aggressively or decisively to halt the destruction.

The limitations placed on the SAS do not excuse its support (tacit or not) of the apartheid system, but complicate our understanding of the apartheid archival system as fully imbricated in archival practices, or in full disregard of traditional archival practices and values. The difficult project of defining the SAS’s role in the apartheid system is indicative of the demands the South African example places on traditional modes of theorizing archival practice; Harris cautions against a simple white/black binary representation of the archives system:

Characterization of apartheid’s archives system as one controlled by whites, preserving records created by whites, and providing services to whites is an oversimplification. It misses the role played by black bureaucrats, including archivists, in the bantusan administrations and, from the 1980s, in black local authorities’ ‘own affairs’ administrations and other branches of the state. It misses the increasing number of black users of archives in apartheid’s twilight years. It misses the emergence in the 1980s and early 1990s of institutions dedicated to giving voice to the voiceless through archival collections. But it captures nonetheless the essential character of the system. (74)

Throughout the period of South Africa’s transition to democracy, efforts to define the state archives and its role have comprised a complex project, one that is necessarily focused on the transformation process.

The period of transformation began in 1990 with the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) and other organizations, a process which was followed by the initiation of formal negotiations to dismantle the apartheid system. “Accountability,” “transparency,” “public participation,” “restructuring,” “reconstruction,” and “transformation” were all terms integral to the new transformation discourse that developed in correlation with these events. Public archives participated in this discursive shift, and in the articulation of new practices in alignment with transformation values and principles. Early moves to transform the SAS, for example, included hiring four women and one black man to occupy positions as senior-level staff, and renaming the organization from the State Archives Service to the National Archives of South Africa (Harris “Redefining”). Recognizing that both these shifts -- and the earlier archival practices they correct -- must be contextualized in terms of broader social and political transformations, as well as technological ones, Harris, Carolyn Hamilton, and Graeme Reid suggest that archives are “always already being refigured: the technologies of creation, preservation, and use [...] are changing all the time; physically, the archive is being added to and subtracted from, and is in dynamic relation with its physical environment [...] the archive is porous to societal processes and discourses” (7). South African state archives have responded to transformation discourse – specifically, to values and concerns relevant to archives within that discourse – in practical terms. At the same time, archivists like Harris, Hamilton, and Reid have looked outside the professional archival literature to find theoretical approaches to inform a new archival practice. These responses – both practical and theoretical – constitute a significant part of the critical archival practice that has emerged in South Africa the last decade and a half.



My analysis of this practice is organized in relation to three of its key concerns: transparency, memory, and representation, and three core archival functions: access, appraisal, and collecting. I discuss these concerns and functions in order to draw attention to the ways in which theoretical approaches (particularly those that may seem removed from archives) can inform archival practice

### 1.3 Transparency and access

Questions of access to archives after apartheid play out in several different ways. The charge to disclose and make official (state) practices transparent – part of the larger transition discourse -- has been a key part of archival transformation, but has required difficult negotiations between the state and public archivists. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has played the largest role in leading the movement for transparency, openness, and disclosure during the transition, some of its hearings were held in secret, its records of protected witnesses kept secret, its archives subject to specific restrictions on access, and “information on certain decision-making processes, and of internal tensions and disputes was jealously kept out of the public arena” (“Archival Sliver” 224). While some of these measures of official secrecy may be acceptable within a democracy, Harris notes that they may provide an unsettling “point of departure” for government communications officials and the South African National Defense Force seeking to restrict access to public records (224). Debates around disclosure have also addressed the South African nuclear weapons program of the 1970s, as archivists have called for a critical assessment of policies surrounding declassification

of information about the nuclear weapons development program, challenging the non-disclosure of information which would not propose a security hazard in terms of proliferation (Harris and Hatang).

Archivists have identified other – less explicitly- or legally-determined – barriers to access that need to be rectified. While “well-meaning platitudes such as ‘devising open-door policies to ensure that a wide range of possible users is reached’” may signal an interest in improving archives’ accessibility, Bhekizizwe Peterson argues that these policies “are not likely to overcome such crucial barriers as the geographies in which most archives are situated, the dominance of English and Afrikaans as ‘archival languages’, and social factors such as low literacy rates” (32). He suggests that archives may be “freed and rendered more dynamic and interactive with a range of communities who do not ordinarily ‘visit’ the archives” by forming relationships with other cultural and educational sites like “museums, libraries, cultural centres, writers’ organizations, schools and churches” (33). These sites are also repositories – not just in terms of the documents and material they contain, but also because they are “populated by people who often prove to be dazzling raconteurs if allowed to express themselves in ways over which they have command; they have lived through much of the history of our vibrant yet troubled cities” (33). Instead of just inviting groups to come to the archives, archivists could create opportunities for “non-traditional users” to engage the archive by bringing the archive to these cultural, educational, and community spaces through workshops and exhibits. Such exhibits have potential benefits for users, as they help “overcome the

barriers of geography, language, class, and literacy,” but they also have value for the archive, as “the notion of the archive itself will be enlivened by being redeployed in fresh new ways in new contexts” (33).

#### 1.4 Memory and appraisal

Memory is never a faithful reflection of process, of ‘reality.’ It is shaped, reshaped, figured, reconfigured, by the dance of imagination, so that beyond the dynamics of remembering and forgetting, a more profound characterization of the struggle in social memory is one of narrative against narrative, story against story. Nevertheless, it is true to say that the tools of forgetfulness, of state-imposed amnesia, were crucial to the exercise of power in apartheid South Africa. The state generated huge information resources, which it secreted jealously from public view. It routinely destroyed public records in order to keep certain processes secret. More chilling tools for erasing memory were also widely utilized, with many thousands of oppositional voices eliminated through media censorship, various forms of banning, detention without trial, imprisonment, informal harassment, and assassination. (Harris “Archival Sliver” 205)

Given their custodial mandate, archives have traditionally been defined as “holding the collective memory of a nation” (Harris “Claiming Less” 137). This definition, as Harris notes, “dismisses the role of libraries, museums, art galleries, and other repositories of memory, not least the memories of individuals. It also suggests a glibness about the complex processes through which archives record and feed into social memory” (137).

The traditional, positivist understanding of archives as reflective of a unitary reality (e.g., national history) is also troubling, because it elides the constructedness of the archive.

The reality archives represent may be re-conceptualized in terms of processes and contexts: processes of records creation, of records management, of preservation (as well as lack of preservation, and decisions made in the process) (“Claiming Less”). Even those records that seem to offer direct representational access to events and memories – like oral histories, snapshots, and videos – are framed by their creators in specific ways, and

thus, mediated and constructed. When archivists view their work as “building a coherent ‘reflection’ of reality through the jigsawing of individual appraisals,” they fail to recognize the ways in which appraisal is shaped by archivists’ decisions, actions, and their respective situations – and that the appraisal report itself may provide valuable insight into archival processes at a later date (“Archival Sliver” 84).

In addressing questions about the nature of the archives and their relation to social memory and reality, Harris uses the concept of the “archival sliver” to supplant the traditional imagination of archives-as-mirror. The archival sliver is a sliver of both social memory and the documentary record – providing “just a sliver of a window into [an] event” (64). The archival sliver left to South African archivists after apartheid and the period of records destruction posed several problems that resisted resolution through a traditional, positivist approach. Individuals in power during the early years of transformation expressed the sentiment that the state should promote certain narratives through the archives (e.g., of reconciliation and nation-building), that inclination was not incorporated in the National Archives of South Africa Act. While the suggestion that social memory could be shaped may have been well-intentioned, it was problematic in familiar ways, given that the use of public archives to manipulate social memory was a legitimating strategy used by the apartheid government. Instead of using the archives to promote new (state-endorsed) narratives, Harris suggests material already in the archives can be used to interrogate the apartheid system and other aspects of South African history. He suggests that:

There is poetic justice in records of the apartheid state, which documented so densely and so obscenely the state’s control over citizen’s lives, being used to unfold the intricacies of oppression, expose the perpetrators of human rights

violations, support the claims of the dispossessed to restitution, and prosecute those who refuse to ask for, or who fail to get, amnesty from the TRC. (79)

Given the importance of record-keeping to the apartheid system, the destruction of records by state offices at the end of the apartheid era, and the role records played in TRC proceedings, it's not surprising that archivists and citizens would be concerned about how appraisal happens, and how these functions are regulated. South Africans have expressed anxieties around the destruction of records that hold the state – and the officials who implement its policies – accountable. Harris frames these concerns as a set of questions about how appraisal will be performed and reported: “who should be responsible for appraisal? To whom should appraisers be accountable? How transparent should the processes be? How reliable are the appraisals done during the apartheid era?” (79). The National Archives of South Africa Act provided some resolution to these questions, charging the National Archives “with the appraisal of public records, subject to the approval of its overarching appraisal policy and monitoring of the policy’s implementation by the National Archives Commission” (79). Additionally, Harris notes, post-apartheid appraisal practices have implemented process-based models, through which archivists can identify which processes of governance are well-documented and which are poorly-documented, in order to identify those that still need to be “covered by records collecting and creating activities” (*Exploring* 21). Concerns about collecting have not only been levied in terms of transparency and accountability, but also in terms of representation – of how collections in state archives represent national history, whose

records have included or excluded from collections, and how to develop collections that represent the experiences of the many constituencies that comprise South Africa's citizenship.

### 1.5 Representation and collecting

Apartheid-era collecting policies of the SAS skewed the collection of non-public records such that resistance to colonialism, segregation and apartheid, as well as the experiences of black, female, disabled, and other marginalized populations, were all poorly documented. In the context of transition, critics of these policies have called for means by which collection can be driven by “the post-apartheid imperative to ‘give the voiceless voice’” (“Archival Sliver” 80). Harris articulates some caveats to this plan, however: public archives should not compete with South Africa's non-public collecting institutions for material that would be better preserved in those locations, and archivists “giving voice” to the marginalized need to be aware of possible disjunctions between their intent and their constituents' desires. Extending Harris' critique, Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook note that “some [people] do not wish to be ‘rescued’ by mainstream archives and some will feel their naming by archivists as being ‘marginalized’ only further marginalizes them” (17). Acknowledging his debt to postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Harris poses a set of questions necessary to inform a reflexive, critical approach to the project of incorporating subaltern voices in archival collecting projects:

How do we invite in what is always beyond the limits of understanding? How do we avoid the danger of speaking for those voices? How to avoid reinforcing marginalization by naming ‘the marginalized’ as such? How to invite in what one wishes to resist – the voices, for instance, of white supremacists, hard drug dealers [...] and so on, and on and on? (“Archival Sliver” 86)

If, as Harris often claims<sup>3</sup>, processes of developing archival theory and practice are constantly shifting and adapting to new theoretical and discursive formations, it will be interesting to observe whether, in addition to – or instead of – being shaped by a state discourse that emphasizes “giving voice,” South African archivists will engage indigenous epistemologies, which could offer alternative, viable frameworks for contextualized theory and practice. Peterson cautions that archivists should not dismiss the “imperative to discover and construct the canons of previously marginalized groups, whatever the limitations that come with canon-formation” (30). Otherwise, archivists will be “unable to inscribe a local and Pan-African provenance in the production of knowledge [...], and will continue to proceed as if the contradictions that face South Africa now, especially with regards to the politics of race, ethnicity, class, gender, identity, culture, nation, and so on, are novel developments, untheorised by past generations in South Africa or the African continent” (30). Without a sustained engagement with indigenous, local, and continental intellectual traditions, “refiguring the archive” may engender “another sophisticated strategy of containment: ensuring the tacit continuation of the status quo – in all its whiteness – at the very moment when other cultures and systems of knowledge are being ostensibly reorganized under the rhetoric of ‘change’” (30). The project to develop multiperspectival collections and to revise collecting priorities requires archivists and their collaborators to pay attention not only to what could be (what kinds of collections could be developed to account for past underdocumentation) but also to what has already existed, but has been unrecognized, by archivists. Such an undertaking is clearly more complicated than filling in “gaps” in

existing collections, within existing systems of knowledge and practice. Instead, it requires a transformation in archival thought and practice – one which recognizes that no one factor in the articulation of new approaches to archiving (i.e., traditional archival principles, transformation discourse, local or indigenous epistemologies, critical theorizations of power, memory, and discourse) can determine another; they are all subject to change through their interaction and their translation into practice.

The archival practice delineated by South African archivists responds to a particular set of political, historic, and social conditions. The refiguring of state archives is motivated by an urgent need to do things differently and to rectify past abuses. As archivists revisit traditional approaches to archival access, record appraisal, and collecting, they balance the demand for an accountable and responsible archival practice with an investment in national transformations for social justice and democracy. The approaches that emerge from the transition suggest that it's possible to find such a balance, to enact archival practices that are informed by theoretical, social, and political discourses – while also maintaining a critical relationship to these discourses (such that they don't completely determine practice, and past abuses aren't re-enacted on new terms). It's also clear that South African archivists continue to prioritize public accountability and professional integrity when deciding which approaches to adopt and which to set aside – these core values do not suffer in the process, and are instead, explicitly addressed in public discussions around archives.

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<sup>3</sup> See his works from 2002 and 1997, especially.



## 1.6 Unconventional archives

I found another set of ideas about what a critical archival practice might entail when I went looking for work on archives closer to my intellectual – and geographic – home. In the course of my research-paper-research, while doing a keyword search on the terms “archive” and “memory” in the library catalog, I encountered a book published earlier in the year (2003). The title of the book, alone – *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* – indicated that this project would explore archives on significantly different terms than those highlighted in my professional education. I found its contradictory terms both puzzling and compelling (e.g., an “archive of feelings” seemed like a desirable but impossible entity, definitely something I didn’t have time to think about while learning definitions of archival terminology and creating finding aids for my archives class).

Before I spent evenings sitting in that archives class, pondering what to do for my research paper, I’d spent a year and a half on a different project, in another program. That project, my master’s thesis, traced the circuits through which AIDS activists’ imaging, documentary, and discursive practices were adapted, co-opted, and resignified in the service of drug marketing and clinical trial recruitment campaigns. I pursued this research for a number of reasons beyond the obvious (i.e., that it was a worthy problem for scholarly investigation): because I was mourning the death of my friend Frank Vincent – thinking about these things was a way to remember him, and to continue the conversations we’d started over copies of *Diseased Pariah News*; because I’d spent years living in southwest Missouri where we didn’t have ACT UP or Queer Nation; because I was trying to figure out what it meant to be an advocate and activist around my own

chronic illness. In other words, my research had a lot to do with feelings, and constituted a way of translating those feelings into arguments. It also had to do with finding a precedent, for developing new ways to understand one's body (Frank's HIV+ body, or my insulin-dependent, diabetic body) as the beneficiary of pharmaceutical developments, located within circuits of transnational capital, privileged with access to care, acting in accord with and in resistance to biomedical discourses (O'Brien). The project required an unconventional archive, comprised of AIDS activist videos, drug ads, clinical trial recruitment cards, novels about people living with and dying of HIV (and their partners, lovers, families and friends), a queer musical, and queer protest graphics. But it wasn't until I started reading the introduction to *An Archive of Feelings* that I recognized the possibility that these ephemeral materials could constitute a kind of archive. My project, motivated by thoughts and feelings I had about Frank, explored how this collection of ephemeral material – ads, zines, cards, videos, and graphics – documented feelings like rage, grief, resilience and playfulness, how these materials were designed to elicit these same feelings in order to foment action and agitation, and, in some cases, how ads made affective appeals to people with HIV/AIDS, or to HIV-negative people who might be persuaded to invest money in drug research or to participate in a vaccine trial. When I read Cvetkovich's introductory definition of an archive of feelings – “an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in practices that surround their production and reception” – the existence and importance of such archives suddenly seemed quite plausible (7).

In *An Archive of Feelings*, Cvetkovich explores how unconventional forms of documentation and representation, including “testimony, [...] new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances [...] can call into being collective witnesses and publics” can be conduits for the representation or expression of past traumatic experience. Because trauma is often “unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all” (7). Cvetkovich maintains, however, that trauma has an archive; composed of ephemeral media and genres, it includes “personal memories, which can be recorded in oral and video testimonies, memoirs, letters, and journals” (7). She suggests that memories of trauma aren’t only expressed through narrative, but also in “material artifacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental, value” (7-8). Cvetkovich articulates her understanding of trauma’s archive in relation to the role of memory, and ephemeral material, in gay and lesbian public cultures; she observes that because they are forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections stand alongside the documents of dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge. (8)

Cvetkovich’s interest in the ephemeral-as-evidence, and in alternative ways of transmitting historical knowledge, resonates with the work of performance studies scholars, particularly Diana Taylor. In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (also published in 2003), Taylor asserts that “performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory,

and a sense of identity through reiterated [behavior]” (3). She understands the archive, and its embodied, performed counterpart, the repertoire, as working “in tandem and [...] alongside other systems of transmission” (21). Where “archival memory” takes material form – in “documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change,” she posits that the “repertoire [...] enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (19-20). Taylor problematizes dominant myths about archival objects – though they may seem permanent and unmediated, they are subject to selection, classification and presentation. And (as the case of South African archival history also demonstrates) the archive itself may be subject to “change, corruptibility, and political manipulation,” and in the process, material may be destroyed, or may disappear from the archive (19). Of course, performances may also disappear from cultural repertoires, but Taylor suggests they are less vulnerable than we may imagine: “performances [...] replicate themselves through their own structures and codes. [...] [Embodied acts] reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. Embodied and performed acts generate, record, and transmit knowledge” (21).

Cvetkovich and Taylor engage the archive in their work, as concept, material, and practice. In addition to theorizing the archive of feelings, and how it manifests in lesbian cultural production (e.g., in video, performance, fiction, and documentary work) Cvetkovich analyzes how grassroots archives, such as the Lesbian Herstory Archive, matter to the collective memory of lesbian public cultures. She also creates an archive of

oral history interviews which is external to the text, but informed by her project: she collects histories from lesbian AIDS activists, in which she and her subjects discuss the affective dimensions of AIDS activist work in the 1980s and 1990s. To the best of my knowledge, Cvetkovich's and Taylor's work have not been taken up by practicing archivists in the United States or beyond; their engagements with the archive have not been reciprocated with archival engagements with trauma studies, queer studies, or performance studies, per se. There are numerous reasons why archivists wouldn't embrace, let alone note, this work. It's published outside the professional literature, and may seem practically irrelevant to American archivists. Work by scholars like Cvetkovich and Taylor requires translation on multiple levels: they use terminology, theoretical approaches, and evidence that aren't represented in the archival literature (and which archivists would have little incentive to learn or adopt), and they critique 'the (general, conceptual) archive' without attending to many of the practical concerns that constitute the everyday work of archivists. My aim in the project at hand is not to explain Cvetkovich or Taylor's work to archivists, though I do explore some questions and concerns we share in the chapters that follow. I am interested, however, in identifying and analyzing practices and objects that emerge outside of traditional archival institutions, in ways that make their relevance and value to archivists and archival practice clear.

In this dissertation, I identify and analyze a set of critical archival practices that emerge in response to traditional archival logics, practices, and modes of historic knowledge production. These practices are enacted by a diverse group of actors, including artists, filmmakers, genealogists and family historians, geneticists, and activist-

archivists, in projects ranging from imaginary archives documenting the history of the Lebanese civil wars; documentaries; genetic genealogies; drag king documentation projects; and collections of oral histories from survivors of Hurricane Katrina. Though they may address problems people encounter when trying to use archives, or problems with the larger historic record, the critical archival practices I write about here are not critical in a negative way – they do not function as complaints or dismissals of archives, or of archival practice or theory. Instead, they are critical in a reflexive, productive, transformative sense. Their critical engagement with archives and archival practice is similar to that which historian and philosopher Michel Foucault describes as:

a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest. [...] Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that which is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. [...] In these circumstances, criticism (and radical criticism) is absolutely indispensable for any transformation. A transformation that remains within the same mode of thought [...] can merely be a superficial transformation. (154-55)

Recognizing the limits of archives as-they-are, the actors and projects I discuss here imagine archives as-they-could-be. They constitute alternative modes of documenting the past and the present, and of building archives. They suggest how archives are more than repositories for records of historical value: they are sites in which differently-positioned subjects exercise power in order to decide whose experiences are documented, represented – and how; what kinds of records constitute a particular collection; and whose access to material is enabled or disabled. They remind us that the historic record is shaped by a multitude of factors; that the under-representation of certain subjects in the archives is not always a matter of neglect, disinterest, or exclusion – not everyone wants

to be included in the archive, or at least not necessarily on the terms available in traditional and grassroots archives, or through other means of documentation (e.g., documentary film). Additionally, as Cvetkovich observes, and several of the projects here demonstrate, some histories and experiences may be difficult to access, to remember, let alone document. In those cases, critical archival practitioners have developed alternative strategies for representing the past.

In the chapters that follow, I suggest how specific artistic, documentary, activist, research, and collaborative practices (and the projects they engender) function as critical archival practices. Chapter Two explores how The Atlas Group Archive, an imaginary archive created by artist Walid Raad, aims to foment public remembering and to facilitate moments of recognition around the Lebanese Civil War, an extended period of extreme “physical and psychic violence” (“Documents”). In this chapter, I suggest how selected Atlas Group records draw our attention to the ways in which images (and the histories that are articulated with them) are framed, and to the temporal distance between the event itself and its representation or interpretation. I also consider how the notebooks emphasize practices of looking and remembering, as the images they contain do not transparently represent the civil wars. The Atlas Group’s documents operate in accord with a set of logics that are distinct from the logics we usually associate with archival records; working with statements from Raad about the Archive and Avery Gordon’s theorization of haunting, I discuss how logics of trauma and of haunting manifest in its documents, how they inform the Atlas Group’s archival practice, and what kind of knowledge these logics, documents, and practices make possible.

Chapter Three considers two projects that seem, at first, to be very different: *Liebe Perla*, a documentary about a Holocaust survivor's search for evidence of her family's experience at the Auschwitz concentration camp, and *The Watermelon Woman*, a fictional documentary about an (also fictional) African American lesbian actress. Though *Liebe Perla* and *The Watermelon Woman* tell different stories, they both lead us to the archives and ask what happens when the records we expect to find – the records that would allow researchers to produce historical knowledge about an individual or group – aren't there, or aren't accessible in particular ways. They show us how archives matter to individuals in intimate and everyday terms, and posit that archival institutions and practices – which seem separate and distant from individual experience – have significant, deeply-felt effects. As part of their critical practice, both films make power relations that shape archives legible, by representing – and critiquing – archival practices, collections, and structures.

In Chapter Four, I argue that the practice of genetic genealogy – doing genealogical research through the use of genetic tests – represents a compelling turn in the relationship between “the body and the archive”. What are the implications of such a shift – when subjects from particular racial groups who have, in the past, been subject to legally-sanctioned, biologically-based systems of racial classification (or who are, at least, aware of how these systems had been used in the management, surveillance, and control of members of colonized or oppressed groups) desire to know themselves better on terms that seem, once again, to rely on essential, biological notions of racial difference? In response to this question by exploring what comes to matter for genealogists, archives and archivists, and others with a stake in genetic testing. I also



employ critiques of the logics of genetic ancestry testing to suggest reasons why archivists should critically engage the principle of provenance (and the way it's enacted).

In Chapter Five, I delineate a critical archival practice called archiving from the ground up. This practice responds to archival exclusions – specifically the historic exclusion and under-documentation of queer cultures in archival collections – by working with members of those cultures to document the present and create a record for the future. My conceptualization of archiving from the ground up arises from a set of conversations I have had with my friend and collaborator, Christa Orth, as I have worked with her and other archivists on two projects documenting drag king performance cultures. When performers have resisted participating in these projects, we've paid attention to why and how they have resisted – and have revised our approaches accordingly. Archiving from the ground up is a collaborative, participatory archiving practice. In archiving from the ground up, archivists *work with* members of the communities and cultures we hope to document, instead of creating projects or building collections on their behalf. We respond to moments of resistance from community participants, and use these moments of resistance to identify and interrogate assumptions that inhere within conventional archival approaches to documentation and appraisal. Telling the story of each project, and of the challenges we encountered, allows me to contextualize, introduce, and define our approach.

In the Conclusion to this project, I analyze a set of online archives documenting the experiences of survivors of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. These sites not only document the recent past to create a record for the future, but also use the archives to

counter popular perceptions of the experience, and to make arguments about how rebuilding should take place, and whose interests should be taken into account in the process.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ATLAS GROUP'S IMAGINARY ARCHIVE

In an essay on post-war Lebanese photography, Jalal Toufic renders the impact of the Lebanese Civil War in a set of figures: “In Lebanon, 100,000 people were killed in ten years of civil war compounded by war. Peacetime death rate per 1,000 pop.: 8. Lebanese population: 2,852,000. Number of natural deaths per year: 22,816. Excess period: the number of years it would take for 100,000 peacetime deaths to occur in Lebanon: 4.383” (73). These numbers quantify the war’s devastation, but describing and understanding the impact of the war years requires more than access to death tolls. To produce historical knowledge, individuals and groups must remember what happened – and decide how to represent these memories, or tell their stories. Artifacts and documents from specific historical moments support, complicate, or contradict narrative accounts; they are the material with which histories are articulated and consolidated. It would seem, then, that the project of articulating a history (or even histories) of the Lebanese civil war would be a straightforward project: that if one collected enough documentation and gathered enough testimony, one could create a better, truer representation of the experience. But this is not the case. According to critic Britta Schmitz and historian Sune Haugbølle, the project is particularly difficult because there is no public discussion of the

war, and the history isn't a strictly national one, as any "historical representation is inevitably intermeshed with current Syrian, Israeli, Saudi, or American interests – not to mention the complexities of the preceding thousands of years in Lebanon" (42). History textbooks end with Lebanese independence in 1943, and don't address controversial issues or themes. Schmitz's account notes that a recent attempt to produce a revised textbook failed because "no agreement could be reached on how to handle the civil war" (42). In the absence of a shared historical account (however flawed or partial), how is the war remembered? How is (shared) historical knowledge produced without public discourse? And how does a nation recollect and make sense of 15 years of civil war which, as a traumatic experience, complicates individual and collective efforts at remembering?

The Atlas Group, an entity created by artist Walid Raad, has built an archive that responds to the challenges that emerge from these questions. The aim of the Atlas Group is to research and document the "contemporary history of Lebanon," with a specific emphasis on events constituting "the Lebanese Civil Wars"<sup>4</sup>. The resulting archival collection is comprised of documents both fabricated and found, and includes notebooks, films, videotapes, and photographs. The Archive materializes in a variety of contexts: on the Atlas Group website, in publications of facsimilies of the files, in galleries where artifacts from the Archive are put on display, and in lecture-performances (in which Raad shows and tells stories about documents from the Archive). Documents in the Atlas

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<sup>4</sup> Accounts differ. Introducing the Atlas Group and its work for the website *control[space]: rhetorics of surveillance*, Raad writes: "The Atlas Group is an imaginary foundation established in 1976 in Beirut, to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon" (1). In 2002, Raad introduced the project during a lecture-performance, stating that "'The Atlas Group is an imaginary foundation based in New York and Beirut, established in 1999, whose purpose is to collect, produce, and archive documents of the Lebanese Civil Wars (1975-91)'" (Lepecki 61).

Group Archive are organized into three types of file: Type A files, which contain documents that the Atlas Group produced and that it attributes to “named imaginary individuals or organizations;” Type FD files, which contain documents that the Atlas Group produced and that it “attributes to anonymous individuals or organizations;” and Type AGP files, which contain documents that the Atlas Group produced and that it attributes to the Atlas Group ([theatlasgroup.org](http://theatlasgroup.org)).

We might ask why this documentary project takes the form of the archive – instead of simply existing as an art and performance project. What does the archive offer Raad and The Atlas Group, and what do they offer the archive? We understand archives as repositories of real, material evidence; as places without politics, supporting the articulation of objective truths and unified historical accounts. They house and organize records of historical, legal, or other evidentiary significance. These collections of records support distinctions between the past and present, the real and the imaginary. We expect archival records to function like snapshots, capturing and representing a past moment, validating the claim that *this* happened *then*, and reminding us who was there. The Atlas Group draws our attention to this set of archival and photographic logics – past/present, rational/affective, representative/opaque, and real/imaginary – as it disrupts them. Through its fabricated documents, donated by imaginary individuals, and contextualized with invented origin stories, the Archive challenges us to develop new ways to comprehend the past.

The Atlas Group’s documents tell stories and give feelings and experiences material form. Objective truth, accurate representation, and “what really happened” aren’t the point of the Group’s work. Instead, the Atlas Group is “trying to find those stories

that people tend to believe, [that] acquire their attention in a fundamental way, even if they have nothing to do with what really happened” (Raad qtd. in Wilson-Goldie). The Atlas Group Archive is both an object and an agent, encouraging its viewers to develop new strategies for encountering the archive, and for understanding documents as cases – of “inarticulate experiences, of symptoms and screen memories, of spiraling affects, of more than one story at a time, of the traffic in domains of experience that are anything but transparent and referential” (Gordon 25). The Group aims to foment public remembering and to facilitate moments of recognition around an unsettled past, an extended period of extreme “physical and psychic violence” (Raad “Documents”). In its approach to facilitating remembering, the Atlas Group performs a role similar to that of a “memory entrepreneur” (33). Elizabeth Jelin, who developed the concept of the memory entrepreneur (based on Becker’s notion of moral entrepreneurs), suggests that memory entrepreneurs “seek social recognition and political legitimacy of *one* (their own) interpretation or narrative of the past” (33-34). As they do this, they also “[maintain and promote] active and visible social and political attention to their enterprise” (34). It’s important to note that the Atlas Group produces a variety of narratives about the past, through its different donors and record creators; this is a key difference from its project and that of the memory entrepreneur. But the Group *does* publicize a specific set of memory practices, evocative objects, and historical narratives.

Knowing about the past on a variety of terms – feeling, remembering, and recognizing both the conscious and unconscious dimensions of life during the war years – demands a particular archive, one that requires its creators and viewers to renegotiate the terms through which they engage both this specific archive and its traditional

counterparts. The Atlas Group asks us to pay attention to how we produce (traditional) historic narratives, and suggests we try to access and comprehend the past through different means. The Archive emerges from a series of complex negotiations: between experiential, affective, and factual knowledge; between individual and public memory; figuring out where (and how) to look for evidence of feelings and events that resist representation.

## 2.1 Photographic logics

What does it mean to say that archives and photographs share a set of logics? And how do these logics matter when we consider the Atlas Group Archives? It helps to think about how photographs *work*. In his seminal study of photography, *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes sought to identify and reveal the essential characteristics of the photograph, and to explain how photographs function and why they are effective in specific ways. Barthes views, thinks, and writes about photographs using a critical perspective he establishes by making himself, the “I” of the text, an avatar for the generic viewer. His observations are both his own and those of an alter-ego to the viewing subject. The Barthes of *Camera Lucida* attributes the photograph’s particular effects to the referential and temporal qualities of the photographic image. Photographs purport to testify to and certify the existence of a real thing, the subject of the photograph. Though photographs may be framed, selected, and developed in ways that influence what we see, these manipulations don’t alter the camera’s ability to document an object, person, or scene that existed at the moment the photograph was taken:

I call ‘photographic referent’ not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. [...] In photography, I can never

deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography. What I intentionalize in a photograph (we are not yet speaking of film) is neither Art nor Communication, it is Reference, which is the founding order of Photography. (76)

Barthes terms this *noeme* of photography “that-has-been”; the fact that a photograph shows us something that has existed, that this thing has been seen is a truth we “[experience] with indifference, as a feature which goes without saying” (77). This indifference on the part of the viewer suggests that the ideology that supports the photographic logic (i.e., the photograph as representation of a *real thing*) is fully in effect, in place. The referential nature of the photograph also contributes to its evidentiary function. Describing his experience viewing Avedon’s photographic portrait of William Casby, an African American man who had been enslaved (or, as Barthes describes it, was “born a slave”), Barthes writes that:

The *noeme* here is intense; for the man I see here has been a slave: he certifies that slavery has existed, not so far from us; and he certifies this not by historical testimony but by a new, somehow experiential order of proof [...]. I remember keeping for a long time a photograph I had cut out of a magazine [...] which showed a slave market: the slavemaster, in a hat, standing; the slaves, in loincloths, sitting. I repeat: a photograph, not a drawing or engraving; for my horror and my fascination as a child came from this: that there was a *certainty* that such a thing had existed: not a question of exactitude, but of reality: the historian was no longer the mediator, slavery was given without mediation, the fact was established *without method*. (79-80)

In Barthes’ reading of Avedon’s photograph, the photograph is at once representative and evidential: in two dimensions, it re-presents the subject of the photograph (the referent) as he appeared in front of Avedon’s camera; the portrait and magazine photographs prove that this person, and the systems of enslavement into which he was born, existed. Barthes



suggests that when we look at a photograph, we become certain – we are interpellated as believing subjects – because we are confronted with evidence of a past that we cannot deny.

When we encounter archival photographs, we look at them with the expectation that they will provide proof of an historic reality (an event, object, or experience). We expect to gain factual knowledge through looking, and this expectation informs how we make sense of images that claim to document the past. Following this logic, when we view photographs in the Atlas Group Archive, we expect to know more about the history of the Lebanese civil wars, to become certain about what happened (because we're seeing evidence of something that has been). Documents in the Archive take familiar documentary forms: photographs, field notes, and videos. They *look like* evidence, like the material effects of witnessing, observing, and recording, but they don't *act like* traditional archival records. They depict objects and scenes, but don't enable the kind of certainty Barthes' avatar experienced looking at his photographs, which show people who were enslaved, and the places where trading occurred, and dead bodies in the street, and images of military occupation and abject debilitation. The scenes depicted in most of the Atlas Group's documents don't bear such a clear relation to the Lebanese civil wars (i.e., they don't show the direct effects of invasions, massacres, or bombings). Often, they direct our gaze elsewhere: toward the sun setting over a boardwalk, signs advertising doctors' offices, or photographs of horse races. The documents are products of an observational practice (someone had to look in order to take or find the photographs), they show us things that have existed. But because they aren't directly referential or representative (of the wars), and their evidential value is questionable (they are, after all,

the products of imaginary individuals collected by an imaginary foundation), they resist assimilation into a chronology, and cannot be used to fill lacunae in an existing account of the wars. They require a different kind of regard and yield an alternative mode of comprehension.

In the sections that follow, I examine two sets of files in the Archive. I suggest how the notebooks in the Fakhouri file draw our attention to the ways in which images (and the histories that are articulated with them) are framed, and to the temporal distance between the event itself and its representation or interpretation. I also consider how the notebooks emphasize practices of looking and remembering, as the images they contain do not indexically represent the civil wars. The Atlas Group's documents operate in accord with a set of logics that are distinct from the logics we usually associate with archival records; working with statements from Raad about the Archive and Avery Gordon's theorization of haunting, I discuss how logics of trauma and of haunting manifest in its documents, how they inform the Atlas Group's archival practice, and what kind of knowledge these logics, documents, and practices make possible.

## 2.2 Framing images and histories

Documents in the archive draw our attention to the ways in which photographs depicting historical events are (always, already) temporally distinct from the events themselves, as well as to the circumstances of photographic production (how an image is shot, what's included in the frame are the result of the photographer's choices, and may be informed by additional – cultural, historic, political – contextual factors)<sup>5</sup>. *Notebook*

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<sup>5</sup> The images in the archive take a variety forms. For example, photographs in *Notebook 38* are digital, photographs in *Notebook 57* are archival inkjet photographs, and photographs in *Notebook 72* are described simply as color photographs. Many viewers of the archive, especially those who encounter the images on

*Volume 72: Missing Lebanese Wars (Vol. 72)* (see Figure 2.1), by Dr. Fakhouri is one such document. According to the description that accompanies the Fakhouri File, “[until] his death in 1993, Dr. Fakhouri was the most renowned historian of Lebanon. At the time of his death and to everyone’s surprise, the historian bequeathed hundreds of documents to The Atlas Group for preservation and display<sup>6</sup>” (Raad). *Notebook Volume 72* is part of Dr. Fakhouri’s generous donation to the Archive, which included “226 notebooks, 24 photographs, and 2 films” (Raad). At present, three notebooks, two films, and one set of photographs have been made available to the public (via the Atlas Group website, exhibitions, and Raad’s lectures). *Vol. 72* documents the betting habits of a group of historians who would go to the races together every week. The Atlas Group provides this description of their outings:

It is a little-known fact that the major historians of the Lebanese wars were avid gamblers. It is said that they met every Sunday at the race track – Marxists and Islamists bet on races one through seven; Maronite nationalists and socialists on races eight through fifteen. Race after race, the historians stood behind the track photographer, whose job it was to image the winning horse as it crossed the finish line, to record the photo-finish. It is also said that they convinced (some say bribed) the photographer to snap only one picture as the winning horse arrived. Each historian wagered on precisely when – how many fractions of a second before or after the horse crossed the finish line – the photographer would expose his frame. (Raad 2004)

The photographs in the notebook illustrate the degree to which the photographer -- and his camera – missed capturing the exact moment the horse crossed the finish line. As such, they are records of the anticipation of the event, or the moment after it’s passed.

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the Atlas Group website or in a series of projected slides during one of Raad’s lectures, will access the images as digital facsimilies. I analyze the images in the archive as (non-digital) photographs, in deference to the circumstances of their (imagined) creation: all of the images in Fakhouri’s notebooks were “taken” between 1975 and 1991, when photographers would still be working in the medium of film.

<sup>6</sup> This donation is especially remarkable when we remember that the Atlas Group, itself, wasn’t established until 1999.

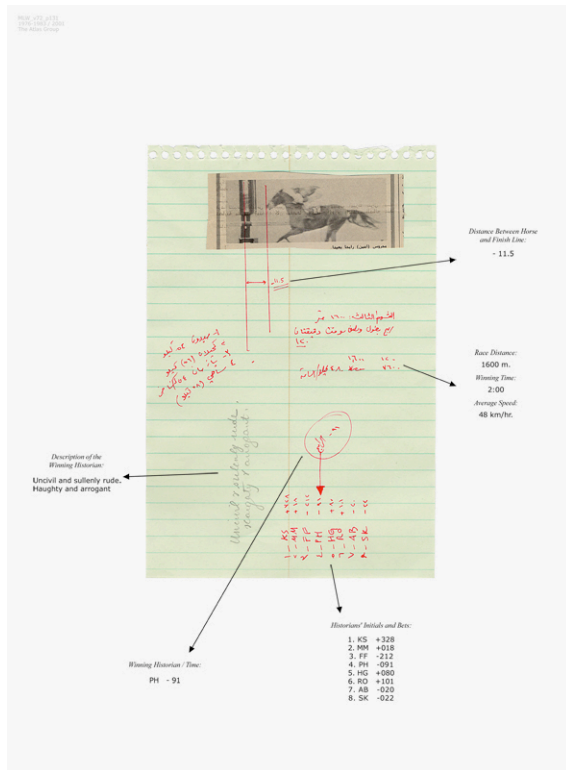


Figure 2.1 Page from Fakhouri *Notebook Volume 72*

The racetrack photographs are highly mediated, both before and after their inclusion in Dr. Fakhouri's notebooks. Because the historians encouraged the production of a single image, the Lebanese public only saw an approximate representation of the horse winning the race. The historians' betting practice recognizes that the human-operated camera cannot exactly document and represent the thing they're witnessing (history-in-the-making). The photographs in *Vol. 72* remind us of a chain of temporal disjunctions between the moment of the event and its representation: between the horse crossing the line and the photographer snapping the shot (and then exposing the film), between the picture being taken and developed from a negative, between printing in the darkroom and

publication in the paper, between their publication and incorporation in Dr. Fakhouri's record, and (finally, for those of us looking at the Archive) between their inclusion in the notebook and its exhibition. The track photographs can capture a moment when the winning horse was on the track, and following an expectation that the newspaper photograph can verify that an event occurred as reported, viewers believe *this horse* and *this rider* were on *that track* on *that day* (and won). When Raad draws attention to the chain of temporal disjunctions represented in the photographs, and to the circumstances of their production (the photographer may have been influenced by an historian's bribe, for example) he complicates this photographic logic. By choosing to use a kind of photograph that appears regularly, repeatedly, and depicts more or less the same thing (a horse, a rider, a racetrack finish line), he emphasizes the ordinariness of the imaging practice – these are not exceptional images. This combination – of clear manipulation and the ordinary, documentary photograph – effectively complicates our ability to look at the images without thinking about the circumstances of their production. We begin to see that “every photograph is the result of specific and, in every sense, significant distortions which render its relation to any prior reality deeply problematic and raise the question of the determining level of the material apparatus and of the social practices within which photography takes place” (Tagg 2). The notes that accompany each photograph in Dr. Fakhouri's notebook provide some clues about the social practices at the racetrack, and further encourage us to view the photographs in terms of social, political, and historic context.

During his trips to the track, Dr. Fakhouri would note the distance and time of the race, the time of the winning horse, the historians' bets, and the "time discrepancy predicted by the winning historian" (Raad). These notes are accompanied by photographs, clipped from the newspaper, on which the historians placed their bets, as well as paragraphs (written in English) describing the winning historian (e.g., "Avuncular rather than domineering, he was adept at the well-timed humorous aside to cut tension," or "What mattered to her most was to avoid anything that might be reminiscent of empathy.") (Raad). Dr. Fakhouri's descriptions imbue each historian with a distinctive personality, history, or perspective, and remind us that individual authors, with their specific perspectives, are responsible for writing the history of the Lebanese wars. These (imaginary) Lebanese war historians have interests and ideologies that inform the way they observe and interpret a given historic moment. The historian who "will not respect you if you speak literally," preferring parables to other forms of speech, will tell a story differently than the one who "always pointed the finger at assorted rogues, morons, neo-colonialists and an imagined conspiracy of Jewish currency traders who he says are bent on keeping his country poor and servile" (Raad). And because they're betting on separate races, the historians are not all watching the set of events that comprise the Sunday races with the same level of interest and attention; they have stakes in some races more than others. Together, the elements on each notebook page— the photographs, notes, and descriptions — suggest that even a clearly-defined event, which can be witnessed and clearly defined in time and space becomes complicated in the hands of historians.

### 2.3 Hysterical symptoms

Dr. Fakhouri's other notebooks, *Notebook Volume 38: Already Been in a Lake of Fire (Vol. 38)* (see Figure 2.2) and *Notebook Volume 57: No, Illness Is Neither Here Nor There<sup>7</sup> (Vol. 57)* (see Figure 2.3), aren't as rich in narrative or observational detail as *Vol. 72*. In both notebooks, people and place are excised from the photograph and the page; each notebook contains images cut out of original photographs. On pages in *Vol. 38*, the cut-out photographs of cars are accompanied by notes (details about the notes below). The photographs in *Vol. 57* depict signs advertising doctors' offices. Photographs are grouped and pasted onto the pages of *Vol. 57* by medical specialty – the pages are devoid of additional data or commentary.



Figure 2.2 Page from Fakhouri *Notebook Volume 38*

<sup>7</sup> In the file chart at the beginning of Raad's *The Truth Will Be Known When The Last Witness Is Dead: Documents from the Fakhouri File in the Atlas Group Archive*, the 57<sup>th</sup> notebook is alternately identified as *Volume 57: Livre d'Or*.



Figure 2.3 Page from Fakhouri *Notebook Volume 57*

Where *Vol. 72* provides viewers with contextualizing numbers and descriptions, and moves us back and forth through time (from the day the bets were placed, to the day the image was published in the paper, and then pasted into the notebook), it's unclear when the images in the other notebooks were taken, and over what period of time Dr. Fakhouri collected them. The photographs of cars in *Vol. 38* are annotated with dates, locations (the places the bombings occurred), casualties, perimeter of destruction, and other data. One could argue that the photos add a layer of data to what's already known about the bombings. But of what use is this data? The Atlas Group leaves significant aspects of Dr. Fakhouri's research and documentation practice – like motivation, rationale, or intent – open to imagination and interpretation. What would these pictures offer a historian trying to write about the wars?



Instead of providing us with information that could (significantly) determine the meaning of the notebooks, the Group presents them as products of one historian's practices of looking and comprehending. By framing the notebooks in this way, the Atlas Group asks us to attend to the *practices* articulated through the books (e.g., looking, documenting), and to understand these archival objects as the material traces of Dr. Fakhouri observing and documenting daily life in Beirut, during the wars. This focus on practice and action resonates with the Group's overarching approach to the wars. Raad describes his "working hypothesis" in the following terms: "'The Lebanese Civil War' is not a self-evident episode, an inert fact of nature. This war, or rather the wars, are not constituted by unified and coherent objects situated in the world. On the contrary, 'The Lebanese Civil War' is constituted by and through various actions, situations, people, and accounts" ("Documents"). Where traditional historical events "[tend] to concentrate on what really happened, as if it's out there in the world, and [tend] to be the history of conscious events," Raad posits that "[most] people's experience of these events...is predominantly unconscious and concentrates on facts, objects, experiences, and feelings that leave traces and should be collected" (Wilson-Goldie). Dr. Fakhouri's notebooks are such traces; they suggest how a person might experience and make sense of the War, both during the years of its occurrence and after, through recordings of facts, minutiae, and photographs of everyday objects. Objects depicted in the notebooks aren't compelling or spectacular; they are things likely overlooked (in both senses of the word: things seen often, repeatedly, as part of everyday life, and/or ignored because of their commonality or ubiquity). But the question remains: why these objects and not others?

When describing documents in the Atlas Group Archive<sup>8</sup>, Raad turns to Freud's understanding of trauma and its effects to explain why the Archive's documents don't necessarily "represent" the Civil Wars. He refers to documents in the archive as hysterical symptoms that "present imaginary events constructed out of innocent and everyday material. Like hysterical symptoms, the events depicted in these documents are not attached 'to actual memories of events, but to cultural phantasies erected on the basis of memories' ("Documents"). As such, the function of the documents – and the Archive itself – isn't to "[uncover] the truth of memories [...] as a meaning to be decoded," but to investigate "the meaning of the processes of remembering, and of what brings one to remember something incompletely and thus to remember something as forgotten" (Cowie 197). Instead of simply offering an archive, the Atlas Group offers a practice, as it encourages its viewers to explore "what can be imagined, what can be said, taken for granted, what can appear as rational or not, as thinkable and sayable about the civil wars" ("Documents").

Documents in the Archive do not (cannot) locate or represent the traumatic event (the origin of the trauma). Instead, they constitute a post-traumatic representational practice, one focused on how subjects come to know or register the events that comprise the "Lebanese civil wars". Unlike traditional archival photographs and records, they don't foster certainty. Instead, they create means to represent "not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully

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<sup>8</sup> In interviews and written texts – not in the performance-lectures he presents.

known” (Caruth qtd. in Cowie 191). Documents in the Atlas Group Archive are evocative objects, agents of personal and collective remembering. The history articulated with these documents is in process, as the Group models comprehension *through* documentation.

#### 2.4 Ghost stories

It may or may not seem like a stretch to suggest that the Atlas Group Archive is a conduit for ghosts (i.e., perhaps not that much of a stretch if you’ve already read this far, and are taking an imaginary archive seriously), but its approach to documenting and presenting the past – and to larger questions of how and what we can know about the history of the Lebanese civil wars – operates in accord with what we might consider a logic of haunting. In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon makes a case for haunting as an element of modern social life – an element that is imbricated in the “complicated workings of race, class, and gender,” apparent at the level of everyday objects, feelings, and practices as well as the level of the “monumental social architecture” in (or under) which we live (4). Haunting is disruptive and unsettling; it “describes how that which appears to not be there<sup>9</sup> is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities” (8). The case of a haunting is also the case of a ghost or an apparition, which gives form to “something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes” (8). Taking haunting seriously doesn’t yield the kind of “cold knowledge” favored in positivist, empirical approaches to knowing the world (8). Instead, Gordon suggests, if we allow ourselves to be haunted, we can account for “the tangle of the subjective and the objective, experience and belief, feeling and thought, the immediate and the general, the personal and the

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<sup>9</sup> This is like the traumatic past that has been forgotten.

social” in our analyses of the present (and, I would argue, the past) (200). Following Raymond Williams, Gordon describes haunting as a structure of feeling, a way of recognizing “experience which may lie beyond, or be uncovered or imperfectly covered by, the elsewhere recognizable systematic elements” (Williams qtd. in Gordon 201).

*Secrets in the Open Sea*, also known as the *Secrets File* (see Figure 2.4), contains 6 large photographic prints that were “found buried 32 meters under the rubble during the 1992 demolition of Beirut’s war-ravaged commercial districts” (“Type FD”). When they were excavated, the prints were six different shades of blue, but when the Atlas Group sent them off for technical analysis in laboratories in France and the United States, the laboratories “recovered small black and white latent images from the prints,” depicting groups of men and women. The Atlas Group was able to identify the individuals represented in the prints, all of whom had been found dead in the Mediterranean between 1975 and 1990 (“Type FD”). Documents in the *Secrets File* bear traces of a haunting, traces the Atlas Group follows: by looking through rubble for documents in the first place, by recognizing there might be more to the images than first appears, by gaining assistance bringing forth the latent images (it doesn’t seem coincidental that this happens elsewhere), and finally, by conducting a thorough investigation into the identities of all persons depicted in the images, and their deaths.

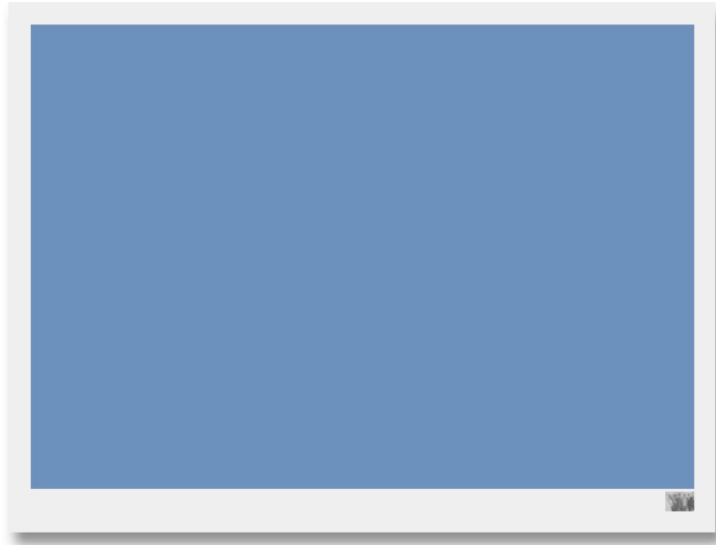


Figure 2.4 Image from the *Secrets File*

The *Secrets File* provides information about the identities and whereabouts of the dead as it raises questions about the ways in which knowledge about the circumstances of their – and perhaps other, similar – deaths has been buried (or withheld, or forgotten, or otherwise rendered inaccessible).

Writing about the uses and meanings of photographs in the context of the Dirty War in Argentina, Gordon observes that photographs of the disappeared “provide the evidence that a disappearance is real only when it is apparitional, only when the missing or the lost or the not there shines through, there where it might not have been expected, there in that moment of affective recognition that is distinctive to haunting [...] The photograph is involved in the ghostly matter of things and not surprisingly, since the wavering quality of haunting often hinges on what sign or image raises the ghost and what it means to our conscious visible attention” (102). When a character in the novel

sees a photograph showing the scene of a disappearance, the disappearance of his patient suddenly becomes real: the “encounter with the photograph is the inaugural moment of [the character’s] ability to see what he had been missing before” (105). Gordon posits that the photograph of a disappeared person – or one that signals this disappearance in some way – “registers the double edge of haunting: the singularity of the loss of my previously held securities and supports, the particular trouble the ghost is making for me; and the sociality of those abstract but compelling forces flashing now (and then) in the light of day, the organized trouble the system is experiencing” (105). The photographs in the *Secrets* file show us *what’s missing* in multiple ways: we see the latent image developed out of the blue field (what was missing from the surface of the photograph); we see the once-living bodies of the dead, captured in group portraits – evidence of their existence; and (if we believe the Atlas Group’s story) we wonder what/who else we’re not seeing. And we experience the haunting in terms of particular consequences (these individuals died, and their deaths should be accounted for) and social ones (what does it mean that so many would be found dead in the Mediterranean during the civil war years?).

Gordon reminds us that the photograph’s haunting mechanism is well-explained by Barthes in *Camera Lucida*, particularly in his discussion of the photograph’s animating force. The photograph’s ability to elicit certainty – a function we’ve already considered – is one example of its animating work: the photograph matters to the viewer in a new way, it elicits a response on the part of the viewer, and draws her in. The aspect of the viewer’s interaction with the photograph that most interests Gordon (and Barthes) is the *punctum*, the element in the photograph that “wounds” or “pricks” the viewer, the

thing in the photograph that captures our attention in a visceral way because it resonates with our sense of what the truth depicted by the photograph. The *punctum* breaks through the *studium*, the aspects of the photograph that we recognize and comprehend because they are culturally familiar or historically interesting (106). The *punctum*, the “off-center detail” that powerfully attracts us, calls our attention to what Barthes calls the “blind field” (57). The blind field is external to the image, a presence with a dynamics, in which our encounter with the *punctum* leads us to wonder about what’s not in the picture, or to want to have a deeper knowledge/encounter with the subjects in the photograph – to know more, and in a different way, than we can with the image in front of us. The elements in the photograph may be recognizable, arranged in a familiar way, depending on our cultural context (e.g., this is a family vacation snapshot, this is a street scene, this is a team photograph), but the *punctum* draws our attention to a mystery or meaning that exceeds the frame – it calls forth associations and connections for the viewing subject, who encounters the photograph with her own set of references and memories, producing an affective response. Recognizing the *punctum* in the photograph means catching “a glimpse of its endowments in the paradoxical experience of seeing what appears to be not there” (Gordon 107).

Whether or not we experience the prick of the *punctum* when looking at images in the Fakhouri notebooks, the Atlas Group seems intent on eliciting our interaction with its photographs. Looking at objects cut from the photographs that framed them (signs without buildings, cars without streets), we are left wondering what else might have been in the photographs before their excision.

In the *Thin Neck File*, we see photographs of bombs that have been propelled from cars during bombings – sometimes there are people in the images, sometimes not, but in all cases we’re aware that we’re seeing something other than the scene where the bombings have major effects. We’re looking over there, blocks away from the injuries, deaths, and destruction wrought by the bombs. Looking at image after image of engines, it’s clear that the engine photo is part of a genre; we can recognize elements that appear in photograph after photograph, and see similarities in composition: many photographs feature groups of people crowded around the expelled engine; often one or more people are examining the engine. But because we know that this scene is at a remove from the site of *what happened*, we wonder what’s beyond the frame, but cannot access that representation directly. The Atlas Group asks us to pay attention to this scene-at-a-remove instead, and to try to imagine why it matters, what it can tell us, what it means that a *studium* can emerge in the context of a history of repeated bombings, as photographers frame scenes-with-engines in similar ways, over and over again.

## 2.5 Transformative recognition

Gordon posits that “following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located” (22). Engaging the Atlas Group Archive means taking its documents/hysterical symptoms seriously, attending not so much to where they came from as to where they direct our attention, and where and how they ask us to look. Gordon describes the kind of knowing that follows ghostly encounters as “transformative recognition.” Such a way of knowing seems well-suited to



the project of an archive that seeks not to produce a shared, authoritative, or objective historical record, but to create a space for recognizing what cannot be remembered or easily documented.

Gordon observes that a ghost is more than a “dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). The ghosts that haunt the Atlas Group Archive – including Dr. Fakhouri, the historians at the racetrack, and the creators and donors of the Archive’s other files – have left material traces: documents and files. The Atlas Group Archive is a site where history and subjectivity are imbricated – we cannot access the history of the civil wars without following the ghosts in the files. The Atlas Group’s archival practice is *articulated with* the feelings and beliefs, imaginary figures and ghosts. Its records depict recognizable objects from everyday life, scenes of the aftermath of spectacular violence (the car bomb projected away from the bomb site), and practices of looking and betting and interpreting both the present and the past. Documents in the archive meet the particular demands of a social and political context in which public remembering hasn’t happened, in which conflicting accounts circulate, but the information they contain – their competing numbers – don’t facilitate the production of a shared history (not even one riddled with contradictions).

Logics of trauma and haunting become archival logics in the context of the Atlas Group Archive. They offer ways of recognizing what can be known about the Lebanese civil wars beyond factual, event-focused accounts, and point to what hasn’t been or cannot be remembered about that period. The Atlas Group’s practice is informed by these logics, as well as by the logics that traditionally underpin archival practice. As it produces

archival documents that aren't directly and transparently representative, referential, or evidential, the Atlas Group reminds us that this is the way we usually perceive historic records, and suggests that we might develop ways of knowing about the past that do not require certainty (as an ultimate goal, if not something actually-achieved). The Atlas Group's practices will not, and should not, supplant traditional archival approaches – they emerge from a specific context and respond to a particular set of problems. I suggest, though, that the Group's practices are worth considering because they remind us of what we take for granted about archives and the neutrality of the archival record. They create a space of possibility for imagining different ways of representing and documenting the past, and for addressing the lingering effects of the past in the present.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REPRESENTING ARCHIVES: *LIEBE PERLA AND THE WATERMELON WOMAN*

This chapter takes up two of the dissertation's major concerns: How do we produce knowledge about the past in the absence of material evidence? And how do responses to this problem constitute – or at least inform – a critical archival practice? My response considers two projects that seem, at first, to be very different: *Liebe Perla*, a documentary about a Holocaust survivor's search for evidence of her family's experience at the Auschwitz concentration camp, and *The Watermelon Woman*, a fictional documentary about an (also fictional) African American lesbian actress. Though *Liebe Perla* and *The Watermelon Woman* tell different stories, they both lead us to the archives and ask what happens when the records we expect to find – the records that would allow researchers to produce historical knowledge about an individual or group – aren't there. They show us how archives matter to individuals in intimate and everyday terms, and posit that archival institutions and practices – which seem separate and distant from individual experience – have significant, deeply-felt effects. That archives (or their absence) can make us feel certain things matters, because these feelings motivate

individuals to create documentation where there is none, to do something with nothing. These documentation projects should matter to archivists because they draw attention to the effects of archival absences and exclusions. They make the power relations that shape archives legible, by representing – and critiquing – archival practices, collections, and structures. In the process, the films model and enact a critical archival practice, one that informs the larger project of this dissertation.

### 3.1 Analyzing power relations in archives

The project of identifying power relations in archives may seem irrelevant or misguided to many archivists, because the concept of power – and its relationship to archival practice – is largely absent from the professional literature. This absence isn't surprising, given the belief (held by those within the profession and without) that the archivist is an “objective, neutral, passive (if not impotent, then self-restrained) keeper of truth” (Schwartz and Cook 5). Canadian archivists Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook consider this understanding of the archivist – as an objective, impartial, and passive agent – pervasive enough to be the “central professional myth of the past century” (5). Schwartz and Cook find the unquestioned perpetuation of this myth troubling because of its widespread consequences. Letting the archival myth of objectivity and neutrality go unchallenged:

sanctions the already strong predilection of archives and archivists to document primarily mainstream culture and powerful records creators. It further privileges the official narratives of the state over the private stories of individuals. Its rules of evidence and authenticity favor textual documents, from which such rules were derived, at the expense of other ways of experiencing the present, and thus of viewing the past. Its [...] positivist and ‘scientific’ values inhibit archivists adopting multiple and ambient ways of seeing and knowing. An original order is thus sought or imposed, rather than allowing for several orders or even disorders to flourish among records in archives” (18)

Archivists do their work – naming, classifying, organizing, and providing access to records – within systems and frameworks for archival practice that have become naturalized (and imbued with an aura of positivist, scientific practice) over time. If we want to understand how archival practice involves the exercise of power, we need to investigate how these frameworks and systems emerge in specific places and times, to serve the information needs (and interests) of particular groups, and to pay attention to their effects. Instead of conducting archival business as usual – and perpetuating historic inequalities – archivists could take a reflexive approach to their work, examining both archival practices and the theories that inform them, and looking for ways in which archives and archivists exert influence over the form and content of the historic record. Reiterating the myth of objectivity and neutrality may become more difficult for archivists as scholars and activists outside the profession draw attention to the absence or under-documentation of marginalized groups in the archives. Recent scholarship in history and anthropology has taken archives and archival practices as objects of study in their own right<sup>10</sup>, and has investigated the constitutive role archives have played in colonial governance. In light of these developments – and considering that their own archives and practices may be subject to similar analyses – archivists would be wise to consider how their own practices (in the past and in the present) have shaped the historic record.

One doesn't have to look hard to find ways in which power is exercised by archivists, and through records and archives. By collecting and maintaining administrative, legal, and fiscal records, archives support the accountability of

governments, institutions, and corporations. Archives house records that can affirm or contradict personal and collective memories, and provide material (evidence) for the articulation of historic narratives.

Even before they're collected, records are instruments in power relations; they regulate "transactions, events, people, and societies through the legal, symbolic, structural, and operational power of recorded communication" (13). The ability to create records depends on a number of social, educational, and economic factors, including access to the materials and means to produce documents, and access to the education and training required to maintain them (especially in the age of electronic and digital document creation) (13). Because of discrepancies in access to materials, means, and education/training, some individuals and groups are better-equipped to produce and maintain records than others, leading to a situation in which "certain voices [...] will be heard loudly and some not at all; [...] and] certain views and ideas about society will in turn be privileged and others marginalized" (14). In turn, records that make it into the archive have the ability to influence "the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, [...] and] how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies" (Schwartz and Cook 2).

Archivists exercise power through the "active management of records before they come to archives, their appraisal and selection as archives, and afterwards their constantly evolving description, preservation and use" (2). When archivists make choices about what to collect and preserve and what to destroy, they "fundamentally influence the composition and character of archival holdings and, thus, of societal memory" (3). When

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example: Burton, Schultz, Smith, Steedman, and Stoler (in the List of References).

a record becomes part of an archival collection (i.e., gains a new context *as archival*), it is granted a status and importance that other records and documents don't possess –archival records are deemed worthy of collection and preservation, while most other records are not. Archivists make choices about how to describe records (i.e., what terminology and subject headings to apply to a given collection), which in turn affects the how researchers can or cannot retrieve records when they search online catalogs and finding aids.

Thinking about archives as socially-embedded and socially-constructed also means that we pay attention to the context in which records are created and used. In addition to thinking about the content of a record, for example, we can also consider “the needs and desires of its creator, the purpose(s) for its creation, the audience(s) viewing the record,” and “the broader legal, technical, organizational, social, and cultural-intellectual contexts in which the creator and audience operated and in which the document is made meaningful” (3-4). The same record may have different meanings, and may be used for different purposes, during its lifetime. The records at the center of *Liebe Perla*, for example, were instrumental in studies of and experiments on little people, and were valuable documents for Nazi scientists and doctors (so weren't discarded or destroyed by their creators). Other records, like a propaganda films that researcher Hannelore screens in the Berlin Federal Film Archive, were produced in the service of Nazi campaigns to build popular support for eugenic euthanasia. As Hannelore encounters these films, she comments not only on their original purpose, but also on their meaning in relation to contemporary arguments around impairment and disability (more on this later in the chapter). In its treatment of records, *Liebe Perla* suggests that the context in which records are produced, their original purpose, and how they are used over

time, matter just as much as their content. Instead of just integrating such archival footage in her documentary (as evidence, without comment), director Shahar Rozen frames the footage in multiple ways: showing us the archive where it is located, showing Hannelore and her assistants working with the film, and incorporating Hannelore's critical commentary on the material.

In addition to showing individual subjects accessing and using specific records, the films under consideration in this chapter move between traditional and unconventional and counter archives. By putting these spaces, practices, and encounters on screen, *The Waltermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* help us recognize power relations in archives – and their effects on specific subjects. Once recognized, power relations “can be questioned, made accountable, and opened to transparent dialogue and enriched understanding” (Schwartz and Cook 2). The films, then, enable a critical, reflexive approach to archival practice, one that disrupts the perpetuation of the myth of archival neutrality and objectivity.

It's important to note that in our discussion, “power” isn't synonymous with dominance, oppression, or marginalization. Rather, the present analysis of “power and archives” focuses on relations of power. Cultural theorist and historian Michel Foucault posits that “a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that 'the other' (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up” (“The Subject and Power” 20). Studying power relations in archives – and their effects on particular subjects



– requires that we consider actions and responses on the part of the institution and the individual, and recognize that individuals may resist institutional practices, or comply with them, or have other, complicated responses to them. Following Foucault’s conceptualization, Schwartz and Cook note that archives “have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They can both reflect and constitute power relations” (13). In other words, archives are shaped by their social context but may also play a role in creating, maintaining, resisting, or reforming social or political orders.

Archives that develop in conversation with – or resistance to – traditional archives may provide counternarratives to the dominant historic record. Like the narratives they collect and preserve, counter archives can “focus on issues of concern for disenfranchised and under-represented communities of Native Americans, Chicana/o, Asian American, and African Americans to construct alternative realities to those constructed through social institutions of dominant culture<sup>11</sup>” (Dunbar 114). Counter-archives can draw attention to the limits of the archival record housed in dominant cultural institutions by collecting materials that represent experiences and populations not documented elsewhere. These archives articulate “alternative realities,” in relation to a dominant culture, and by doing so, recognize that “multiple realities or truths [...] share the same social or philosophical space” (115). The multiple realities or truths offered by different archives may contradict each other, but in doing so, they open events, experiences, and histories to interpretation and investigation that wouldn’t be possible otherwise.

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<sup>11</sup> Though Dunbar’s focus is on counterarchives organized around racial or ethnic communities, there are also counterarchives organized around sexuality and sexual identity, gender identity, and disability (to name just a few additional groups that have created counterarchives).

In their work on lesbian public cultural archives and AIDS video archives, respectively, Ann Cvetkovich and Alexandra Juhasz argue that such counterarchives are instrumental for remembering and preserving gay and lesbian histories and for catalyzing queer activism (in political, documentary, and other forms) in the present. Though they may be unconventional and idiosyncratic, gay and lesbian archives serve a vital function for their constituents, as they “address the traumatic loss of history that has accompanied sexual life and the formation of sexual publics, and they assert the role of memory and affect in compensating for institutional neglect” (110). Cvetkovich terms the public cultural archive that does this work an “archive of feelings,” an archive capable of documenting (or at least recognizing and valuing) experiences of “intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism” She argues that traditional archives cannot meet the demands of a lesbian and gay historical record, which needs to recognize the affective dimensions of lesbian and gay life (110).

The records in the counterarchives Cvetkovich describes are primarily ephemera (such as “occasional publications and paper documents, material objects, or items that fall into the miscellaneous category when catalogued”), “pornographic books, short-run journals, and forms of mass culture that are objects of camp reception,” and records of personal life – diaries, letters, photographs – which have added significance given the under-documentation of gay and lesbian lives in the extant historic record (111). While traditional archives select materials based on professionally- and/or institutionally-defined criteria (e.g., uniqueness, ability to document an important function, historical or legal value, or research interest), gay and lesbian archives “propose that affects – associated with nostalgia, personal memory, fantasy, and trauma—make a document

significant” (112). The archive of feelings is “both material and immaterial,” documenting affective experience and recognizing that some experiences “[resist] documentation because sex and feelings are too personal or too ephemeral to leave records” (112). The kinds and forms of documentation (or memory) that characterize the archive of feelings don’t simply reside in institutional spaces or even in the physical space of grassroots archives, but also in “personal and intimate spaces” and “cultural genres” (112). The concept of the archive of feelings may be difficult to think with in terms of archival practice (i.e., what are archivists to do with this concept?). But I maintain we can use this concept to recognize the myriad sites and forms unconventional archives can take. If we, following Harris and others, want to think about how archives can relate to other places and practices in which people are enacting ways of remembering, documenting, and archiving, then we may think through the idea of the archive of feelings to help us find and identify those other places and practices<sup>12</sup>. My analysis of *Liebe Perla* and *The Watermelon Woman* draws attention to how these other places and practices enrich – and sometimes contradict – the histories that can be articulated with conventional archives.

### 3.2 Film synopses

*The Watermelon Woman* (1996) was directed by Cheryl Dunye, who plays the film’s central character, Cheryl. Cheryl (the character) is a young filmmaker who wants to establish a sense of history and precedence for her work – and for her personal experience – as a black lesbian artist. She begins to look for this history on film, by watching movies she’s borrowed from the video store where she works. Cheryl becomes

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<sup>12</sup> I return to this possibility in Chapter Four.

fascinated by a black actress from the 1920s – 1940s, who is credited in old Hollywood films as “the Watermelon Woman”. Cheryl learns that “The Watermelon Woman” was Fae Richards, a black, lesbian actress who (like Cheryl) lived in Philadelphia. Cheryl embarks on a quest to learn as much as she can about Richards and document her search for a film of her own (creating a film-within-a-film for *The Watermelon Woman*’s viewers). As she gleans more information about Richards’ life, Cheryl finds multiple, significant points of identification with her, and her research (which started as a project motivated by intellectual and artistic curiosity) provides a means for her to make sense of her own desires, relationships, and aspirations. Cheryl’s short documentary is incorporated in *The Watermelon Woman*, first as rough footage, later as a short film at the end of the movie. After we see Cheryl’s short, before the film’s final credits roll, Dunye reveals her historic invention (or, more appropriately, her *intervention*) in two sentences: “Sometimes you have to create your own history. The Watermelon Woman is a fiction.” Through her dramatization of Cheryl’s research process, and in the film project itself, Dunye draws attention to the absence of women like Richards (African American lesbians) from the historic record.

*Liebe Perla*, directed by Shahar Rozen, focuses on the relationship between two women of short stature (or little people): Hannelore Witkofski, a German oral historian, and Perla Ovici, a Holocaust survivor. Perla and her siblings performed as part of a musical troupe, a ‘Lilliput Troupe,’ in Hungary before World War Two. During the War, she and her siblings (seven sisters and three brothers) were imprisoned at Auschwitz extermination camp. During their time there, they were subjected to experimentation and

study by Josef Mengele. Perla survived and migrated to Israel; she settled in Haifa. When the documentary was made, she was the last surviving member of her immediate family; her other siblings had been buried in Haifa.

The relationship between Hannelore and Perla is one subject of the documentary, but the film has other concerns. Its narrative centers on Hannelore's attempts to locate and obtain a reel of film for Perla. The film was made at Auschwitz to document Dr. Mengele's exhibition of Perla's family, and while Perla clearly remembers the moment of being filmed, this memory is not enough – she wants possession of the artifact. In the context of her own research project, Hannelore visits several state archives, and during these visits she searches for Perla's film. Rozen shows Hannelore making these visits, and we watch as she screens archival footage and reviews files with the assistance of a research aide. Because she has a visual impairment, Hannelore cannot fully see the archival materials that inform her work. In the process of searching for this missing object, Hannelore and her assistant locate other documentation, which is then included in the search narrative, and re-presented in the film (we'll return to the implications of this representation in my analysis of the film). As she reports on her search, Hannelore writes to Perla – and through voice-overs reading her letters, speaks to us – about continuities between Nazi eugenics and contemporary European attitudes toward people with disabilities, and the role archival films play in supporting a then-vs.-now mentality about eugenic thought and practice. The search provides a venue for unsettling assumptions about the distance between past and present, and allows archival material to become public through its inclusion in the narrative.

Ultimately, Hannelore is unsuccessful in her attempts to locate Perla's film. Neither Rozen nor the women treat this outcome as a tragic end; even though the most desirable outcome, according to Perla and Hannelore, would be the destruction of the film, there's some comfort in knowing that it's not in any of the archives where one would expect it to be (which decreases the possibility of its unexpected public appearance).

Though they are particular – like *Liebe Perla* – or fictional – like *The Watermelon Woman* – these projects show us how we might respond to the problem of archival absence. Dunye and Rozen show us that even when we are left with nothing (when the material evidence isn't there), we can still produce knowledge about the past. These projects don't tell their stories *despite* the archives – despite the lack of evidence in the archives, despite the destruction of records, despite the systemic oppressions and power relations that have shaped archival collections, and thus, the historic record. *The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* represent archives within the documentary frame; their protagonists' archival research trips serve as key points in each film's narrative arc. In their depictions of these visits, the filmmakers make explicit and implicit critiques of the archives. Their critiques aren't wholly or necessarily negative, however. The filmmakers' representation of archival research demonstrates their investment in working with the existing historical record to create new historical narratives – they don't give up on the promise or significance of archives, even when they can't draw from archival collections to support the stories they tell.

*Liebe Perla* and *The Watermelon Woman* show us how what's not there can be disturbing enough to motivate filmmakers to document these absences and exclusions. They make the specific, particular, and everyday effects of archival systems and practices visible. In the process, they lead us to think about archives behind-the-scenes, about the practices that structure *what* and *how* we know about what's in specific archives, and what and how we know about the past.

*The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* tell distinct stories, and employ specific strategies in their versions of critical archival practice. Critical archival practice recognizes how power relations manifest in different ways, in different archives, practices, and historic, social, and political contexts. Critical archival practice also involves learning from the particulars – looking for ways in which the strategies used in specific situations are applicable in others. Following this approach, Dunye's and Rozen's projects are not only relevant as models for other projects and archives documenting American black lesbian, Holocaust, or disability history, but can be adapted for other projects. By paying attention to the problems and practices they both address, we can locate some common concerns for a critical archival practice.

### 3.3 Making absence present

The subjects in *Liebe Perla* and *The Watermelon Woman* face the challenge of researching under- or un-documented subjects, subjects without proper names, identified in records (if at all) by number or stage name, or by association with another, more prominent figure. As they conduct their research, Hannelore and Cheryl discover a lack of information and evidence in the archives that could otherwise make the subjects of their research (i.e., members of marginalized groups, or survivors of cultural trauma or

state violence) legible. Their struggles to locate evidence in conventional archives meet frustrating and disappointing ends: Cheryl finds a handful of publicity photographs in the disorganized lesbian community archive she visits, but is not allowed to reproduce or capture the images on film for her documentary (though she does so secretly, out of the archivist's sight), and Hannelore and her assistants visit several state archives in Germany, but are unable to locate the film reel that documents Perla's family in Auschwitz. This limit, this absence of documentation, frustrates the women, who have experienced the ways in which having an un-documented past affects personal and collective perceptions of the present moment – whether for validating memories and stories, creating an historical precedent or genealogy, or for some other purpose. Faced with the absence of historical records, the women develop strategies to negotiate relationships with histories that are both present (in memory and (structures of) feeling) and absent (from the archival record).

### 3.3.1 “I hoped [...] it would crumble into dust”

The most pressing absence in *Liebe Perla* is the missing film Mengele made of Perla's family. For Perla, the film is a document of past mistreatment, though she and Hannelore disagree over the extent of Mengele's harm: in both a conversation with and a letter to Hannelore, Perla communicates her belief that Mengele's interest allowed her and her siblings to continue living. She recalls that, when Mengele made the film of her and her siblings, they were forced to stand “like soldiers,” “stark naked” for five hours. Perla is convinced the missing film footage resides in an archive, and as long as it's unaccounted for, it presents a threat to Perla's privacy and dignity – it could resurface or become public, or be used in ways she cannot control. At the start of the film, she tells



Hannelore “I want you to try to find that film in the SS infirmary where it was made or Auschwitz – it has to be in some archive if Mengele didn’t take it”. By organizing the documentary around the search for the film, Rozen shows us particular effects of archival absences on her subjects. While Perla wants to locate the film, Hannelore, the historian, wishes otherwise. In a letter to Perla, presented near the end of the documentary, Hannelore reports that her team has not found the film:

Often I hoped that if I do find it, as soon as I open the box it would crumble into dust. I’m afraid that someone in some archive or other or in some attic would find and show it. You don’t need the film to prove what you went through. The film belongs to you and you alone.

In *Liebe Perla*, archives are a site of promise (they may potentially hold the film or some other useful records) and frustration (when they don’t). As Hannelore’s and Perla’s comments suggest, archives can “provoke irresolvable longings and anxieties about a lost documentary past, not only among historians” (Bear 356) – these feelings are strong enough to justify the time, energy, emotional investments, and resources Hannelore, Perla and Rozen devote to searching for the film, and documenting the process.

Through Hannelore, we get a sense of the difficulties and frustrations researchers encounter when trying to conduct research on populations targeted by the Nazi regime. Her frustrations are likely shared by researchers who are trying to research other groups of subjects who lived and died under violent, genocidal, or oppressive regimes<sup>13</sup>. Rozen’s film suggests that existing records are limited in their ability to inform us about the subjectivity, experiences, or perspectives of little people who were Holocaust victims and survivors. In the archives, these victims and survivors are represented by, or in relation

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<sup>13</sup> See the introduction to Hartmann’s *Scenes of Subjection* for a helpful discussion of trying to use archival sources to study the history of slavery in the United States.

to, those who had power over them, who treated them as objects of investigation and experimental test subjects, but not as full persons. Hannelore gleans information about them through the records available to her: medical files from Auschwitz, doctors' research files from the Max Planck Institute and the Verschuer Institute of Medical History, transcripts of Ludvig Feld and Martina Puzina's testimonies at Mengele's trial, and grainy film footage (which she has trouble seeing, as well). In the offices of the Chronos Production Company, the resident expert (it's unclear if he's an archivist or an historian) informs Hannelore that no films were found of Auschwitz, nor any films about medical experiments that may have been made under Mengele. The only relevant, camp-related film he can show her is a Russian film of survivors being liberated from Auschwitz, which includes footage of Ludvig Feld (Moritz identifies him in the crowd, and compares his image on film with a photograph of Feld from Israel). At this point in the film, it's clear that the chances of finding Perla's film are slim; her account of the experience provides the only proof of its existence.

In light of the archival absences around Perla's and other's treatment in the camps, Hannelore and Rozen use the documentary to draw attention to the absences and limits of the archives, and to create an historic record in the present. Working from existing records, Hannelore pursues oral history interviews with survivors and those involved in their treatment. Through names in the medical files from Auschwitz, she locates a member of Mengele's staff, Wilhelm Brasse. The documentary shows Hannelore interviewing Brasse, who speaks about the photographs he took: who he photographed, the circumstances in which the photographs were taken, and what Mengele's subjects had to do (undress in front of each other, men and women together,

and pose for photographs naked). The film doesn't show the photographs, nor Hannelore finding them. Instead, Brasse's account becomes the evidence that matters. By conducting such oral history interviews, Hannelore adds multiple perspectives to the existing record, and changes the nature of what can be known about the Holocaust experiences of people of small stature (and those who interacted with them). The historic record created through her work (and through the documentary itself) allows researchers to do more than "read through" institutional, medical, Nazi, or state records.

### 3.3.2 "Sometimes you have to create your own history"

*The Watermelon Woman* responds to the problem of archival absence with an imaginative practice that resonates with *The Atlas Group's*, as Dunye invents a lineage and an historic context for contemporary African American lesbian cultural production. In her introduction to an interview with Dunye, media studies scholar, film producer, and videographer Alexandra Juhasz (who is also Dunye's partner) notes that Dunye describes her style of film- and videomaking as "the *Dunyementary*, which is a hybrid of narrative, documentary, comedy, and autobiography" (291). The *Dunyementary* form allows its creator to authorize her own work and the work of her central character, Cheryl. Juhasz offers this description of the relationship between Cheryl and Dunye:

The 'Cheryl' character, played by Dunye, wants to be a filmmaker but feels she needs to know about the lives of her foremothers before she can fully claim this identity and voice for herself. Because the lives of black women in film, let alone black lesbians, were never considered worthy of the historical record – so were never documented – the Cheryl character has a hard time finding authorities who will do their job and authorize the existence of black lesbians from the past. This is when Dunye (the filmmaker) decides to entirely fabricate the life of a woman who did not but could have existed, Fae "the Watermelon Woman" Richards [...]

(291)

Instead of accepting the limits of the historical record, Dunye draws our attention to the exclusion of black women in film from dominant accounts of film history. Her depiction of Cheryl and Fae's stories remind us of the significant difference between being visible on film (or involved in movie/video production) and being recognized as a "woman in film." Cheryl works as a wedding-videographer-for-hire, which means that weekend after weekend, she creates records of a highly- and commonly-documented life event: the wedding ceremonies of the couples who hire her and her assistant. This work provides her with money and additional expertise, but it doesn't help her articulate an identity – or receive recognition from others of her status – as an African American filmmaker<sup>14</sup>. For that, she needs to research and tell Fae's story, meet members of Fae's community, and connect their experiences with hers.

As an actress in Hollywood and race movies, Fae was cast in movies that are popular enough to wind up on the shelves of the video store where Cheryl works. But the context of her visibility reminds us of the constraints African American actresses have experienced throughout film history – Fae is on-screen, but as a maid or servant. Her performances aren't credited to Fae Richards but to "the Watermelon Woman;" in addition to denying her identity, the absence of Fae's name from the credits makes it difficult for Cheryl to find her in books and archives (more on this later).

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<sup>14</sup> Given that *The Watermelon Woman* was Dunye's first feature film, and had limited theatrical distribution, we might imagine that telling Fae and Cheryl's stories also provided Dunye with a kind of recognition she hadn't received from her short videos and films. In her interview with Juhasz, Dunye theorized that while her work is well-received by "the academy," or "all the feminist and all the queer theorists, and all the performance theorists, and all the theorist theorists" (301), she needed to make a feature film in order to attract black audiences, who would offer a different kind of recognition: "It takes a lot for somebody of my mother's generation, or from a working-class or middle-class black background, it takes a lot for them to go to see work at some avant-garde house. I want to see how my issues play out in the black context. That's one reason why I'm working on a feature, so I can see how my story affects this black audience" (298).

The material Cheryl encounters as she investigates the life of Fae Richards – the records in the lesbian community archive, posters in the collection of an independent film historian, and the souvenirs, programs and snapshots collected by Fae’s fans and relations – was created specifically for the film. The film’s fabricated archival materials include snapshots of (a woman posing as) Fae Richards with friends, snapshots of her with Martha Page (a white director who was also Fae’s girlfriend), glamorous publicity photographs from her studio, photographs documenting her vocal performances at lesbian clubs in Philadelphia, and photos taken by her longtime partner, June Walker. This archive was created by Zoe Leonard for Dunye’s project, but the “Fae Richards Photo Archive” also exists as a stand-alone work, comprised of 78 black and white photographs, four color photographs, and a notebook.

The archival collection created for *The Watermelon Woman* serves an evidential purpose in the film, as it’s used to re-construct Richards’ past, but its status outside of the film (as fictional documentation) means it can’t function as evidence in a traditional way. Like the film that provides the context for its creation, the collection documents a past that Dunye and Leonard know *is there*, but for which there is no record. As with the records in Atlas Group Archive, the material that constitutes *The Watermelon Woman* isn’t intended to tell us exactly what happened. Instead, it authorizes and inspires future projects – its existence creates the precedent Dunye required for her own work.

*The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* critically engage the problem of absence – of an historic record that doesn’t provide them with the kinds or forms of evidence their subjects desire. *Liebe Perla*, especially, attends to the context in which specific archival records were created, the purpose for which they were created, and the

ways in which they have been used. Both films remind us that we can (and should) explore the power relations that informed or determined their content: we may only be able to know certain marginalized, oppressed, or in/visible subjects as they are depicted by others (whether in medical files or in a racially-determined role in a Hollywood film). The films also demonstrate that records are significant in ways that archivists and historians cannot anticipate: Perla's and Hannelore's anxiety about the film's becoming-public, and Cheryl's identification with/authorization through records, exemplify kinds of emotional investments subjects may have in specific documents and objects.

Like Raad and the Atlas Group, the directors of *The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* develop ways to see – and show us – *what's not there*, and remind us why this absence matters. The fact that the films exist at all suggests that the filmmakers (and their collaborators) share “longings and anxieties about a lost documentary past” that are strong enough to motivate the completion, funding and public circulation of their films. But these sentiments aren't prohibitive; instead, the filmmakers develop strategies for responding to archival absences and limits – and transforming the existing record – that others might employ or adapt for their purposes.

### 3.4 Negotiating the archives

As *The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* direct our attention to the ways in which power relations shape the historic record, they also show us how archives, themselves, are sites in which archivists and researchers negotiate power relations. By representing the difficulties their subjects encounter while trying to access different

archives, the films address issues of access which manifest in a variety of ways: in material terms (i.e., the characteristics of records and archival spaces), in classificatory practices, and in security protocols.

#### 3.4.1 Seeing and knowing in the archive

As these films make archival spaces visible, they also highlight archives as highly *visual* spaces. The connection between being able to see and being able to know is particularly prominent in *Liebe Perla*. Watching Hannelore visit different archives, we recognize how important vision is in one's ability to work with records and get around archival spaces. Impairments to Hannelore's vision make her viewing of archival materials difficult, so her access to archival material is mediated through her research assistants, Moritz and Jan (we see much more of Moritz in the film than Jan). Moritz screens films with Hannelore, providing oral descriptions to accompany the footage – and helping to identify Ludvig Feld in the Russian liberation film. He also reads Feld's and Puzina's testimonies aloud (to her, and to us viewers – who also can't read the documents), and finds Perla's medical file on microfilm. Because Hannelore requires accommodation in order to access and use the archives, we recognize her as the archive's unexpected subject; she challenges the way in which archives are often used (by the independent scholar, working alone), and shows us that users need to be able to access archival records through a variety of means. It's also worth noting that her contribution to the historic record takes the form of oral history interviews – which (once transcribed and/or captioned) can be accessed in audio and visual form.

### 3.4.2 Surveillance

When they show their subjects using archives, *The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* remind us that archives are spaces in which access is regulated, and researchers are subject to surveillance by archivists and other users. Throughout *Liebe Perla*, when Hannelore and her assistant visit the archives (and at one point, when Perla has made a trip to Germany to accompany them), they are subject not only to the gaze of the archivist – whose surveillance we understand as necessary to the security of the archives – but also to the gazes of other people visiting the archives at Holocaust memorial sites. Rozen’s choice to show her subjects as the objects of multiple gazes aligns with the film’s investment in connecting the past experiences of people of small stature to those in the present; while the experience of being subjected to the gaze of Mengele and his staff (and the practices that accompanied that gaze) isn’t commensurate with the experience of being surveilled by archivists and others, the film reminds us that contemporary practices of looking at people with disabilities can be linked to other practices of looking at disabled people in different contexts (e.g., medical, scientific, eugenic gazes; as part of freakshows or other spectacles).

In *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye makes surveillance practices – and possible responses to them – a key feature of Cheryl’s visit to the archive. During her visit to the CLIT archive, Cheryl finds a few publicity photographs of Fae Richards in a box. When she attempts to record the images for her documentary, the archivist scolds and discourages her from doing so (more on this shortly). When Cheryl appeals to the archivist, the archivist tells her that she can’t grant her permission to use the images until after the (monthly) meeting of the collective, who will come to a consensus-based answer



to Cheryl's request. Because her trip required time off from work, and travel to a different city (from Philadelphia to New York City), returning at a later date would require time and resources she doesn't have. So Cheryl resists the rules of the archive, and records the photos for her documentary, out of the archivist's line of sight.

### 3.4.3 Classificatory practices

Early in her research process, Cheryl visits an unidentified public library. In order to ensure that she hasn't missed something in her own library search, Cheryl asks for help from the librarian, and in the process, subjects herself to the epistemological and organizational protocols of the library. When Cheryl approaches the information desk to ask for help, the librarian on duty provides brusque and minimal responses to her query. His advice to Cheryl is confusing; he answers as if she knows both too much and too little at the same time: assuming that she hasn't done any preliminary searching, he asks her if she's checked the "black section" in the reference library; when she asks if there are non-reference texts on women in film that mention Richards, he stops talking in terms of broadly-defined sections, and references Library of Congress call numbers<sup>15</sup>, asking if she's "tried the film section, PN 1993 to PN 1995?" When Cheryl tells him that she has, he begins to take her request seriously, and searches the catalog, noting that the only results he retrieves are for Martha Page. Even though the library doesn't have any material on Richards, in the face of the librarian's attempts to dismiss her (and the poor quality of his service, in general), the scene helps us understand the challenges non-academic researchers face when asking questions: if she hadn't already done some

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<sup>15</sup> The Library of Congress call number system would be familiar to regular patrons of academic libraries, but not to patrons of public libraries, where books are typically organized using the Dewey Decimal scheme.

searching on her own, didn't know how to use the Library of Congress system, or didn't have the tenacity to keep asking for help she wouldn't have received confirmation that there were no books on Richards in the collection.

It's important to note that the searches the librarian conducts are only as good as the interface and the collection he has at his disposal. For Cheryl's immediate purposes, the distinction between what the librarian *can't find*, what the library *doesn't have*, and what *doesn't exist* isn't important, but it's worth exploring here, because it complicates the clear binary of presence/absence in the record. The library scene draws attention to the ways that indexing and classificatory practices employed by librarians and archivists – who work in accord with Library of Congress standards for cataloging and classification – shape what and how we can know about the past, and about the lives of specific individuals.

When Cheryl consults reference sources to find information about the “Watermelon Woman,” she finds only generic subject headings for “Black Women in Film” and references to Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers. In her analysis of the film, Thelma Wills Foote observes that generic or stereotypical terms – like “Black Women in Film” or “The Watermelon Woman” – don't recognize actresses' unique identity. She posits that these generic and stereotypical references are instances of “epistemic violence against black female subjectivity [...] black actresses of the past lack the indexical specificity in authoritative sources of historical knowledge that would make it possible for Cheryl to conduct conventional research on an individual actress's life story” (5). In addition to causing trouble for the researcher looking for materials on a specific individual, subject headings don't necessarily help researchers doing projects on lesbian,

gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer history, either. The category of “Black Women in Film” can include sources on black lesbians (who are likely also black women), but without the lesbian label, catalog searches won’t match those sources with keyword searches on the term lesbian. As Polly Thistlethwaite observes, subject headings applied to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer material “are perpetually clumsy and out-of-date” (166). As a result, “mainstream library catalogs and periodical indexes are plagued with deficiencies in description, foiling computer subject and keyword searches. A world of lesbian, gay, transgendered, and queer-relevant material languishes unidentified and even uncataloged in libraries and archives” (166). The problem here is at the level of the classificatory system: the terms available to catalogers are insufficient to the task of creating specific and nuanced descriptions of materials; these terms are approved for use by the Library of Congress (LoC), and any official change to descriptive terminology must be approved by the LoC before it can be widely applied to materials.

Access to items is also influenced by how subjects represented in collections identified themselves. If record creators were “closeted, or [...] did not self-identify as queer, homosexual, lesbian, gay, or transgendered,” any queer, transgender, or homosexual content in their files will not show up at the level of the catalog record or the finding aid (166-67). In such situations – and sometimes in situations in which it’s clear that subjects had homosexual, queer or transgender identifications or relationships – catalogers and archivists are empowered to make decisions about what headings to apply to a given collection. If descriptions don’t explicitly point to collections having homosexual- or queer-related content (if, for example, a relationship is described as a friendship instead of a partnership, romance, or sexual relationship), that content isn’t

legible as such (Thistlethwaite 167). Thistlethwaite argues that this practice of “coding or softening” archival descriptions is “at the root of queer invisibility in historical record. It is this tradition of closeting by mainstream archivists that leaves lesbians present, yet incognito in mainstream historical record. When archives fail to name or explicitly identify collections with established or even speculated queer content, they construct a veiled, closeted history – a silent, unannounced inheritance no more apparent in the mainstream public than it was in the pre-Stonewall era” (167). Subject headings constitute a kind of recognition, one that makes certain subjects legible. In Dunye’s film, we see the effects of Richards’ not being granted indexical status, and of being denied specificity in a classificatory system: she cannot be found<sup>16</sup>.

#### 3.4.4 In the lesbian archive

After her visit to the library, Cheryl visits a lesbian community archive. The archive, named the Center for Lesbian Information and Technology (CLIT) is clearly Dunye’s parodic representation of the actually-existing Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). We tend to think of archives like the LHA as less-powerful, under-funded, grassroots counterparts to institutional and state archives, and we’re usually correct in our perception. Dunye’s depiction of CLIT reminds us that grassroots archives are not exempt as domains in which power relations matter, and have effects. CLIT’s volunteer archivist, the collection’s contents and their organization, and the archives’ collective leadership structure are all subject to Dunye’s critique. The role of the CLIT archivist is

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<sup>16</sup> The library scene also draws attention to the non-naming of Richards in the first place, since Cheryl notes that “It’s not like I can go and ask for information about the Watermelon Woman” (especially since this research is happening in a moment before widespread, popular use of online search engines or encyclopedias, i.e. Google and Wikipedia).

played by novelist, journalist, activist and ACT UP archivist/oral historian Sarah Schulman; in character, she parodies the Lesbian Herstory Archives' rhetorics around collectivity, privacy, and "safe space."

The CLIT archive is disorganized and, though the contents of its boxes are out on shelves and physically accessible, visitors would be hard-pressed to identify the contents of any of them. Because records in the archive haven't been appraised or described, they are effectively inaccessible to researchers. The CLIT archivist recognizes that this is a limitation; she reassures Cheryl and her friend Annie that "someday we're going to have a great system – people are going to donate materials and they're going to be logged, categorized [sic], sorted, and stored. Right now they're just in boxes." But there are limits to the archivist's concerns, as well. When Cheryl asks for material on black lesbians from Philadelphia, the archivist informs that there is, indeed a collection, and "it's very separate" from the rest of the archive. It's not well-taken-care-of, however. In her enthusiasm to show Cheryl the (disorganized) contents of the first (worn-out and taped-together) box she pulls from the shelf, the archivist carelessly dumps contents out onto a table. Cheryl prevents her from treating a box of material on black lesbians from Philadelphia in the same way, and finds photos of Richards at the top of the pile. An inscription on the back of one of the photographs reads: "To June Walker, Special Friend." Cheryl and Annie capture the inscription on video, only to be reprimanded by the archivist, who suddenly cares a great deal about the treatment of the material. The archivist takes the box away from Cheryl, after explaining/exclaiming her rationale: "This is confidential! This is a safe space!" Here, Schulman pokes fun at the Lesbian Herstory Archive's "safe space" rhetoric. Viewers of the film who aren't familiar with

the LHA may not understand the specific valence of this phrase in relation to the Archive, and will likely understand it as a reference to an un-hip, unfashionable mode of lesbian-feminist separatist discourse.

The LHA's use of safe space rhetoric was historically part of its effort to provide "a physical and historical space for women to transform themselves, to come out – first to recognize and understand themselves as lesbians, then to come out into a community – a grass-roots public that stationed itself between isolated private and mainstream public spheres" (Thistlethwaite 157). A woman could be closeted in her everyday life, but donate her papers to the LHA as a lesbian; she would not have to fear that she would be publicly exposed. Recognizing that "individuals are often differently out in different social venues, that being out bears tremendous variety and nuance, and that coming out generally is not a wholesale surrender of a private life to the scrutiny of a mainstream public," the LHA does not grant access to members of the "noncommunity public" (158). The Archive is particularly wary about "exposure [that] involves inclusion in the mainstream press or media" – exposure of the sort that would occur if records from the LHA were to be featured in *The Watermelon Woman* (though not completely mainstream, it is a feature film intended for release beyond the film festival circuit) (158). And here, questions around the absence and presence of African American lesbians in the archives get a little more complicated.

A significant amount of material in grassroots archives like LHA is not legally approved for publication, representation, or display in public venues. Unless a donor is able to provide legal documentation of her status as the copyright holder for donated

material, she cannot be recognized as the owner of that material. Instead, ownership and copyright may accrue to “homophobic next-of-kin [... whose] legal reckoning with the collection may threaten its very existence” (165). When donors entrust the LHA with their papers, they sacrifice (or protect against) public visibility and legibility as lesbians, but still contribute to an historic record that attests to their existence.

Joan Nestle, the most well-known founder of the LHA once said that “Lesbian history is made up of other people’s garbage” (qtd. in Thistlethwaite 165). The materials that comprise a collection like the LHA’s may be those that families of lesbians don’t care to keep, and may only be saved if a partner, friend, or the woman herself chooses to collect and donate them to an archives. Because professional standards (and institutional mandates) dictate that mainstream archival collections operate within legal frameworks, such archives will not collect material from donors who cannot furnish proof of ownership. Thistlethwaite maintains that this poses an “impossible standard for lesbian and gay people seeking to control either public or private history [...] Nonbiological queer families are not, without legal maneuvering, holders of ‘clear title’ to the documents of deceased loved ones” (166). Unless the queers in question have the inclination and financial resources to make legal arrangements for the donation of their records to a mainstream repository, their personal material “may never find its way into [the] historical record except through private or community-based collections or through professionals resisting or ignoring professional archival standards” (166). Because her connection to Fae was not a biological one, nor legally-recognized, June Walker could

not have donated Fae's papers to a mainstream archive. However, the LHA would accept such a donation because it accepts materials from any lesbian who wants her papers preserved there.

In its parody of the LHA, *The Watermelon Woman* also glosses over the possibility that Walker donated Fae's materials to CLIT precisely because she didn't want those materials to become public – or, more likely, because she wanted to exert control over how Fae was represented, by whom, and for what purpose. If we watch the scene in the CLIT archive with questions of *Walker's* control over the records (instead of the archivist's) in mind, we can ask a productive set of questions about presence/absence, accessibility, and visibility. If Fae's documents are in the archive, but are not available for inclusion in a film, does that change our understanding of them – as present or absent, accessible or inaccessible? In the logic of *The Watermelon Woman* in particular, and documentary film in general, visibility is key to articulating histories and making them legible to others. How do we make sense of subjects' choices to remain invisible in certain contexts, to understand that they may *not* desire the exposure that may accompany their records becoming-archival? Why might some subjects want their records preserved, but resist the publicity that accompanies donation to a conventional archive<sup>17</sup>?

### 3.5 Counternarratives and counterarchives

Representations and critiques of archival business as usual (in both conventional and unconventional archives) are significant elements of the critical archival practice Dunye and Rozen develop in *The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla*: they show their subjects confronting the problems of archival absence and under-documentation,

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<sup>17</sup> I explore these last two questions in depth in Chapter Five.



negotiating access to archives (i.e., access to the archives, to records, and to information that enables finding more records), and responding to different forms of subjection within archives. But Rozen's and Dunye's critical practice extends beyond critiques of existing archival practices and limits; both directors use their films to articulate histories that resist closure, that create space for conflicting narratives, and that integrate multiple forms of evidence (not just what can be found in the archives) into their accounts. In other words, *The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* draw upon counterarchives and counternarratives as part of their practice. In the final sections of this chapter, I explore the work counternarratives and counterarchives in *The Watermelon Woman* and suggest how – by creating their own counternarratives – both films create possibilities for social and cultural transformation in the present.

### 3.5.1 Counternarratives in *The Watermelon Woman*

Though my analysis thus far has focused primarily on Cheryl's visits to a library and an archive, it's important to note that these visits are only part of her research process. In addition to visiting conventional research sites, Cheryl records interviews with a range of subjects who've known (or know about) Fae in different capacities. While some of Cheryl's interviewees have recollections of Fae, herself, others offer social or historical context. Though most of Cheryl's interview footage doesn't make it into her documentary about Fae, Dunye incorporates these multiple accounts (some of them conflicting) in the film.

As she begins her research, Cheryl visits a family friend of Tamara's, independent scholar Lee Edwards, who describes himself as a collector, exhibitor, and lecturer in the area of "race films" produced between 1915 and 1950. Edwards' house is decorated with

“authentic” posters advertising black cast films, including *Dark Manhattan* and *The Bulldogger*. He can’t tell Cheryl much about the Watermelon Woman or Martha Page, but he loans Cheryl his back issues of *Photo Play* magazine, and fill some gaps in Cheryl’s knowledge of local history – telling her about the black-owned and black-operated theatres that showed Hollywood films in Philadelphia: the Royal, the Standard, the Dunbar, and the Lincoln.

Cheryl then conducts an interview with her mother (played by Dunye’s mother, Irene Dunye), which doesn’t yield much information, but does lead Cheryl to an interview with her mother’s former co-worker, Shirley Hamilton, or “Miss Shirley.” In a voice-over introducing the interview footage, Cheryl speculates that Hamilton might be a lesbian, a hunch that Hamilton confirms – without being asked – near the start of the interview. When Cheryl inquires about the Watermelon Woman, Hamilton corrects her, and provides her with Richards’ full name. Hamilton knew Richards as a singer in Philadelphia, after she’d ended her career in “those movies.” She tells Cheryl “her real name was Fae Richards. When she sang for us she used her real name...she used to sing for all us stone butches.” Hamilton doesn’t know much about Richards’ connection to Martha Page, but jokes that if she “remembers her gossip correctly...Martha was one mean, ugly woman.” Hamilton also shows Cheryl photographs depicting Richards in her non-Watermelon Woman years, photos she purchased at clubs where Richards performed, and has saved in a cigar box for decades. Hamilton’s collection is a valuable resource for Cheryl, showing her (and us) a new aspect of Richards’ experience. The

scene reminds us of the ephemeral nature of collections like Hamilton's – as she pulls the photos from the cigar box, Hamilton's holding a lit cigarette in her left hand, close to the pile of highly-flammable photos.

While the story Hamilton tells is ultimately affirmed by another character in the film, Dunye creates complications for Cheryl's research through interviews with a series of characters who challenge local (community) memories of Richards' past and refuse to criticize her relegation to roles like the 'Watermelon Woman'. When Cheryl interviews Martha Pages' sister, Mrs. Page-Fletcher, she denies Martha was a lesbian, and won't admit that she might have had a relationship with Richards. It's clear that Page-Fletcher feels she has something to protect – it's unclear if she's trying to protect her sister's memory, her family name, or her own choices: toward the end of the interview, as Page-Fletcher becomes agitated at Cheryl, who had pressed her to admit that Page and Richards had a relationship, an African American maid (in a maid's uniform, no less) enters the room to protect and comfort her.

Cultural critic Camille Paglia (played by Camille Paglia, caricaturing herself) presents the other major challenge to Cheryl's interpretation of Fae's film work. Paglia functions as a cultural critic whose commentary is designed to establish context for interpreting Richards' early roles, her "Watermelon Woman" nickname, and African American women's relegation to playing "Mammy" characters on film. Paglia refutes Dunye's interpretations of each of these aspects of Fae's career, and of the history of African American representation in major motion pictures. She asserts that it's a misinterpretation to think that the "Mammy" figure was "desexualizing, degrading, and dehumanizing" – instead, she links the figure to her own Italian-American heritage,

noting that casting large women as “Mammies” honored their goddess-like nature, their “abundance” and “fertility.” She notes that her Italian grandmothers also “never left the kitchen” (and they weren’t slaves or servants), and that she doesn’t understand why the watermelon might hold a negative connotation for African Americans, since it was a fruit her family ate at the end of big means (and shares the colors of the Italian flag). It’s clear that Paglia is invested in contextualizing African American women’s history in terms of her own cultural, familial, and personal history – completely ignoring the specific experiences, conditions, and power relations that make those histories dramatically different.

In this series of interviews, the “experts” Cheryl consults prove far less helpful than the local women who’d known Richards (even just as her fans). Paglia can’t move beyond her own identity issues – making all things relevant to her cultural heritage – in her commentary on stereotypical representations of African American women on film. Her analysis does little to support Cheryl’s investigation of the cultural context in which Richards’ body of work emerged, and in which she lived her life. The film satirizes the white feminist academic (and renowned cultural critic) for dismissing significant differences between African American women’s and Italian American women’s experiences, reframing the discussion in terms of ahistoric, essential symbols – i.e., the fertility goddess. Paglia’s refusal to recognize or address difference seems ridiculous, and it’s clear that her interpretation is too far-fetched to be taken seriously. But her character’s not just there for comic relief – by including the figure of the academic/cultural critic/talking head in the film, *Dunye* reminds us that such

commentators have the ability to influence our interpretation of the past. The threat such experts post – of misrepresentation, misinterpretation, and erasure – is felt by those whose history Cheryl investigates; anxieties about how Fae and her community will be represented become clear as Cheryl follows up on her research in CLIT, the lesbian archives.

### 3.5.2 Counterarchives in *The Watermelon Woman*

Counterarchives in *The Watermelon Woman* take a variety of forms: CLIT is an archive formed as a space for lesbian records to be protected from the public, as a counter to mainstream archives where women's records wouldn't necessarily be legible as lesbian, access could be granted to a wider public, and confidentiality might not be respected on the same terms. But there are other, smaller, collections that prove instrumental to Cheryl's research as well. These are the personal collections she accesses through her interviews with Miss Shirley (who'd saved memorabilia from Fae's performances) and June Walker, Fae's longtime partner. Walker's archive provides the strongest counter to mainstream representations of Fae (e.g., in film and photographs from Fae's *Watermelon Woman* years).

After her visit to the lesbian archive, Cheryl contacts June Walker, Fae Richards' longtime partner. Walker agrees to be interviewed, but when Cheryl arrives for their meeting, a neighbor informs her that Walker was taken to the hospital with heart pains. Walker leaves a letter for Cheryl, in which she describes her reaction to Cheryl's invocation of Fae's *Watermelon Woman* years: “[the call] got me to remember some unhappy things about the past. I was so mad you mentioned the name of Martha Page. She should have nothing to do with how the world remembers Fae.” Walker would prefer

that Cheryl ignore what she knows about Richards' association with Page, and create an historic representation that 'corrects' for things Richards' might have been ashamed of, or that further re-present harmful, stereotypical images to audiences. Walker cares deeply about how Richards' story is told, and her appeal to Cheryl reveals her anxieties about how members of her (African American lesbian) community will be remembered, and who will create that record. "She paved the way for kids like you to run around making movies about the past and how we lived then," Walker writes, "Please Cheryl, make our history before we are all dead and gone. Our family will always only have each other."

Cheryl introduces her short biographical film with a response to Walker. She explains that the moments Walker had with Richards, as well as the moments Richards and Page had together, were all precious, but that Richards' life means something to Cheryl, as well: "it means hope, it means inspiration, it means possibility, it means history." Richards' life makes Cheryl's work possible – hers is the story Cheryl needs to tell in order to claim the future she wants for herself: "what I understand is that *I'm* going to be the one who says I am a black lesbian filmmaker, who's just beginning, but I'm going to say a lot more, and have a lot more work to do."

Presented with the opposition between the historic record (in books, movies, and archives) and Walker's representation of Richards' life, Cheryl incorporates these conflicting perspectives in a short documentary film. She draws upon information provided in the historic record, and complicates its claims to truth, by including Walker's perspective – and her personal archive – in the film, alongside publicity photographs and

footage from Fae's "Watermelon Woman" roles, her roles in black cast films, and photographs depicting her with Page. None of these aspects of Fae's life are privileged over others in Cheryl's representation of her life.

### 3.6 Motivating action in the present

*The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* show us how archives and counterarchives offer different kinds of sources – and remind us that sources from different archives come with (or even embody) different knowledges, affects, and kinds of significance. They also show us how – and why – their subjects use documents from multiple sources to articulate historic narratives. But *The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* go beyond showing how; the films, themselves, create conditions of possibility for their viewers to act in the present and transform their social worlds. In other words, the films motivate viewers' critical reflection on the past (as documented and undocumented in the historic record) which can then inform their perspectives on – and action in – the present.

The notion that records from the past – represented in or through video – can facilitate social transformation in the present builds on Alexandra Juhasz's theory and practice of "queer archive activism." In her experimental documentary *Video Remains*, Juhasz takes a 1992 interview with her friend James Robert Lamb and lets it play in real time, incorporating sound recordings of four lesbian video activists – Alisa Lebow, Juanita Mohammed, Sarah Schulman, and Ellen Spiro (all of whom she interviewed for the documentary, in 2004) – into Lamb's interview. These women loved, cared for, and supported gay men during their (the women's and the men's) participation in AIDS activism in the late 1980s and the early 1990s (Juhasz 320). Juhasz characterizes their

commentary as an “intrusion of present-day AIDS – suffered differently, represented less, lacking a movement, aware of the awful and inspiring legacy of the past” into the world represented in the earlier film. The video activists’ commentary “enlivens [the] old tape and recommits to a contemporary conversation about AIDS, its representations, feelings, activism, and history” (320). The purpose of re-presenting this video from the AIDS video archive isn’t to help viewers remember the past, or revisit feelings of loss. Instead of (just) documenting and representing the past, Juhasz suggests that it “reanimates” and foments queer activist thought and action in the present. She posits that *Video Remains* creates a space for a “practical and theoretical possibility” that she terms “queer archive activism” (320). Through queer archive activism, videos from the AIDS activist movement are mobilized in ways that encourage viewers to “remember, feel anew, analyze, and educate” (326). As old footage is “enlivened” by the activist videographers’ reflexive commentary, and a document of personal significance is deployed in the service of collective action, the archival record gains additional significance and a new role – as an object enabling social transformation.

Though it employs fabricated footage (instead of found or archival footage), *The Watermelon Woman* does so in order to create a documentary heritage for black lesbian cultural production – importantly, one that publicly circulates – to enable future projects. When June Walker implores Cheryl to “make our history before we are all dead and gone,” she is also speaking to the film’s audience. Though this audience isn’t comprised of filmmakers, Walker’s plea draws attention to the significance of real-world documentary projects. The film also draws attention to histories of African American representation on screen; Dunye incorporates Leonard’s footage and photographs in ways



that remind us that racist and stereotypical representations still circulate (literally, as Cheryl gets her tapes from the video rental store where she works). As Robert F. Reid-Pharr suggests, the film “tells us that early images of blacks in film are infinitely available yet somehow always lacking. They are but pale and distorted reflections of the vibrant reality of mid-twentieth-century black American life and culture” (133). *The Watermelon Woman* makes this critique and offers some exemplary correctives, including a scene of Cheryl and her friends in a lesbian club, and of singer-songwriter Toshi Reagon performing on the street. In addition to looking for traces of the past and documenting them, the film encourages its viewers to imagine reasons and strategies for documenting contemporary black lesbian communities.

In *Liebe Perla*, Rozen and Hannelore use critical commentary to alter the meaning of archival footage. Throughout the film, Hannelore comments on archival footage and records, both as she views them, and in letters to Perla. In the Berlin Federal Film Archive, Hannelore views a Nazi film advocating (propagandizing) for eugenic euthanasia. We see footage of the film, and are exposed to the reasons it enumerates for killing (“sparing”) disabled people: impairment is unnatural (a “distortion of nature”), is a “misconception of Christianity”, disabled people may pass on “criminal” traits to offspring if they are allowed to live and reproduce, pose a burden on future generations, and require greater financial support than people without disabilities – such that supporting the life of a disabled person draws resources away from a greater number of “healthy” people. While the film is included as a source for Hannelore’s research, it’s clear that she’s already viewed this footage multiple times, enough she dreads its retrieval from the archive. She observes: “When the film came, I didn’t want to watch it. Every

time a film is shown about euthanasia in Germany, this segment is shown. It creates the impression that euthanasia was a Nazi idea with no validity today. But to this day, one hears of killing so-called invalids just like the aged and infirm.” Arguing against a kind of remembering that allows forgetting (recognizing that these things happened, but that was in the past, and things are different now), Hannelore links past records to the persistent, if less explicit, support of eugenic practices in contemporary Germany. This connection between past Nazi ideology and practice, and contemporary forms of eugenic practices and euthanasia, becomes one of the film’s central concerns.

After visiting the Verschuer Institute of Medical History, where Hannelore reviews material related to Prof. Verschuer’s studies of twins and eugenics, she writes a letter to Perla, in which she states that “in fact, babies are killed everywhere, before, at, or after birth if some disability is diagnosed.” Hannelore’s statement is followed by footage of a gang of Neo-Nazis marching and chanting, making the continued threat of Nazi ideals evident. By including Hannelore’s commentary in the film, in reaction to specific archival records, Rozen and Hannelore are able to mobilize these records to support their argument about troubling attitudes and practices in present-day Germany.

Though they differ in style and content, *The Watermelon Woman* and *Liebe Perla* develop a critical archival practice that challenges the myth of archival objectivity and neutrality, and subjects the archives (not just the records they contain) to examination and critique (Schwartz and Cook 18). The films show us how libraries and archives that “document primarily mainstream culture and powerful records creators” fail to meet the needs of researchers seeking information about members of historically-marginalized or subaltern groups. Instead of “[privileging] the official narratives of the state over the

private stories of individuals,” the films articulate histories through the experience of individual subjects, and show how “official narratives” are limited in their ability to represent subjects on their own terms (i.e., in their own words, as full persons, not objects of study or experimentation). Instead of complying with “rules of evidence and authenticity [that] favor textual documents, from which such rules were derived, at the expense of other ways of experiencing the present, and thus of viewing the past,” they recognize, incorporate, and create non-textual forms of evidence, including photographs, oral histories, videos, and a variety of ephemeral material. By consulting individuals with different knowledges (i.e., people who lived during the time the researchers are documenting, not only scholars or experts), and using multiple forms and sources of evidence (and valuing the immaterial and ephemeral as evidence), they suggest how archivists might “adopt multiple and ambient ways of seeing and knowing.” And while the films critique both traditional systems for organizing information *and* archives that are disorganized, they draw attention to the fact that organizational systems have the power to enable or disable user access.

Further, the films model a critical archival practice for researchers: they demonstrate critical engagement with archival records by showing their subjects commenting on the records’ provenance, content, and use. Both the filmmakers and their subjects enact forms of archival activism: they place historic records in the service of collective struggles for social transformation, as well as individual struggles for identification, recognition, and creative production. In addition to showing their subjects

negotiating research with conventional sources and strategies, they model unconventional research practices and suggest how archival records can be put in conversation with other forms of evidence or documentation, and with personal memory.

## CHAPTER 4

### ARCHIVAL BODIES: GENETIC GENEALOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF RACE

When I first learned about the practice of genetic ancestry testing, I thought I'd found a perfect object of analysis for this dissertation. Genetic ancestry tests, which promise to yield quantitative information about an individual's ancestry, derived from a sample of DNA, are marketed as a supplement to traditional genealogic research methods, or, in the case of individuals for whom there isn't an extensive paper record, as a source of authoritative evidence about one's geographic origins. The testing services, or researchers themselves, often extrapolate these results, and associate geographic origin with specific racial or ethnic heritage. Thinking about these research practices in relation to the project at hand, I imagined that genetic ancestry testing would provide another avenue for exploring what people do when they encounter the limits of the archive: when the documentary record isn't sufficient to provide individuals with material evidence of their ancestry, the body can function as an alternative archive. Because genetic ancestry testing has been largely promoted as a resource for descendants of enslaved people in the United States, it seems like a racialized archival practice, a form of research that, while

available to anyone, has greater significance for members of particular racial and ethnic groups who want to access family histories that extend beyond their relatives' forced migration across the Atlantic.

Genetic ancestry testing seems like it should be a stabilizing practice. For individuals who are uncertain about their ancestry, or who want additional support for familial historical accounts, genetic ancestry testing offers answers to the question of *where (or who) one comes from*. It seems, then, like an object of analysis that would easily align with others already discussed here: it supports the articulation of personal and familial histories in the absence of material evidence, and it constitutes another form of historic knowledge production. But as I learned more about genetic ancestry testing, it became clear that it's not a stabilizing force, and there's much more than historic knowledge at stake. Representations of genetic ancestry testing in the mainstream media highlight the potential for genetic ancestry testing to disrupt individuals' sense of racial, ethnic, or tribal belonging, and draw attention to what subjects are doing with their test results beyond simply filling in some blanks in their family trees (e.g., using them to make claims for benefits).

Where previous objects of analysis in this dissertation – the Atlas Group Archive, *Liebe Perla* and *The Watermelon Woman* – critique and complicate traditional archival practices and logics, researchers undergoing genetic ancestry tests are invested in particular archival logics and principles; they seek empirical evidence to verify their claims about the past, and care about provenance (in archival terms, this means the chain of custody for an item, traced and documented in order to establish its origins). More interestingly, given the historic use of archives to manage specific persons/bodies (i.e.,

the police archive to identify and track the criminal, the archives of European and American colonial states to determine the racial classification of their colonized or indigenous peoples), genetic genealogy represents a compelling turn in the relationship between “the body and the archive”<sup>18</sup>. What are the implications of such a shift – when subjects from particular racial groups who have, in the past, been subject to legally-sanctioned, biologically-based systems of racial classification (or who are, at least, aware of how these systems had been used in the management, surveillance, and control of members of colonized or oppressed groups) desire to know themselves better on terms that seem, once again, to rely on essential, biological notions of racial difference? In this chapter, I consider what’s at stake in genetic genealogy. Following the productive line of inquiry I’ve taken in my discussion of archives thus far, I attend not only to the ways in which genetic genealogy contributes to the production of historical knowledge, but also to how individuals employ the information they glean from tests for other (non-historical) purposes. I’m particularly interested in exploring how genetic genealogy contributes to the problematization of race

Michel Foucault suggests that a problematization “does not mean the representation of a preexistent object nor the creation through discourse of an object that did not exist. It is the ensemble of discursive and nondiscursive practices that make something enter into the play of true and false and constitute it as an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)” (qtd. in Rabinow 138). In order for a problematization to occur, “something prior must

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<sup>18</sup> See Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” for a discussion of the development and use of police archives in late 19<sup>th</sup> century France. Sekula examines the ways in which the photographic archive was instrumental in the regulation of the social body.

have happened to introduce uncertainty, a loss of familiarity; that loss, that uncertainty, is the result of difficulties in our previous way of understanding, acting, relating” (138). The task of the analyst investigating a moment of problematization is not to “proceed directly toward intervention and repair of the situation’s discordance, but rather to understand and put forth a diagnosis of ‘what makes these responses simultaneously possible’” (138). Genetic ancestry testing, and popular representations of genetic genealogy, challenge the existing consensus that conceptualizes “race” as a social construct, as something that is not “real,” i.e., “race” is not an essential, embodied characteristic, not an explanatory mechanism, not a biologically-legitimized source of difference (Reardon 2008). Given its deployment in a range of contexts, including personal historical research, tribal membership decisions, social recognition of the legacy of enslavement, and the production of databases of genetic information, genetic genealogy factors in a number of conversations in which race is also subject to redefinition, reiteration, and critique.

In order to consider how genetic genealogy contributes to the problematization of race, it’s important to explore how genealogy, and genetic genealogy, are constituted. We can do this by examining how both are “ensemble[s] of discursive and non-discursive practices,” but in the context of this dissertation – with its attention to *logics* as well as *practices*, the *material* as well as the *ephemeral* – it’s also important to consider what logics and principles contribute to the production of both forms of genealogical knowledge, how these (biological and social) logics and principles relate to archival logics and principles, and *what comes to matter* in the process of doing genetic genealogical work. Conducting a thorough and complete analysis of the sort I describe above is beyond the scope of the project at hand (and well beyond the scope of a single



dissertation chapter), but I believe this is a productive approach for a critical archival practice, and as such, deserves to be tested out in a limited way here. When, like me (the writer of this dissertation trying to get a grasp on genetic genealogy, and discovering that my research object wants to take me places I hadn't planned on going<sup>19</sup>), an archivist encounters objects, (human) subjects, practices, or situations that resist *belonging to* archives; that are unfamiliar (or so familiar that they seem hard to critically engage); or that seem to demand we address questions at or beyond the limits of our expertise or experience, identifying constitutive elements, practices, and discourses can help us begin to understand what's going on, what's at stake, and how it matters to archives, archival practices, and those who engage archives as archivists, researchers, subjects of records, and/or critics.

Questions of mattering, and critical examinations of practices and logics and principles, allow us to explore ways to think about (ways to make an object-of-thought out of) genetic genealogy. Specifically, they allow us to regard genetic genealogy as a site in and through which many things are happening, and multiple modes of mattering<sup>20</sup> are evident. Many things, for example, are *at stake* in genetic genealogy, for different constituencies, including access to financial benefits, forms of social recognition, and new terms for identification and self-knowledge. In genetic genealogy, we can identify shared concerns between two modes of establishing specific kinds of relationships:

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<sup>19</sup> See Marie “Keta” Miranda’s *Homegirls in the Public Sphere* for an excellent, engaging discussion of what happens when one’s research subjects decide they don’t want to answer the researcher’s pre-determined questions, and instead, prompt her to reimagine her project, and her relationship to her subjects.

<sup>20</sup> I borrow this phrase from John Law, who describes “modes of mattering” as “Ways of making realities that matter. Handling matters of concern. Or different modes of concern” (3). In his analysis of the 2001 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the UK, he asks: “What *is* mattering in foot and mouth? What is being made material, made relevant? What is the business of foot-and-mouth all about? To put it

kinship and provenance<sup>21</sup>; and attend to how they matter to archives. We can explore how bodies come to matter as archives, as well. We can look for continuities and discontinuities in histories of archival subjection (i.e., the role(s) archives play in subordination and subjection), and investigate how state- and corporately-sponsored biopolitical projects matter to genealogists, and vice versa. I address each of these questions and points of investigation below, in order, with the expectation that my discussion will require necessary (temporary) bounding in order to impose some form on my content<sup>22</sup>. To conclude the chapter, I return to the big-picture question of how genetic genealogy matters to the problematization of race as a way to bring together the chapter's lines of inquiry.

#### 4.1 Overview of traditional genealogy and genetic genealogy

Genealogical research is motivated by (at least) two important desires: the desire to secure material evidence that documents a familial past, and the desire to establish a sense of familial continuity across generations. These desires highlight key questions that researchers expect genealogy to answer: how to document an undocumented past, and how to establish continuity between – and articulate a history of – oneself and one's ancestors. In addition to responding to these questions, genealogists may pursue their

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differently, how are 'contributions' made to foot-and-mouth, contributions that matter? And how does what matters get moved about?" (2). These questions inspire and inform my analysis.

<sup>21</sup> The contexts in which kinship matters being biological and social; provenance, archival.

<sup>22</sup> Though what I propose to do here may seem expansive, my content & analysis is limited in (at least) one key way: another (later, for-the-book) version of this chapter should also include a discussion of specific techniques used in genetic genealogical research. For example, I'm interested in how genetic genealogists develop lay expertise in genetic research, and how they join and run surname projects. In a popular genetic genealogical guidebook, *Trace Your Roots with DNA: Using Genetic Tests to Explore Your Family Tree*, Megan Smolenyak Smolenyak and Ann Turner devote several chapters to the process of surname project initiation and management, which includes: selecting tests and vendors, finding, contacting, and recruiting participants, using specific reference sources and research tools (in addition to tests), "broadcasting" (or publicizing) the project, arranging/collecting test payments, interpreting data, sharing results (which

research projects in order to resolve uncertainties about ancestral relations and cultural origins, to situate familial histories in relation to national and transnational histories, to explore connections between individuals who share a surname, or simply to verify, or enhance family stories.

As they trace their family histories, researchers document relationships in ways that aspire to a level of empirical truth. The evidence used to support this truth may be genetic and/or archival; either way, researchers rely upon some kind of historic record in their attempts to produce knowledge that can be documented and verified. Researchers turn to archives and to databases of genetic information to locate – and to produce –documentation that supports existing knowledge provided by family members. For many genealogists, the process of locating, uncovering, and identifying suitable evidence for records-based genealogical research is about more than being a good researcher. In her analysis of the (often conflicted) relationships between autobiography and genealogy, Julia Watson observes that the practice of genealogy resists the “narrative elaboration of data” provided through autobiography, and as such, contributes to the suppression of “the story of enslavement, colonization, and appropriation that underlies American history” (299-303). Analyzing Doane and Bell’s genealogical guidebook, *Searching for Your Ancestors*, Watson identifies how the authors emphasize the genealogist’s “objectivity,” as they imagine the process of genealogical research remaking the researcher as “tactician, detective, archaeologist, and psychologist” (302). “Objectivity is crucial” Watson notes, “personal connection to the ‘object’ of study, who can talk back, hold back, or, worst of all, distort and fantasize, is discouraged. The researcher must be

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includes adding data to existing databases and/or creating project websites). This is all rich material for

committed to detection, to uncovering plain fact by using good timing and relentless curiosity. The sources of investigation are vulnerable to forgetfulness and mortality” (303). The authors’ emphasis on the genealogist as an investigator in pursuit of verifiable, factual data downplays the value of personal accounts that might be subject to their tellers’ inaccuracy, imagination, incomplete mnemonic recall, and embellishment (303-304). The research process Doane and Bell describe is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion, as they advise genealogists to focus on completing their family pedigree charts, and to resist the tempting distractions of narrative<sup>23</sup>.

Indeed, genealogy’s form is not expository prose or narrative account. The privileged forms for documentation are charts: pedigree or ancestral charts (which show the direct-line of ancestors for a specific individual), or descendancy charts or trees (in which a chosen ancestor appears at the top, linked to his spouse, and his descendants are arrayed in generationally-ordered rows beneath him) (Smolenyak Smolenyak and Turner 9). These are tools for investigation (the blank spaces that remain to be filled) and documentation. They offer a visual and minimally-textual representation of relations organized in accord with the naturalized structure of heterosexual, reproductive family units: male-female pairs beget children, who are then linked through marriage and

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analysis.

<sup>23</sup> Although the doctrine of “pure” genealogy “eschews family stories and subjective memory in favour of the verifiable ‘facts’ of the past,” genealogists often draw upon subjective sources, such as family histories, memory, biography, and autobiography, in their research (Nash 2002). These narratives contribute to the overarching project of producing a documented history, however, and they fulfill a function similar to that of the materials pulled from the archives – even if their status as “factual” sources is in question. Donna Beasley notes that while pedigree documents “may be accurate portrayals of a family’s lineage,” they are also “boring to read” (32). According to Beasley, the product of the genealogical investigation should be more than a family history, it should be a family heritage (32). We might imagine that genetic genealogy enthusiasts would align with Doane and Bell, but Smolenyak Smolenyak and Turner encourage researchers to “start at home,” collecting both documents and stories from family members, and emphasize that genetic ancestry testing is a new – but not a singular or ultimate – research tool (xi-xii).

produce children (another row in the chart), and so on. While options for charting have been technologized, through the availability of online family-tree building tools and genealogy software, the *form* of the chart itself has remained a primary investigative tool in biomedical research, as, for example, molecular geneticists and genetic counselors, who transform “[webs] of oral narratives” into “[sequences] of visual inscriptions which, in turn, become part of larger inscriptions connecting medical pedigrees to the visual display of, say, cytogenetic or molecular biological test results” (Nukaga and Cambrioso qtd. in Lindee 42-43). The family tree hasn’t been lost in the shuffle over genetic genealogy, either; at least one of the largest online genealogy sites (i.e., Ancestry.com) offers test-takers an application for incorporating results into existing trees (or creating new ones, if necessary).

Genealogists have, traditionally, relied on familial accounts and “the paper trail” to produce pedigrees or descendancy trees. To fill in a box on either kind of chart, genealogists collect information about a person’s given name, any name changes, birth date, birth location, date of marriage, and date of death. This information, as well as information necessary to establish the nature of relationship(s) among ancestors, can be found in both familial ephemera and state records. According to Smolenyak Smolenyak and Turner, a researcher has found the equivalent of “genealogical gold” in a range of documents: birth, marriage, and death certificates; obituaries, wedding, and anniversary announcements from newspapers; naturalization and citizenship papers; passports and visas; religious records; a family bible (no other religious texts are mentioned, though this could also have to do with the traditional use of a bible to record family events and relations); letters and addressed envelopes; diaries and journals; photographs; engraved or

embroidered (or otherwise marked) heirlooms; and “any other documents,” including “military, school, occupational, business, land, [and] legal” documents (5). Other sources for genealogical research include census records; records of slavery, forced removal, and government classification (i.e., the Dawes Rolls); records of religious organizations; court records; cemetery records; yearbooks; and plantation records (Rose and Eichholz 7-9).

When they introduced genealogists to genetic ancestry testing, companies, laboratories, and geneticists offered a new source for evidence-gathering. Genetic ancestry testing offers genealogists a kind of historic record that is relatively accessible (in terms of cost and availability), requires minimal knowledge of genetics, and only involves a few steps. Genetic ancestry testing services offered by private companies typically provide information through one of three types of DNA analysis. The first type of DNA test analyzes an individual’s mitochondrial DNA (or mtDNA). Because mitochondrial DNA is transferred through maternal inheritance, its analysis can be used to trace maternal lineages. The second type of test analyzes an individual’s Y-chromosomal DNA sequences, by “examin[ing] 10 to 26 markers on the Y-chromosome, which is passed down from father to son and thus can be used to trace paternal lineages” (Bolnick 1). Y-chromosome tests follow paternal lineage, and as such, they resonate with the hereditarian logics that inform genealogical surname studies, in which individuals are linked through the passing-on of a father’s last name to his children. These two types of tests can be combined to “identify closely-related individuals or groups of people,” and, because both mtDNA and Y-chromosome variation are geographically patterned, they can be used to identify a probably geographic origin for the lineage under investigation

(Bolnick 1-2). The third type of test, biogeographical ancestry analysis, examines several autosomal genetic markers to suggest the larger ancestral groups from which an individual descends. These ancestral groups are defined in terms of region or continent; the scope of the geographical groupings along which the results plot individual ancestry range from the relatively specific (e.g., Southern or Northern European) to the broadly continental (e.g., African/non-African) (Shriver and Kittles 613). The results of biogeographical analysis are based upon statistical calculations, and are reported “in terms of the proportional representation of [ancestry informative markers] from a selection of ancestral populations” (613).

Individuals interested in submitting their DNA for analysis purchase kits from online vendors. Test prices (including kits and analysis) range in price from \$79 or \$99 to \$290 for a paternal, Y-chromosome test, and from \$179 to \$290 for a test of maternal DNA, mtDNA<sup>24</sup>. Once they’ve acquired a test kit, subjects swab the insides of their cheeks and return the cell-covered swabs to the companies by mail. What happens at the lab is not usually addressed in depth on company sites; the DNA-testing section of Ancestry.com, for example, breaks it down in the following terms: “After you swab your cheek and send us your samples, a workforce of robots in our laboratory use chemicals, tubes, and high-tech machines to separate your DNA from the rest of your cheek cells. More robots and computers then take a look at specific locations on your DNA.” After the non-human robot-and-computer actors manipulate and inspect the DNA, “the system”

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<sup>24</sup> Price ranges from a survey of popular genetic ancestry testing sites: africanancestry.com, ancestry.com, dnaancestryproject.com, and rootsforreal.com. While the cost of these tests may render them inaccessible to many, they are far less expensive than the costs one would incur while doing extensive paper-based genealogical research, which often requires travel to town, city, or state archives away from the researcher’s place of residence.

compares two individuals' results to calculate their similarity, their degree of relatedness, and "helps connect you to possible relatives." The ways in which results are reported vary from company to company, and from test to test. Several companies provide clients with a certificate authenticating the information derived from the report for an additional fee.

It's interesting to note that the same material (cheek cells) can be manipulated in ways that change its cost to the consumer (and value to the company); though Roots for Real charges the same for all of its tests (mtDNA, Y-chromosome, and autosomal), Ancestry.com charges more for the mtDNA test than for its Y-chromosome tests; within the Y-chromosome option, consumers can choose a basic test of 33 markers or an "advanced test" of 46 markers. In genetic ancestry testing, cheek cells and DNA become valuable in material ways as well as symbolic ones. Genetic genealogists likely have a different relation to their cheek cells – the material conduit for recent and ancient historical information, for enabling new connections with other biological kin, for forming social connections through participation in surname projects and genetic-genealogical web forums – than those who do not use their cheek cells as a resource. We'll return to the notion of body-as resource, specifically, the archival-body, in a later section.

#### 4.2 At stake in genetic genealogy

One clear and direct way to investigate what matters in genetic genealogy, or how genetic genealogy matters to a variety of constituents is to ask what's at stake, and for whom? Popular reporting about genetic genealogy places a great deal of emphasis on certain kinds of stakes, including identity/identification, access to social recognition, and



access to material benefits. Consumers invest money, and entrust DNA (and the information it contains), to testing companies in exchange for what their test results can help them know, claim, or do.

On April 12, 2006, the *New York Times* initiated its series on “The DNA Age” with an article describing multiple cases in which genetic ancestry tests (tests to determine an individual’s genetic ancestry) were used to establish and support a diverse set of claims. In the article’s first scenario, the ability to secure an advantageous college financial aid package was at stake. A set of college-age twins, Matt and Andrew Moldawer, took a genetic ancestry test to determine whether or not they could apply for certain kinds of financial aid based on their racial status:

“Naturally when you’re applying to college you’re looking at how your genetic status might help you,” said Mr. Moldawer [the twins’ father], who knows that the twins’ birth parents are white, but has little information about their extended family. “I have three kids going now, and you can bet that any advantage we can take we will.” (Harmon)

In another scenario, a property claim is bolstered by genetic evidence. Pearl Duncan, who is descended from Jamaican enslaved people, had already identified the Scottish slave owner who was her mother’s great-great-grandfather through traditional archival research at the time of her test. When her test results “[confirmed] her 10 percent British Isles ancestry,” she was emboldened to contact her cousins in Scotland, who had “built an oil company with his fortune”:

‘It’s one thing to feel satisfied to know something about your heritage, it’s another to claim it,’ said Ms. Duncan, a writer in Manhattan. ‘There’s a kind of checkmateness to the DNA.’

The family’s 11 castles, Ms. Duncan noted, were obtained with the proceeds of her African ancestors’ labor. Perhaps they could spare one for her great-great-great-grandfather’s black heirs? [...] Her appeal, Ms. Duncan said, is mostly

playful. Less so is her insistence that the Scots stop referring to their common ancestors as simply “Virginia and West India merchants.” ‘By acknowledging me, the Scots are beginning to acknowledge that these guys were slaveholders,’ she said. (Harmon)

In both of these scenarios, something larger than strictly genealogical knowledge is at stake; these test results come with (possible) benefits, recognition by institutions and extended relations, and a sense of certainty about heritage.

A 2006 *Newsweek* cover story on genetic genealogy includes several stories of genealogical revelation through DNA<sup>25</sup>. In Kalb’s article DNA and blood contain mysteries and secrets waiting to be uncovered through testing. She writes, for example, that for test subject Debra Ann Royer:

DNA unlocked a deeper mystery. Adopted at birth, Royer knew nothing about her biological parents. But certain physical traits – wide nose, dark skin – led people to guess that she was Iranian or even Cambodian. ‘I always wondered,’ she says. Two hundred dollars and a swab of her cheek gave her an answer: Royer’s maternal ancestors were most likely Native American. The knowledge, she says, ‘*makes you feel more of a person.*’ (47-48, emphasis added)

Royer was working with a tentative hypothesis about her ancestry, based upon visual racial typecasting (by others), and found the results of the test satisfying because they provided her with terms on which she could make herself legible. It’s important to note that the terms of Royer’s legibility are not self-defined but instead, allow her to situate herself in relation to an existing racial category.

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<sup>25</sup> The story features individuals of varied geographic (or, depending on the case and how it’s reported, racial, tribal or ethnic) ancestries. The article does not represent genetic genealogy as mattering more to African Americans (or black Americans) than to other Americans. The *New York Times* article I analyze here also features subjects from a range of backgrounds. While I suspect that testing has been more popular with African Americans and black Americans than with members of other ethnic groups, I don’t have data to confirm this.

Kalb also interviewed Henry Louis Gates, Jr., head of the African American Studies Department at Harvard, for the article<sup>26</sup>. She tells the story of his genetic genealogical quest using dramatic language, and switches back and forth between references to Gates' "blood" and his "DNA." This slippage is worth noting, given the historic rendering of race in terms of blood in the U.S. (i.e., blood quantum, the one drop rule) – Kalb is clearly not interested in maintaining a distinction between social constructs of race and biological notions of racial difference. She writes:

Gates always knew he wasn't 100 percent African American. According to family legend, Gates's only white ancestor was a slave owner named Samuel Brady, who had sex with Gates's great-great-grandmother on a farm in Maryland in the 1800s. But recent DNA analysis turned Gates's world upside down. There was no trace of Brady on Gates's genome. Further testing revealed that Gates, in fact, carries as much Western European blood as he does African – and that one of his white ancestors was probably an Irish servant who met Gates's sixth or seventh great-grandfather sometime before 1700. 'I'm thinking I'm a Brady and maybe I'm from Nigeria, and here I am descended from some white woman,' says Gates. 'It's incredible.' (48)

I want to pause for a moment and note something else: in this article, as in others, people taking tests and receiving results already understand genes as embodying the past. We could analyze Kalb's movement back and forth between the language of "blood" and "genes" as a movement between popular or folk notions of inheritance and scientific ones, or as a sign that we're still in a moment when one kind of bio-social matter hasn't triumphed over the other (i.e., the gene has not superceded the blood in the United States' popular imagination). I'm interested in pursuing a different line of inquiry (if not analysis), prompted by Gates' commentary in another popular venue.

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<sup>26</sup> The publication of which coincided with the initial broadcast of Gates' series on genetic ancestry testing, *African American Lives*.

In 2006, U.S. public television broadcast *African American Lives*, which Gates produced and hosted. The series follows a group of prominent African American figures as they trace their family histories, using traditional genealogical and genetic genealogical methods. In one episode of the series, Gates and his guests go beyond the end of the “paper trail” by taking genetic ancestry tests.

The results of Gates’ admixture test reveal that his ancestry is 50% European and 50% African. Though his family only knew about (and presumed there was) only one white ancestor, the test suggests that half of Gates’ ancestors over the past 200 years were white. In the context of the show, Gates acknowledges that the white men in his lineage were likely slave owners. He also makes light of his results, joking: “50% European, I never expected that. I mean, do I still qualify for affirmative action? Can I get a reparations check? Half a reparations check? I have the blues. Can I still have the blues?” His jokes play on anxieties surrounding racial classification and status (i.e., who’s entitled to what benefits), and to what extent he can still claim the cultural heritage he’s assumed throughout his life. The jokes also rely on racial logics that embed cultural matters in biological substance<sup>27</sup> -- logics that aren’t new to discourses around genes. In the late nineteenth century in the United States and Europe, “blood” was “for many a solvent in which all processes were dissolved and processes commingled,” while “race” was defined in terms of “accumulated cultural differences carried somehow in the blood” (Stocking 6). Discourses around race in the early twentieth century (i.e., ethnological, Lamarckian, polygenist, and evolutionist thought and practice) understood “linkages of

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<sup>27</sup> Of course, the relationship isn’t as simple as pure-culture embedded in – or contaminating, or enriching – pure-nature. The biological matter of *blood* is made an object within discourses and practices that define a particular substance *as blood*.

lineage and kinship” as essential to definitions of race. At this point, “no great distinction could be maintained between linguistic, national, familial, and physical resonances implied by the terms kinship and race” (Haraway 232-33). Blood lines, and blood ties, were the means for the “physical and historical passage of substance from one generation to the next, forming the great nested, organic collectives of the human family” (Haraway 233). Blood ties mattered in the determination of kinship and the definition of race; family relations and racial difference (or sameness) could be explained in terms of this particular kind of matter that carried both biological and cultural heritage forward.

The reason I pause to talk about blood is that it’s important to note, amidst popular emphasis on the newness of genetic genealogy, that genes-race-and-culture are being discussed in ways blood-race-and-culture have been for awhile. Given the logical tradition that links blood to kinship *and* race, biological relation *and* cultural tradition, it’s hard to imagine that these wouldn’t be the terms on which we’d come to understand this other carrier-substance, the gene<sup>28</sup>.

The concern that arises, for scientists and social scientists, especially, is that this re-iteration of relations – in which social and cultural matters are imbricated with essential, embodied material – only reinforces the notion that “race” is a meaningful difference which can be biologically defined, and this difference can be used to justify oppressive ideologies and practices (Hammonds). The stories of genealogical success that

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<sup>28</sup> We should also attend to the fact that the gene, itself, isn’t all that new as an object through which differences are made meaningful and both physical and socially-defined traits are explained. Though biologists, geneticists, historians, disability studies scholars and science studies scholars have critiqued and denounced eugenic thought and practice, the logics behind eugenics – the idea that one could be genetically-predisposed to socially-undesirable characteristics, or for that matter, socially-desirable ones, isn’t far gone.

have been broadcast on public television<sup>29</sup>, published in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*, and used as content for genetic ancestry testing companies (on their websites and, in one case, in an infomercial) have not gone unnoticed by critics. Bioethicists, geneticists, social scientists, biologists, and other natural scientists have responded to the threat posed by the popularization of genetic ancestry testing (i.e., the reassertion of biologized notions of racial differences) in a few different ways: by critiquing the methods testing companies use to conduct their calculations or communicate results (problems with the companies' scientific practice), by reminding readers of past scientific abuses and racist social ideologies justified with biologically-legitimized notions of racial difference, or by raising the spectre of genetic discrimination or the misuse of genetic information. These critiques do not receive much (if any) attention in popular representations of genetic genealogy, but that doesn't mean there isn't room for intervention and argument. In the context of *African American Lives*, Gates uses his test results to make an argument about how his results can change the way we think about race.

In addition to the admixture test, Gates takes Y chromosome & mtDNA tests. The results of the Y chromosome test suggest that Gates also has a European Y chromosome, which means that “all [his] hopes for an African connection lie within a small section of [his] mitochondrial DNA.” The geneticists conducting tests for the series, Rick Kittles, Fatima Jackson, and Peter Forster, all consult their databases in search of mtDNA matches for Gates (no workforce of robots here!). The biggest clusters (“dots”) of matches they find are between Paris & Dublin, with one African data point, around

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<sup>29</sup> *African American Lives* was popular enough to warrant a second season, which aired in 2008.

Egypt. The tests suggest that it's most probable that he's descended from indentured servants before the colonial period, "one black male and one white female" (note the use of racial categories here). "I did this series so I could find out where in Africa my ancestors were from," Gates comments as he ponders his results, "And the irony of my life is it turns out that I'm descended from the African province known as Ireland or France or Northern Europe." When Gates' genetic test results are in tension with his intellectual and political commitments, he jokes about his heritage and its implications for his academic career. He also emphasizes the socially-transformative power of genetic ancestry testing when he asserts that DNA is "turning ideas of racial purity upside down." This is especially important, Gates maintains, given our situation as members of "a culture full of evidence of how those ideas [re: racial purity] have poisoned relations between so-called 'black people' and so-called 'white people'" and have "strained even relations between African American people" (i.e., through internalized racism).

While DNA may be turning ideas of racial purity "upside down" for Gates and his viewers, genetic ancestry testing is still being used to determine whether others can claim to possess genetic material that is discernably "Native American" (i.e., DNA that would connect one to an ancestor who was "entirely" or "purely" – in genetic or other physical/biological terms -- Native American). Those tribes using genetic ancestry testing to measure who is "truly Indian" are arbitrating claims for access to a range of benefits (TallBear 82). As Kimberly TallBear maintains, the use of DNA analysis constitutes a "contemporary and perhaps more sophisticated form of eugenics [that] equates genetic markers with cultural continuity and seeks to use DNA to support or deny an individual or group claims to cultural and political rights" (82). The use of DNA testing as a means

for granting (or denying) rights to individuals and groups resonates with the logic of blood quantum, in which “racial authenticity” is measured by the amount of Indian “blood” an individual can claim through his or her familial line (82). Once again, we find old logics informing new discussions, and matters of biology, culture, and “race” difficult (if not impossible) to disentangle.

#### 4.3 Provenance and pedigree

Making a connection between provenance and pedigree (a specific principle and record of kinship) isn’t difficult. According to the Society of American Archivists, provenance is “a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the *individual, family, or organization* that created or received the items in a collection. The principle of provenance or the *respect des fonds* dictates that records of different origins (provenance) be kept separate to preserve their context” (emphasis mine). Note that, under this principle, the contents of the archive, itself, may be organized and defined by family unit. In archival and museum collections, provenance can also be an object, “a textual record of the origins of a given object,” which archivists and curators use to document the *chain of custody* for objects that enter their collections (Lindee 41). The concept of provenance is also used in forestry management practices, in which case it refers to “a record of genetic stock” (41). These forms of provenance – documented in textual and genetic records – serve to authenticate and legitimate the origin stories that accompany a diverse set of actors, including documents, paintings, seeds, and people. The standard of provenance is evident in the practice of genealogy as researchers create their own pedigrees to document personal and familial origin stories. The results of genetic ancestry testing also operate within the logic of provenance, as they produce a genetically-defined



origin story – a chain of genetic custody – for individuals and populations. Genealogists – whether they are working with archival records or genetic information – may not be familiar with the concept of provenance, but they are likely conversant in the language that surrounds the concept: that of origins, genetic stock, pedigrees, and family trees.

I'm not interested in conducting a comparison of how provenance and pedigree are similar or different, and don't explore the history of these principles – and the practices associated with them – here. Following the overarching project of the chapter, I'm interested in questions of mattering. Specifically, I want to consider how the relationships established and recognized by these organizing principles *matter to archives*.

In both genealogical and archival practice, relationships of provenance and pedigree are established and defined in terms of property and ownership within family units. This property may be material the family owns – i.e., records, buildings, land, or other forms of wealth – or the actual material that constitutes the family; the genes, the blood, the bodies of parents and children. The organization of the pedigree reminds us of another kind of ownership: the surnames that connect generations are usually those of men in the family, whose wives and children “take” or are “given” the name passed down through the male line. In the familial arrangements represented by pedigree charts, genetic inheritance “neatly matches Euro-American systems of patronymic inheritance” and “the flow of life from father to son guides the flow of property between men” (Nash 12). As Catherine Nash observes, within this system, women function as “vehicles for the transmission of life and identity from father to son but are simultaneously the focus of anxiety about the legitimate bequest of genes, names and property” (12). In this context,

legitimacy hinges on the alignment of sexual reproduction within the legal-social arrangement of the Euro-American family (i.e., procreation and continuation of the family by married pairs).

It's important to remember that this isn't the only situation in which *legitimacy* is defined in terms of legal-biological terms of relatedness. The discussion of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in the previous chapter provides one example of how legal-biological legitimacy matters to archives: materials cannot be donated to conventional archives by individuals with "illegitimate" relations (i.e., queer kinship, communal, or other affective relations) to record creators because these relationships are, for the most part, not recognized on either legal or heterosexual-familial terms. When the chain of custody for these records does not and cannot align with legally-recognized relationships, archivists aren't able to accept them. This practice effectively bars many glbt and queer individuals from donating material to conventional repositories, and even in radical archives (like the LHA), materials that have been accepted without clear provenance cannot be used in other contexts (i.e., for publication or in films) because of concerns about ownership (with ownership comes the ability to grant permission for the use of records).

The imperative to build collections based on narrowly-defined legal and biological-familial relationships – to continue to let pedigree determine (or at least strongly inform) how provenance will be enacted and chain of custody defined – is foundational to archival practice in the United States. It's important to recognize the risk we take, however, when archival systems are strongly allied with legal-biological relations. My sense that this systemic imbrication of the archival systems and legal-biological relations poses a specific kind of *risk* to archives emerges in conversation with

TallBear's work on the use of genetic ancestry testing to determine tribal affiliation. When tribes are narrowly, biologically defined, the terms on which individual members can claim affiliation are strictly limited, as is tribal cultural and political self-determination (84). The tribe that would result from a genetically-defined lineage would not necessarily be a collective formed on broader terms of affiliation, i.e., in relation to cultural, spiritual, historical, geographic, and political experience. In the current context, archivists conceptualize risk in terms of legal constraints and the threat posed by records that are not clearly deeded to the archives. I suggest we also think about risk in terms of what gets excluded *because of* legal constraints. What other forms of kinship, affiliation, or community could be represented in the development and organization of archives? What other (non-traditional Euro-American) epistemologies could contribute to the expansion of terms on which provenance is recognized?

The point here is that systems based on biological-legal arrangements will necessarily exclude those who cannot – or do not choose to—participate. It's important to recognize that provenance, this principle that seems neutral, is defined in terms of patriarchal systems of genetic and material inheritance. I don't suggest that archivists abandon the principle or the practice, but do want us to recognize that the principle both represents and participates in the valuation, recognition, and legitimization of some kinds of relations over others.

#### 4.4 The archival-body

In the context of genetic ancestry testing, the body functions as a repository of genetic information – acting as what I call the archival-body. This instance of archival refiguring is compelling because the turn to the archival-body represents a

reconfiguration of power relations between archives and subjects, specifically in determinations of racial or national status, and broadly in processes of subjection<sup>30</sup>. State and colonial archives have, historically, been instrumental in defining and supporting systems of racial classification, which have, in turn, determined the social and political conditions in which subjects live. Importantly, archives have supported the implementation of policies and practices, as well as the distribution (or withholding) of benefits, contingent on one's racial status<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Here I refer to Judith Butler's theory of subjection. In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler defines "subjection" as both the process of becoming a subject and the process by which the subject becomes subordinated to power. The subject "emerges through a primary submission to the categories, terms and names established by the concatenations of power relations that precede and extend beyond the subject they hail into being" (Mills 270). This means that the subject's existence is recognized by others *and* by the subject itself through social categories that are not of its making, i.e., gender, sexuality, and race or ethnicity. The subject's primary submission to power entails its desire for "the conditions of its own subordination in order to persist as a social being," because existing-under-subordination is better than not existing at all (270). Butler posits that the relations of power, or the conditions of possibility, that make the subject possible are, themselves, open to transformation; power can also be "taken up and reiterated in the subject's 'own' acting" (Butler 14). In other words, the subject of power both *belongs to* and *wields* power, and this reversal allows the subject to "[eclipse] the conditions of its own emergence" and intervene in the reiteration of the power relations that conditioned its emergence (Butler 14). Butler's theorization is relevant to my discussion here because it allows us to address both how archives factor into the subordination of the subject (as instruments in projects to define and determine racial classification) and how subjects are participating in their own subjection through genetic ancestry testing (seeking self-knowledge in terms of the geographic-racial schema offered by testing companies).

<sup>31</sup> A compelling example of the ability of the archive (here standing in for also archivists and the bureaucracy the archive supports) to exercise these kinds of power comes from Laura Bear's ethnography of the families of Anglo-Indian railway workers who were employed by the East Indian Railway Company. In 1927, the Company developed a system for determining which employees would be eligible for retirement to Europe. This system was supported and maintained with an archive, the East Indian Railway Nationality Files. Under the new system, rights of domicile were determined on the basis of one's "place of education, ownership of property and the maintenance of kinship links by marriage and sentimental relations to a country" (Bear 359). Those who achieved the status of non-Asiatic domicile were eligible for the privileges of "higher pay, a Sterling provident fund and periodic furloughs in Europe, and would have their passage back to Europe paid on retirement" (359). In this system, race didn't disappear, but was coded in terms of one's nationality – defined through heritage and kinship.

Since the Railway Company privileged documentary evidence in railway workers' claims to European, or "non-Asiatic," social relations and heritage, Anglo-Indian railway workers sought to produce or secure evidence of connection to Europe for the railway company's files. Note that this is another instance of relations mattering to archives. The system discouraged employees from including information about or documentation of Indian ancestors in their files. Indian relations were "rendered irrelevant to this public archive and became a private and disabling secret. [...] a failure to produce documents or a silence about the origins of female relatives were always interpreted by officials as a sign that the worker had disabling kinship connections to India" (362).

The archival-body of genetic ancestry testing may seem like a significant departure – or even disentanglement – from histories of bodily subordination and subjection in relation to archives. The archival-body of genetic ancestry testing is the primary source of ancestral information and data: individuals do not need to locate and collect documents from archives and other sources to articulate knowledge about their geographic or familial ancestry. The archival-body contains its record – the information within cannot be lost or destroyed – and no one is compelling genetic genealogists to pursue their research projects. As a source of information that allows individuals to produce historical knowledge that extends beyond forced migrations, the archival-body provides an alternative to the paper record or the collective memory of the family. Because its data are rendered in quantifiable terms, the archival-body provides information that seems more reliable than that provided by the extant record. For example, information derived from the archival-body may not seem susceptible to bias or subjective interpretation. But for all of these points of distinction, and of possibility and promise, the archival refiguring that takes place through genetic ancestry testing still involves processes of subjection.

Examples I discussed earlier in this chapter demonstrate that genetic ancestry testing shapes subjects' sense of self, and even their sense of legibility *as subjects*. Recall that when Debra Ann Royer received her test results, she observed that the knowledge about her (likely) Native American ancestry “makes you feel more of a person.” When she received her test results, she could understand herself in terms of a culturally- and biologically-defined group (even though the category of “Native American” is still broad), she had a categorization, and could inform people about herself on those terms.

It's also important to recognize that in addition to being racialized (or granted a geographic origin or ancestral heritage), the archival-body is also gendered. Genetic ancestry tests reduce gender identities to “maternal femininity and paternal masculinity” (Nash 25). Catherine Nash observes that in this reduction, “not only are gendered identities geneticized but a version of genetic personhood emerges. The emphasis on paternal and maternal lines in the past is projected into the future. When identity is defined retrospectively by parentage and prospectively by parenthood [...] failure to reproduce, whether by choice or by circumstance is a failure to be fully human” (25). The archival-body reaches a limit here, one which would require some genealogists to develop new documentary forms<sup>32</sup>, or create multiples, for families in which parenting involves “birth” and “adoptive” parents, or two mothers or two fathers, or three parents, etc. While the archival-body could yield information about an adopted person's genetic heritage, the meaning of that information would be highly dependent on how the person relates to her multiple parents and extended families, and what her investment is in coming to understand herself on terms other than those her parents chose for her (i.e., member in the social category of “adopted child”). A queer critique of genetic ancestry testing would also remind us of the costs and benefits that accompany genetic explanations. For example, as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer subjects are continually called to account for their sexual difference, having recourse to a “gay gene” as the cause of this difference, may allow some homosexual subjects to understand themselves as

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<sup>32</sup> I wonder what would happen if we focused on the roots, for example, instead of the branches of the family tree. A rhizomatic structure could be a real problem-solver for many of us who want to account for multiple modes and forms of being family.

“naturally” gay – not having a choice, subject to a biologically-determined sexual orientation. At the same time, queer subjects who resist naturalizing or normalizing discourses may be further marginalized because they choose to live in certain ways.

While it yields data for the individual, the archival-body may provide data for other kinds of “bodies.” These bodies may have investments in the utility or continued significance of racial categories: the nation-state, pharmaceutical corporations, state law enforcement, and, of course, genetic ancestry testing services. As we imagine the liberatory promise of the archival-body, we need to also retain an awareness of how this body is connected to other kinds of archives in significant ways.

#### 4.5 Genealogy and/as a biopolitical project

In this final section of the chapter, I consider one last line of inquiry<sup>33</sup>. A primary reason social scientists, as well as anthropologists of science, historians of science, and activists, are wary of public participation in genetic ancestry testing is the potential transfer of genetic information to larger state- and corporately-sponsored biopolitical projects. When individuals submit their DNA for analysis with testing companies or similar initiatives, they give up some control of their genetic information (in terms of both knowledge of “what’s in their DNA” and of ability to control how that information is used) in exchange for information about ancestry. We can observe this happening with The Genographic Project – a joint venture between IBM and the National Geographic Society which aims to “combine population genetics and molecular biology to trace the migration of humans from the time we first left Africa 50,000 to 60,000 years ago, to the

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<sup>33</sup> My initial discussion here gestures toward a future direction for thought and analysis, not so much an analytic closure.

places where we live today” – invites public participation by Americans, who can purchase a test kit for \$99.95 and submit their cheek cells for analysis (qtd. in Hammonds). In the Genographic Project, for example, individuals’ DNA samples are analyzed, stored, and then owned by IBM and the National Geographic Society.

Mainstream reporting about the Project (i.e., in the *New York Times*) did not raise any

serious concerns [...] about the launch of a project to create one of the largest privately owned DNA databases in the country. [...] The public was given no information about the potential problems that this project raises, the most obvious being questions of privacy, future use of the DNA that will reside in the database, and even the waste of money that might have gone elsewhere. (Hammonds)

When participants submit their genetic material to the Genographic Project, they entrust their personal genetic information to bodies that are not accountable to anyone other than their governing boards and shareholders. The idea that “genomics can be a part of individual empowerment, and even ‘recreation’” must be balanced with an awareness of this particular form of “recreational” research “[gives] rise to databases that are used to arbitrate the kind and amount of resources an individual will receive” (Reardon “Race and Biology” 376).

Reardon characterizes the present moment of racial problematization<sup>34</sup> -- emerging in part through genetic ancestry testing practices, but also through newly-available, direct-to-consumer genetic tests for illness – as one in which

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<sup>34</sup> Reardon distinguishes the present problematization of race from earlier moments of problematization on spatial-temporal terms. In earlier moments, it was possible to trace stages in the politicization and de-politicization of biological sciences. In the first half of the twentieth-century, nation-states, including the United States, England, and Germany, “defined race in oppressive ways, enabling eugenic policies. This [...] represented the politicization of human differences” (375). This period of politicization was then followed by a period of de-politicization, when in the second half of the twentieth century, “states, through practices of self-identification, purportedly granted the power to define race to individuals, thus eliminating the states’ need to draw upon the biological sciences to define race” (375). In the case of twentieth-century eugenic (science, ideology, and policies), for example, the temporal separation helped the identification of moments when the two spheres, science and society, “[encroached] on one another” because “a different



purification and entanglement, politicization and de-politicization, control by the state and individual empowerment, the negation of biological concepts of race and their proliferation happen concurrently. At the same time that the genetic ancestry tests act to delink race from the state through “individualizing” the experience of racial identification, data from these tests are used to build DNA databases that support an increasing number of state-organized biopolitical projects<sup>35</sup>. (375)

Reardon’s and Hammonds’ analysis is concerned with the (present and future) implications of research into the past through genetic means. I’m curious about how their linking of genetic genealogical pursuits with state interests can inform our thinking about the imbrication of traditional genealogical pursuits and state biopolitical projects. If we revisit the list of documentary “gold” articulated by Smolenyak Smolenyak and Turner, we find that most of the records that genealogists employ in their projects are produced as part of biopolitical processes, i.e., state records of births, deaths, and marriages; documents that track immigration and naturalization; and school, military, and other institutional records. These documents bear witness to the ways in which both the family and the state make the same documents meaningful in different ways. An in-depth analysis of the use of state records for genealogical research would allow us to trace the ways in which these records not only document families but constitute them. In other words, we could ask: How might state documents not only recognize and legitimate family relations, but also strongly inform the terms on which families know themselves? Does this traditional documentary interplay between the state and the family have any bearing on how participants in genetic ancestry testing projects understand their

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temporal moment offered a space for separation: the separation of biology from society, truth from politics, and ideology from power” (375). Reardon maintains that though these separations never actually occurred, the dominant *belief* was that they did. This belief in the separation was powerful enough to “create the conditions for the return of the race problem in biology” (375).

<sup>35</sup> For example, DNA-based racial profiling and race-based medicine. See Simons, “Getting DNA to Bear Witness” and Kahn, “Race in a Bottle.” I have necessarily bracketed my discussion here to focus on genetic

(potential) enmeshment with state biopolitical projects? Does genetic ancestry's emphasis on transnational connection obscure (or direct attention away from) the use of data for state purposes, or for transnational corporate interests?

#### 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter, like its object, resists a tidy closure (John Law might call it “a mess,” since “it<sup>36</sup> isn't very clear what matters or what doesn't. Or to put it differently, a whole lot of different things matter” (2)). I approached genetic genealogy by thinking through the frameworks of problematization and mattering – as ways of exploring different lines of inquiry that might not be immediately apparent. An analysis of genetic genealogy, which is taken up by individuals, but also matters to families, to states, to tribes, to corporations, and to large-scale research projects (and more) needs to recognize these different levels of matter-ing and valuing. The story needs to be more complex than one which suggests that genetic genealogy is a liberating or subordinating practice, more complicated than one in which we assert that the meaning and power of traditional racial logics and discourses are simply reiterated or challenged by test subjects and reporting in major news sources (all of these things seem to be happening at the same time).

Additionally (and most importantly for archivists), a critical engagement with genealogy – genetic and traditional – leads us to examine how specific kinds of relations constitute archives, and to consider how biologically- and legally-defined terms of inheritance matter to archives. While we tend to think in unidirectional terms around genealogy – of archives mattering to individuals who are trying to establish or document

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ancestry testing, not medical or criminal uses of genetic information. But we should not forget that social, political, and personal understandings of race and kinship are also being problematized in these arenas.

<sup>36</sup> “It” being genetic genealogy, not the chapter, I hope!

relationships – it's important to recognize that archives, themselves, are structured in accord with systems of kinship and inheritance that are particularly Euro-American, and organized around heterosexual reproduction and the legal transfer of property. These systems aren't neutral, are exclusive, and do matter – both in the development of archival collections and (remember *The Watermelon Woman*) to researchers who may not encounter materials that support the articulation of individual and communal histories on terms other than the biological-legal.

## CHAPTER 5

### ARCHIVING FROM THE GROUND UP

My previous chapters demonstrate how we can interpret alternative, unconventional archives as responses to particular problems. In the second and third chapters, I examined how documentation projects by The Atlas Group, Cheryl Dunye, and Shahar Rozen respond to the problem of missing archival records by drawing attention to their absence and developing alternative documentary strategies and forms. In the previous chapter, I explored the implications of genetic genealogy for individual researchers and the groups with which they seek affiliation. When the results of genetic tests challenge other ways of knowing about the past, researchers and groups must decide what kinds of evidence to accept. In these chapters, I focused on how individuals (artists, documentarians, researchers) address the problem of missing (or insufficient, or non-extant) archival records. Individual responses to these problems emerge from sites outside conventional archives, and while they're effective in different contexts (i.e., in theatres and galleries) they do not bring about changes in archival practice. In this chapter, I delineate a critical archival practice called archiving from the ground up. This

practice responds to archival exclusions – specifically the historic exclusion and under-documentation of queer cultures in archival collections – by working with members of those cultures to document the present and create a record for the future.

My conceptualization of archiving from the ground up arises from a set of conversations I have had with my friend and collaborator, Christa Orth, as I have worked with her and other archivists on two projects documenting drag king performance cultures<sup>37</sup>. The first project documented a set of drag king troupes in New Orleans, the second documents an annual event, the International Drag King Community Extravaganza. The subjects of these projects are performance-based, queer cultures that cohere around a set of events, spaces, and practices. They are transitory: performers change the terms or nature of their involvement from year to year; shows migrate, occupying new spaces; and venues change hands, or close, or reinvent themselves. These are cultures in which we've participated, and with which we have a history; our interest in archiving and documentation is motivated by our belief in their significance and singularity, as well as our love for them. We have learned from experience, however, that our investments and love, our willingness to work to build collections, and our good intentions as participants *and* archivists, aren't enough – at least not when we want to get others involved in our efforts. When performers have resisted participating in these projects, we have paid attention to why and how they have resisted – and have revised our approaches accordingly.

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<sup>37</sup> I don't intend my definition of archiving from the ground up to be comprehensive or final. I am interested in suggesting how I came to think about the practice in the context of my collaborations with Christa and others. Her definition of archiving from the ground up would likely differ from mine, and it would incorporate her reflections on teaching college students how to document queer community

Archiving from the ground up is a collaborative, participatory archiving practice<sup>38</sup>. In archiving from the ground up, archivists *work with* members of the communities and cultures we hope to document, instead of creating projects or building collections on their behalf. We respond to moments of resistance from community participants, and use these moments of resistance to identify and interrogate assumptions that inhere within conventional archival approaches to documentation and appraisal. Because archiving from the ground up is responsive and dialogic with its constituents (both participants and archivists), it is continually in-the-making: intrinsically unpredictable, and subject to revision and change. For those of us working on the drag king documentation projects, this approach emerged in response to moments when (mostly) traditional archival practices and power relations garnered resistance. Telling the story of each project, and of the challenges we encountered, allows me to contextualize, introduce, and define archiving from the ground up. For reasons of chronology (which project came first) and narrative coherence, I focus first on the New Orleans Drag King Collection Project (the Project) first, and then discuss the Extravaganza.

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histories, and to put that knowledge into practice by volunteering with the Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest.

<sup>38</sup> Once it had taken shape, we learned our approach shared some emphases with participatory action research. Notably, participatory action research treats participants “as competent and reflexive agents capable of participating in all aspects of the research process; integrates values and beliefs that are indigenous to the community into the central core of the interventions and outcome variables; involves participants and researchers in collaborative processes for generating knowledge; and treats diverse experiences within a community as an opportunity to enrich the research process” (14). Our approach also supports the aim of supporting individual and community self-determination by encouraging self-

## 5.1 Aims of the New Orleans Drag King Collection Project

The New Orleans Drag King Project was the brainchild of Cristina Hernandez, librarian at the Newcomb College Center for Research on Women, who approached me with the idea of building an archival collection documenting drag king performance cultures in New Orleans. I would bring my experience with drag kinging in New Orleans, Columbus, Ohio, and the Extravaganza to the project, along with my knowledge from the archives course offered by my library school. From the start, we wanted the Project to incorporate as many perspectives as possible, from individuals who were involved in king performance in New Orleans in diverse ways. For our project, this meant that we wanted to identify the different actors and practices that constitute drag king culture in New Orleans, and to invite participation from individuals who were engaged in these practices: kings and other performers doing acts and putting on shows, venue managers hosting shows and providing spaces for performances to happen, and fans creating an audience for king performances and sustaining king culture.

We wanted to capture more information about drag king performance than we could glean from promotional fliers, and photographs and videos of performances. While we actively collected those materials, they did not offer the kind of information we deemed most valuable for future researchers. Fliers, photos, and videos, alone, couldn't help researchers establish or interpret points of connection (or conflict) between troupes performing in the city, and wouldn't incorporate information from or about non-performers involved in the scene. Those material forms were also limited in their ability to be representative of kings' experiences – we wanted to document how kings thought

about their performances, and to ask them to reflect on the significance and function(s) of king shows – in local lesbian and queer women’s communities or counterpublics, and in relation to other variety arts and queer performance in New Orleans. My thinking about what to collect and how was strongly informed by work on unconventional archives in queer studies and performance studies (recall the discussion of unconventional archives in the Introduction): I wanted to figure out how to collect more than factual information (who performed in what show, or belonged to which troupe, or where shows were held, etc.), to develop ways to document the affective dimensions of performance and troupe membership and dissolution. In a city where troupes proliferated (formed and disbanded as members developed different performance interests, politics, or social affiliations), it seemed important to document the affective factors in the formation and reformation of performance groups. In order to incorporate this kind of information in our collection, we decided to collect oral histories.

We believed it was important for the collection to be housed in New Orleans, for two reasons. First, we wanted participants and donors to access and contribute to the collection, and this would be much easier if the collection was located in the city. Second, we wanted to collect and preserve something akin to Shilton and Srinivasan’s concept of “empowered narratives,” “records and histories spoken directly by traditionally marginalized communities, embedded within the local experience, practice, and knowledge of that community” (90). We wanted to collect and preserve narratives that were as much about the experience of drag kinging as they were about the experience of being part of a particular queer culture, in a particular place, New Orleans. When we

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participatory action research to archiving from the ground up is a possibility I hope to explore in the future.



conducted interviews with kings, fans, and venue managers, we asked questions that we hoped would make embedded, implicit knowledge explicit, and treated any interested participant as a possessor – and communicator – of such knowledge.

## 5.2 Choosing to work from the top-down

The decision to work from the top-down is often a non-decision; alternative approaches aren't widely taught in archival courses or represented in the professional literature. In the case of the New Orleans project, however, our decision to take a top-down approach was an intentional (and well-intentioned) choice. Our approach was top down in two key respects: structurally – through our institutional affiliation – and methodologically.

### 5.2.1 Institutional affiliation

We chose to work within an existing structure, to seek out an institutional affiliation, because we felt it would be irresponsible and unethical to start collecting records, papers, and oral histories without having secured space in a reliable repository. Having an institutional affiliation allowed us to access that space – a clear benefit. At the same time, working in an institutional context meant that we were required to operate within established administrative and regulatory structures. These structures determined the parameters of our praxis, because they required that we submit our project for approval from an Institutional Review Board, which, in turn, affected our recruitment and interview practices. Our institutional location also meant that the collection was physically removed from the drag king scene and its participants. In this way, the institutional home of the project meant that it was local, but perhaps not local enough for prospective participants.

### 5.2.2 Regulating knowledge

Our Center affiliation meant that the project's oral history component had to be approved by an institutional review board (IRB). We were required to submit recruitment materials and interview questions to the IRB, which limited our ability to develop new materials, revise our interview questions, or change the focus of our recruitment efforts on the fly. By working within an institutional structure, we lost some of the flexibility and decision-making power we could have exercised as independent researchers. Most importantly, working under the IRB meant that we structured the articulation of the empowered narratives we were trying to preserve. While participants could "speak directly" to us and our camera (they could control the content of their responses), their speaking was regulated and determined in alignment with externally-imposed knowledge practices.

### 5.2.3 The limits of the local

Along with regulatory constraints, our location – in a women's research center, on the Tulane University campus, in Uptown New Orleans – also compromised our ability to create a locally-embedded context for the collection. We discovered that our understanding of local – in geographic terms (local at the city, not neighborhood level) and in epistemological terms (local knowledges) – was not as nuanced or specific as it might have been.

When we developed a recruitment strategy for the collection, we drew upon our own local knowledges: we did the same things we'd do if we were publicizing a king show, employing the same methods I used to recruit performers for Fe-Male Trouble when I moved to New Orleans. We posted fliers at key sites around town, handed out fliers at drag king shows, and talked about the project (informally) with friends involved in drag performance in the city, as well as their friends and other performers we knew. The fliers announced the existence of the New Orleans Drag King Collection Project, described who and what we were looking for in developing the collection, included a URL for the Project website, and provided contact information (Cristina's work email address and phone number).

We put up posters and fliers in all of the places I'd advertised Fe-Male Trouble shows (or, all of the places that were still open for business), and where we'd seen local bands, burlesque performers, and theatre troupes advertise their events: coffee shops, cafes, the lesbian & gay community center, the Tulane University campus, and community arts spaces. We flied in neighborhoods where we knew drag kings and lesbian/queer women lived: the Marigny, the Bywater, and the upper and lower Garden District. Cristina carried fliers around town with her, and handed them out (with organizers' permission) when she went to shows.

We did our best to get fliers into the hands of potential participants, and to raise awareness of the project, but our fliers didn't yield many recruits. Given that we were fliering in places where locals knew to look for fliers, where they would expect to see information about projects and events by local performers, I don't think that we could have distributed our material in smarter ways, or in better places. We designed the fliers

to match our documentation and archiving interests: we wanted as many people to identify with the project as possible. We wanted to involve people who thought of themselves as drag kings, but also wanted to address local performers involved in other kinds of gender-transgression or gender-play, butch or masculine performers, or male impersonators. We chose our words in accord with this objective, hoping our fliers would communicate our recognition that kings and gender-transgressive performers in the city were *not* the same across troupes. At the same time that we were using our local knowledge to recruit participants, we established distance between ourselves and other participants in one key way: we recruited on behalf of the Project and the Center – we didn’t advertise the project as one by “Alana/Red Rider and Cristina”. We imagined that emphasizing our institutional affiliation legitimized us as (non-profit, academic) researchers, and created a sense of stability for the project. But the project’s emergence from a research institution – instead of from a community arts group, or an activist collective, or a local queer group – might have rendered it suspect because the Center and its staff weren’t clearly connected to the scene.

When we conducted the interviews at the Center, instead of in people’s homes or in drag venues, we brought performers into a space that wasn’t part of the scene, nor a part of the community of practice (there were no rehearsals held at the Center, for example, the way they might be in different kings’ houses). Most performers didn’t live near Tulane, which is situated in the wealthy Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans. Paying a visit to the Center could be time-consuming (requiring a 40-50 minute bus or

streetcar ride from downtown to campus); free, nearby parking was hard to find; and the visit could be intimidating for participants who didn't feel comfortable in the social or academic environment of the campus.

#### 5.2.4 Methodological concerns

The methodology we employed for the New Orleans Project was akin to documentation advocacy (though at the time, we didn't have the language to describe our method as such) (Sturgeon 36-37). Documentation advocacy responds to concerns about archival bias, initiating collecting projects that document under-documented groups and organizations – not just mainstream, powerful, or notable groups and individuals (36). Archivist-advocates document the lives of “ordinary people,” and identify and collect those records that are “most vulnerable to disappearing” (36). They “recruit record collections from individuals and groups who lack the institutional connections that normally result in records being donated to archives” (41), and “channel collections into archives which would otherwise be missed [...] building bridges with groups of people who exist outside the normal archival domain” (42).

Archivists who act as documentation advocates identify a group that should be documented, establish a relationship with this group through outreach activities, and then collaborate with the group to build archival collections. Documentation advocacy incorporates the narratives of traditionally marginalized communities in the historic record, and in doing so, challenges the social and archival exclusion of these groups. This kind of archival activism yields collections that represent the diversity of the society being documented in the archives. It responds to “the longstanding archival undervaluing of multicultural narratives, [...] [which] has created a persistent gap in documentation of

the meaningful narratives of a host of peoples” (Shilton & Srinivasan 5). The archives built through documentation advocacy are not neutral; their archivists recognize and address the ways in which archives have promulgated specific (often un-representative and exclusionary) versions of national and community memory. It’s important to note that, while they find bias in the archival record, documentation advocates (and other archival activists) are still invested in the promise of archives and archival practices. Such a shift in practice – toward participatory and community-oriented archiving – does not necessarily mean abandoning traditional archival practices of appraisal, arrangement, and description. Instead, these practices can be rearticulated with the aim of creating “representative, empowered archives” (1).

Collaborations formed through archival activism ideally bring about a “reconciliation between community efforts and the preservation resources of information institutions,” which allows “communities, institutions, and larger publics to learn and gain reciprocally in the creation of a collective memory that acknowledges multiple cultural contexts” (5). This shift toward participation and collaboration is significant for a few reasons. First, it connects community groups with the resources institutions can offer – this is part of what we hoped to achieve with the New Orleans project, using the resources available at the Center to support the documentation of a New Orleans lesbian and queer culture that didn’t have any other home – since “drag king culture” was not associated with a particular venue, community center, or community space – and whose participants did not have access (or time to gain access) to the resources available through the Center. Second, it explicitly recognizes that archiving can be relational: members of under-documented communities may benefit by gaining access to resources, and

archivists (and the publics they serve) also benefit in the exchange – not just because the archive now has a new collection, but also because community knowledges can inform archival practice. These collaborations have the potential to enrich existing archival practices, by adding new dimensions, additional information, and contextual value to records, and to transform archival practice.

While archival-activist approaches – like documentation advocacy – suggest an equitable relation between archivists and local collaborators, there are significant ways in which they still *function* from the top-down. In documentation advocacy projects, archivists exercise power in a variety of ways: they initiate projects, identify which groups should be documented, decide where collections will reside, conduct outreach and education activities, determine the scope and methods for the project (e.g., oral history), and are ultimately responsible for the arrangement and description of records. While working on the New Orleans project, Cristina and I functioned in accord with this hierarchy, exercising our power as archivists in making these decisions. At the same time, we also identified ourselves as participants in the scene.

We believed we were qualified to serve as documentation advocates because of our dual status as participants and archivists. We came to the project with existing ties to the community – I had co-founded Fe-Male Trouble, a drag king troupe, in the city in 2000, and Cristina had participated as a fan – at our shows and others – for several years. We knew that no one else was documenting drag performance in the city, and that there was little documentation of drag kinging in the Midwest or southern U.S. As participants in the New Orleans drag king scene, we knew that none of the troupes or kings were keeping track of troupe histories, ephemera, or even consistently documenting

performances. We knew that, because there wasn't a lesbian bar in the city, and because there were few other lesbian or queer women's social or entertainment events, drag king shows created a temporary space in which New Orleans lesbian public culture became visible. This temporary space and culture were important subjects for documentation. We saw the drag king scene as a discrete object, one we (thought we) knew something about. We assumed that because we were participants *and* archivists we were well-prepared to take on the role of documentation advocates. We imagined that our participant status would enhance our ability to define an object of documentation – the New Orleans drag king community – and to recruit participants from that community.

### 5.3 Feeling the need to advocate

When Cristina and I initiated the Project, we were motivated by a set of feelings that activate many lgbt and queer documentation projects. We looked to archiving as a way to combat (what we perceived as) threats to local, collective memory about drag king performance and culture in New Orleans. Troupes disbanding and re-forming in new configurations, performers moving to other cities, venues closing or changing management, and neighborhood demographics were shifting due to rent hikes (meaning that kings moved, and occupied different spaces in the city) – all of these factors seemed to work against a shared sense of history or knowledge about king culture in the city.

In *An Archive of Feelings*, Anne Cvetkovich writes about her motivations for conducting oral history interviews with lesbians who were members and leaders of ACT UP. When she describes her decision to create this archive – an archive that explicitly addresses the affective and traumatic dimensions of the women's activist work– she is clear about the emotional investments that drive her research project (168). She writes:



I was driven by the compulsion to document that is so frequently, I think, engendered by the ephemerality of queer communities and counterpublics; alongside the fierce conviction of how meaningful and palpable these alternative life worlds can be lies the fear that they will remain invisible or be lost. Oral history can capture something of the lived experience of participating in a counterpublic, offering, if nothing else, testimony to the fact that it existed. Often as ephemeral as the very cultures it seeks to document (since both tapes and transcripts are records of a live event that is past), oral history is loaded with emotional urgency and need. (166)

Cvetkovich posits that the feelings that accompany her research project aren't idiosyncratic. She points toward several prominent queer ethnographic research projects that are similarly motivated, including those by Esther Newton, Madeleine Davis, and Liz Kennedy, and to queer autoethnographic documentary films by Jean Carlomusto, Gregg Bordowitz, Marlon Riggs, and Ellen Spiro (166). With the New Orleans Drag King Collection Project, Cristina and I worked from a set of fears, convictions and desires. We feared that a vital performance culture in the present would go undocumented for the future, and that we were missing the opportunity to document lesbian and queer women's lives in New Orleans – as well as the spaces that supported the (temporary) production of a queer subculture. We were also motivated by our knowledge that what was happening in New Orleans was distinct from drag king cultures in other cities, in terms of performers (not all – and at times not even predominantly – lesbian or queer), venues, kinds of acts, and the integration of drag king performance in a variety of contexts, including cabarets and circuses. I can admit to a personal stake in the project, too: I wanted my contributions – to drag king and queer culture in the city – documented and made legible in both the present (for kings who came after me & didn't know who I was, or what role I played in the scene) and the future.

Addressing these feelings would have been a productive way to explore our joint – perhaps conflicting – commitments and investments as participants and archivists. Articulating our stakes in the project could have provided a way for us to invite participants to join us in conversation about these issues (fragmentation, disappearance) – and perhaps challenge or complicate our perspective in the process. Looking back, we realized that participants didn't share our sense of urgency. They didn't share our anxieties about the loss, fragmentation, or (anticipated) disappearance of drag king culture or history. While we were experiencing these anxieties, we didn't do the necessary work of asking participants if they experienced or interpreted the changes as negative or potentially-threatening, or if they felt the changes were worth documenting.

#### 5.4 Assuming instead of asking

As we neglected to articulate the affective dimensions of our motivations, we also neglected to articulate our motivations or rationale to others. We didn't explain why we thought the project mattered, and didn't ask *if it did matter* to participants. We just assumed “everyone” (read: politically-engaged queer and lesbian feminists living in New Orleans) shared our belief that it's politically, culturally, and historically important to document queer lives. As we talked with our king friends, we discovered that while they liked the idea of the project in theory, they didn't actually want to be interviewed. We also realized that some prospective participants misunderstood our goals – the reasons for the interviews – due to rumors that we were making a documentary or writing a book. These rumors had serious implications; some performers were concerned that we might

profit from their stories, and Cristina recalls feeling that jokes they made – particularly jokes about the interviews and the project making them famous – expressed some real hope (and could lead to some disappointment).

It became clear that, with a few exceptions, local performers didn't *want* to be subject to our advocacy. When we interviewed performers and participants who were interested in the project, we asked them if they thought there was a “drag king community” in New Orleans. As one participant after another rejected that possibility, we discovered that we were advocating for something – an object, a community formed through social relations and practices – that didn't matter to its participants in the same way it mattered to us.

In retrospect, it's clear that we approached the project as participants and archivists acting *for* others – acting *on behalf of* participants instead of acting *with* them. This distinction matters because when archivists act for others, we risk assuming that we know how best to relate to and document communities, and we reify a hierarchy between archivists and participants, in which archivists are the primary (or sole) decision-makers, and participants are informants and donors. With the New Orleans project, we learned that we couldn't assume that our knowledges – as participants in the king scene and as once- or still-local residents of the city – were shared by other participants. We also discovered that taking on the role of archivists-with-institutional-support meant that we were both enabled by our institutional affiliation (i.e. with its resources) and constrained by it, as participants identified us with its (geographic and figurative) distance from the king scene.

## 5.5 Summary of the New Orleans Collection

Between 2004 and 2005, we collected eight oral histories, and received donations of DVDs, photographs, fliers, and videos from shows. The collection doesn't represent all of the troupes active in New Orleans between the mid-1990s and 2005, but it does represent the activities of a few troupes, and the oral histories provide valuable information about relations among most of the (known) troupes, performers, and their supporters in the city (including individuals and groups not represented elsewhere in the collection). During Hurricane Katrina, the interview tapes were damaged and had to be repaired; the only tape that didn't survive the flood was the one containing my interview. We hadn't officially stopped collecting when the hurricane hit New Orleans, but we had to put the project on indefinite hiatus at that point. Cristina's priorities necessarily shifted to living and working in the aftermath of the storm, and dealing with its effects on the library and its collection.

## 5.6 Documenting the International Drag King Community Extravaganza

Because the project went on hiatus, we couldn't apply what we learned to that collection. Luckily, we had the opportunity to continue working and learning in a different context, documenting the International Drag King Community Extravaganza (IDKE). As a member of the IDKE Board from 2003-2006 I'd brought the need for documentation and archiving to the attention of other board members, but in the face of logistical difficulties and some resistance from group members, did not make headway with collecting materials related to the event and its organization.

In our discussions, we had no trouble identifying the practical and logistical problems with establishing a collection. First, there was the problem of identifying which records to collect, and communicating with records creators and record holders (organizers and community members) to facilitate collecting. Record collection and retention has been erratic across IDKE host cities and years. There tends to be a high level of burnout among IDKE organizers; as a result, in the months following IDKE weekends, a number of different host city organizers (the people responsible for bringing IDKE to their town and running the event) have dropped out of communication with the IDKE Board (which oversees the event as it travels). This loss of communication means that at a vital time – while host city organizers still have their papers, ephemera, and electronic files (documents, websites, promotional material) – record holders have dissociated from the event and the stress it caused. During my time as a member of the IDKE Board, I wasn't successful asking host city organizers to do more work at that point, and my efforts to contact past host city organizers a year or two later (to request files) were also fruitless.

There are participants and past organizers who could be willing to donate material if they felt it was no longer useful for planning current and future IDKEs. Board members have argued that it's too early to turn over organizational records, which facilitate information-sharing between cities and years. Because the event moves from city to city, its documentation also moves (literally, as a binder is passed between host city organizers). This use of documentation – as a way to ensure a smooth transition between cities – makes it difficult to distinguish when records have ceased to be useful or current,

or whether they will matter to organizers in the next host city (in other words, host city organizers can't just box up all of their stuff at the end of the weekend and store it somewhere, especially if they need to be able to consult and share documentation).

Record holders may also have difficulty donating material because they aren't emotionally ready to part with their collections, to give up their souvenirs. For many participants, enough time hasn't passed for their IDKE experiences to be distant memories, and they may want to hold onto records in anticipation of a time when they'll want to access their personal collections of ephemera (without visiting an archives). IDKE participants (including me) may also be unwilling to part with their collections until they know where the records are going, and can determine if they trust the repository to care for their records and allow access to them. This reason for resisting-donation ties into the next hurdle in collecting: the problem of collecting records in one location, or coordinating across host cities.

Because IDKE has traveled, and has no home institution, there isn't a central location in which records can be stored. To develop a collection, the community (or its board) would have to identify and agree upon an archival (or other) repository. While IDKE does have a home city – Columbus, where a couple of its founders still live – the LGBT archives there is a new, volunteer- and community-driven project. The Gay Ohio History Initiative (GOHI) was formed in January 2006 in partnership with the Ohio Historical Society (OHS). Its organizers have secured start-up funding and have developed a “collection and curatorial plan to solicit and accept donations of historical items statewide,” and gained a spot on the OHS Board to advocate for the GOHI archives' plans and needs (“About”). Because the GOHI project is so new, and does not

yet have a full-time archivist or other staff, IDKE participants may be cautious about donating, and may consider the repository as a good choice at a later date (when they can expect their material to be processed or accessible by an archival staff, in an established space). But the IDKE community may choose to donate records elsewhere, at an archives with collecting emphases in lesbian or queer women's history, or individual participants may decide to donate to archives that are geographically closer than GOHI's central Ohio location.

Upon realizing that the official collection of IDKE records was a long-term project, one that would require further investigation on the part of the Board, several participants in the event (including me) developed strategies for documenting IDKE that wouldn't require institutional support and that would demonstrate how community members could be major contributors and participants in documentation projects. In 2006, a core group of four IDKE participants – all interested in archiving the event and its history – formed. The group included Christa Orth, Julie Applegate (an IDKE founder and one of my Columbus friends), Cristina Hernandez, and me. A year earlier, we'd presented the idea of documenting IDKE specifically, and drag king culture generally, to members of the IDKE community. First, Cristina and I organized a panel and information-sharing session on documenting drag king culture for IDKE 6 in Chicago. We felt good about the way conversation happened at the session, though we were mostly speaking with other participants who were already doing documentation projects, and didn't need to be convinced that creating an historic record was a worthwhile pursuit. The winter following the Extravaganza, Julie and I started brainstorming about a small-scale, independently-published book project. We thought a book documenting IDKE's history,

and the experiences of its community, would provide a temporary way of gathering and creating documentation, and might generate interest in an archival collecting project. Resistance to the book took the form of low- or non-response to calls for submissions. We encountered similarly low responses to our calls for submissions to a blog and livejournal. We imagined the book and the blog as sites for a participatory, decentralized documentation project, to which participants could directly submit content (including text, images, and video). The projects we'd initiated seemed like good ideas to us, but we hadn't developed them in conversation with other participants, and this seemed like a major factor in participants' lack of enthusiasm.

### 5.7 Archiving from the ground up

As we prepared for the 8<sup>th</sup> Extravaganza, thinking toward the event's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we decided that we needed to change our approach – we needed to create a truly collaborative, dialogic, and responsive approach to documentation. Instead of positioning ourselves as the archivists, we've chosen to work alongside participants – instead of on their behalf, or as their advocates (Johnston 2001, Sturgeon 1996). This approach has allowed us to adopt a set of attitudes and practices that respond to the problems we experienced with the New Orleans project and with early efforts to document the Extravaganza. To illustrate how our practice is responsive, and show how we bring our theory into practice, I provide some examples of how we've practiced archiving from the ground up in this context.

The first problem we encountered was that we assumed that members of these communities would want advocates, would understand our efforts as advocacy on their behalf, for our collective benefit. Our first response involved *advocating for archives*. At



the 8<sup>th</sup> annual Extravaganza, we proposed and facilitated a workshop on do-it-yourself approaches to documenting drag king culture. In this workshop, we were able to perform as archivist-advocates – in limited ways: we communicated rationales for documentation and archiving projects to other participants. We made arguments about the significance of documenting queer cultures and lives, and talked about why we thought documenting drag cultures is important. We borrowed this part of our strategy from documentation advocacy projects, in which archivists communicate the relevance and significance of the collecting project, and the archives, to records creators (e.g., community leaders and members, activist organizations). But our approach asserted that we (archivists) were not the only people capable of doing such a project.

Second, we decided to *ask instead of assuming*. The workshop allowed us to explicitly ask participants if they wanted to take part in a documentation project, with the long-term goal of building an archival collection. The workshop was well-attended, and we could tell that members of the community were interested in at least exploring the idea of documenting the Extravaganza. During the workshop, we asked participants if they would be interested in collaborating on an archival exhibit for the event's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The next problem we identified was that participants resisted or rejected the documentary forms we selected for archiving projects (oral history, book, blog). In response, we decided to *let participants decide how, what, and who they want to document*, and *embrace unconventional documentation practices*: Instead of determining in advance what form the documentation would take (oral histories, book, blog), we invited participants to consider how they could document their troupes, and the

Extravaganza. We discussed kinds of documentation participants could create, and emphasized that participants were likely already creating documentation of their troupes, by taking photos, making videos of shows, and creating fliers. To support the workshop discussion – and to create documentation of the workshop, itself, we compiled a zine. We included short articles on why we thought the Extravaganza (and drag culture in general) is worth documenting, and provided tips for do-it-yourself documentation projects and preservation information.

Christa wrote an article for the zine encouraging participants to interview each other, and brought recording equipment to the Extravaganza, so that she could interview any interested participants, or help them set up interviews with each other. By making herself available to participants during the weekend, Christa was able to do interviews in the context of the event (instead of at a space or time removed from the event and its community). By offering to share her equipment with others, she acted as a facilitator for their interviews. It's important to note that by choosing to facilitate interviews (rather than insist on conducting them herself), Christa minimized the 'gatekeeping' role of the archivist, as the one who decides which participants should be interviewed, then determines what questions to ask, and conducts the interviews herself. She continues to bring equipment to each Extravaganza, so that participants who weren't able to do interviews at IDKE 8 can still take part in the project.

A third problem we considered had to do with the fact that, in New Orleans, working with an institution that was 'outside' the community was a point of disconnection between archivists and participants; in the case of the Extravaganza, the event is decentralized and an archive has not yet been identified to preserve participants'

records. In response, we decided to *create opportunities to temporarily centralize and exhibit collections*: The form and duration of the Extravaganza offers an opportunity for experimenting with decentralized archives. The Extravaganza is a place and time to share: during the long weekend, we perform, have discussions and debates, teach each other, and show art and films. Given the success of other components that have been added to the original weekend (like the art exhibit and film festival), we can imagine that if an historic or documentary exhibit were made a regularly-occurring part of the event, participants would have an impetus to create and share material from year to year. The first exhibition of materials documenting Extravaganza history happened in October 2008, and was curated by Julie Applegate. Julie invited participants to contribute to the exhibition, either as donors for a collection with GOHI or as lenders on a temporary basis. With this exhibition Julie created an opportunity to start building an Ohio-based archival collection. Those who lend but don't donate materials can become part of a network of participants interested in the overarching project of documenting the Extravaganza, with whom we can maintain contact.

In the context of the Extravaganza, and in practice, 'archiving from the ground up' has meant developing ways to support a participatory, collaborative archiving practice that de-emphasizes our status as the 'official' archivists for the event and its community. Instead of seeking to produce empowered narratives through documentation advocacy, we're supporting self-documentation by encouraging participants to do their own documentation and preservation projects – and providing them with information and tools that support these endeavors. We're also trying to act as mediators between participants and archives, by doing things like educating participants about archives,

providing opportunities to collaborate with archives on exhibits (curated by community members, featuring borrowed, not donated material), and encouraging participants to consider their lives worth documenting.

When we approached these documentation projects, we did so as archivists with an agenda. But even though we were known participants, our agendas and our motives were suspect and subject to resistance from both communities. Members of these communities still understand us as exercising externally-endowed power and authority – the kind of power and authority that come with claims to expertise, with institutional alignment, with academic training, and with status-as-archivist. We share the goal of developing a centralized archival collection – or even a decentralized digital collection – for the Extravaganza, but we’ve recognized that the approach that holds the most promise for us now is one that moves collectively, and collaboratively toward this end. Though we cannot build a centralized collection in the present, archiving from the ground up is important because it lays the groundwork for representative collections in the future.

The strategies and choices we have made in our work are particular, and they respond to specific problems. In other contexts, archiving from the ground up will manifest in different practices (i.e., there might not always be a zine, or a workshop, etc.). But archiving from the ground up does have some constants: it means approaching archival projects by thinking and acting *with* instead of *for* constituents. While the methods we employ in archiving from the ground up aren’t traditional archival practices, we seek to make archives meaningful to participants, and encourage them to understand the significant contribution they can make to a collective memory articulated through archival collections. We introduce participants to archival practice by informing them

about techniques and strategies they can use in documentation and preservation (e.g., Christa's oral history article or Cristina's tips on preservation). When we encourage participants to self-document, we support their ability to represent themselves, to exert some influence over how their experiences and knowledges are represented, interpreted, and contextualized. When we archive from the ground up, we transform archival power relations: we have the opportunity to explicitly identify – and share – the power to represent, to define, to describe, and to organize materials in the archive as part of our practice.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSION**

With the exception of the drag king documentation projects I discuss in the previous chapter, the critical archival practices I identify and analyze here are designed to produce historical knowledge, to document the histories of particular subjects and constituencies, or to facilitate personal and collective remembering after extended periods of physical violence and psychic trauma. They are concerned, in other words, with the past – with what we know about specific histories, as well as how we represent them, and under what conditions we can gain access to them. Since most of the projects I analyze here document events and experiences that are temporally distant from the present moment, or respond to already-existing archival collections, it might seem that critical archival practices are necessarily oriented toward the past. But this isn't the case; the project and promise of a critical archival practice is that it also allows archivists, activists, researchers, and others to address the present: to reassess what they're doing now, to develop ways to respond to events as they happen, to engage in partnerships and collaborations with communities to document contemporary experiences as well as histories. I conclude my work with a discussion of a critical archival practice that has emerged in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which struck New Orleans in August,

2005. Within months of the disaster, archivists, community activists, and researchers launched projects to document the effects of the hurricane, the inadequate governmental response, and the conditions of structural violence that contributed to many New Orleanians' economic, political and social vulnerability before, during, and after the crisis. Several of these projects have taken the form of online archives<sup>39</sup>, which collect, preserve, and promote access to interviews and records documenting survivors' experiences. Three of these archives, the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank, the I-10 Witness Project, and Alive in Truth, exemplify critical archival practices around Katrina particularly well. A shared function of these projects is to archive survivors' accounts and perspectives (while their memories and impressions were fresh), in order to create a record for the future. But these archives also make arguments that seek to intervene in the present. Interviews archived on these sites draw attention to the structural factors that contribute to racialized poverty in New Orleans and make claims about how New Orleans should be rebuilt. These interviews provide testimonial evidence for activists and communities working to transform the social, economic, and political conditions that left so many residents unable to evacuate, or to return (either to the city or to their homes).

### 6.1 Hurricane Digital Memory Bank

The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank (HDMB) is the largest, and likely the most stable, of the online archives that have developed in response to Katrina. According to the statement of purpose on the HDMB website, the project collects digital records related to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, in order to contribute to “an ongoing effort by historians and

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<sup>39</sup> It's important to note that many of these sites do not call themselves “archives,” but I include them here because they perform an archives' primary function (collecting, preserving, and making records available), and several projects indicate a desire to collaborate with archives in the future.

archivists to preserve the record of these storms by collecting first-hand accounts, on-scene images, blog postings, and podcasts.” The project further aims to “foster some positive legacies by allowing the people affected by these storms to tell their stories in their own words, which as part of the historical record will remain accessible to a wide audience for generations to come.” These statements suggest that though it does not call itself an archive, the HDMB performs several core archival functions, i.e., collecting and preserving records, and making them available to the public. The project is maintained by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, and was organized with collaborators from the University of New Orleans, the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History, and several others.

The HDMB collections feature records from a range of sources – from well-established contributors like the Smithsonian National Museum of American History to temporary collectives, like the Katrina Kids Project, which donated a collection of artwork by children staying in the Reliant/Astrodome shelters in Houston, to individual contributors who want to upload stories or images to the archive. Students and faculty from colleges and universities (including Tulane University, Delgado Community College, the University of New Orleans, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College, and others) have developed and contributed collections of hurricane-related work. On their own and in groups, artists, writers, photographers, and filmmakers have contributed records documenting the aftermath of Katrina and Rita, as well as materials that represent neighborhood installations and other site-specific projects. The diversity of sources in the Memory Bank may be due to the radical openness of the HDMB’s acquisition process—instead of curating an archival collection by inviting selected individuals and groups to



contribute, the site welcomes “survivors, first responders, relief workers, family, friends, and anyone with reflections on the hurricanes and their aftermath” to contribute stories, images, and other digital files. Users can exert basic control over access to the files – they can elect to make them publicly-available on the site, or ask the HMDB to preserve but not post them. They can describe their contributions (and in doing so, provide additional access points) by tagging their file(s) with key terms and identifying their hurricane location (where they were or where they lived when the hurricane hit). The site asks for basic demographic information – age, gender, race, occupation, location during and after the hurricane(s) – but does not make this information publicly available.

The site facilitates access to collections through a comprehensive list of publicly-available collections on the Collections page of the site, and through a set of filters on its Browse page. Visitors who access collections by browsing can choose to organize their results by kind of record (image, story) or location.

The Memory Bank’s form (online archive) privileges public participation and access over the selection and management of a necessarily limited volume of physical files. It’s important to recognize that, because its collections are digital, the HDMB can solicit a higher volume of contributions than its traditional archival counterparts. While it requires a different kind of storage space, the Memory Bank doesn’t have to deal with the kinds or extent of physical storage issues traditional archives encounter, and its preservation work is oriented toward maintaining and providing access to digital files. The Memory Bank does not preserve ephemeral records – like the drawings by the

Katrina Kids Project participants – in their material form. As a result, the digital facsimiles of those records may outlast their paper counterparts, or paper records may become part of archival collections elsewhere.

Given these limitations, the HDMB is able to enact a critical archival practice that welcomes contributions from differently-situated actors, in a variety of media. Contributors can decide what counts as hurricane documentation, shape the ways in which their files are described and accessed, and tell stories – or represent their experiences – on their own terms. The archive, then, becomes a place in which multiple narratives, voices, and documentation strategies coexist. For one contributor, documenting and remembering Katrina involves sharing a video of a neighborhood tour after the hurricane, for another, it means creating a record of where the New Orleans Community Bike Project/Plan B distributed rehabilitated bikes after the storm, and for yet another, it means creating a collection of materials representing pre- and post-Katrina Po-Boy Festivals (which celebrate poor boy sandwiches, shops, and corner groceries as part of New Orleans’ culinary and cultural heritage). The archive accommodates official representations of relief efforts alongside counternarratives documenting the inadequacies and failures of those efforts. On the HDMB’s Collections page, a link to the Convention Center Relief Blockade collection, which documents the “lengthy delay experienced by thousands of African-American evacuees who waited several days for relief inside and outside of the Ernest N. Morial Convention Center in downtown New Orleans” is followed by a link to the U.S. Military’s Joint Task Force, Katrina History Group, which is compiling “documents, photographs, and other materials” from the “many branches of the US military that responded to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.” One set of records

isn't privileged over the other; it's up to visitors to determine how to read or view the collections, together or apart, with or against each other. The HDMB anticipates users' concerns about misrepresentations and factual errors (which may be revealed in the process of reading multiple, conflicting accounts), and addresses this issue on its FAQ page. According to the HDMB, each submission,

even those that are erroneous, misleading, or dubious—contributes in some way to the historical record. A misleading individual account, for example, could reveal certain personal and emotional aspects of the event that would otherwise be lost in a strict authentication and appraisal process. That said, most people who take the time to submit something to the Hurricane Digital Memory Bank share the goal of its organizers—that is, to create a reliable and permanent record of responses to the storms of 2005—and therefore most contributions are authentic. Nevertheless, as with any historical sources (including, for example, newspaper accounts), there are always questions about reliability, and all researchers need to evaluate their sources critically.

With this statement, the HDMB encourages visitors to develop a critical approach to archival sources and to recognize how “personal and emotional” responses to historic events can be meaningful to what and how we know about the past.

## 6.2 Alive in Truth and the I-10 Witness Project

The Hurricane Digital Memory Bank provides access to an array of sources, contributed by a multitude of geographically-dispersed users. A major benefit of this approach is that it yields a large collection documenting the experiences of many individuals and groups. Two smaller, grassroots oral history collections inaugurated immediately after Katrina – Alive in Truth and The I-10 Witness Project (Witness Project) – demonstrate what's possible on a different scale. Alive in Truth volunteers started collecting oral histories on September 4, 2004. Volunteers began collecting interviews outside the Austin Convention Center, which sheltered 6,000 New Orleans

residents after the storm, and have continued to conduct interviews with displaced and resettled New Orleanians. The I-10 Witness Project describes itself as a “community based story collective formed to document the myriad tales emerging from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.” The project is conducted by “Louisiana artists, educators and community organizers.”

As their names and descriptions suggest, *Alive in Truth* and *The I-10 Witness Project* intend to disseminate the testimony of survivors, to offer a venue in which their accounts can be made freely available to the public. The projects’ mission statements make this intention, and the archives’ other commitments, explicit. *Alive in Truth*’s mission is “to document individual lives, restore community bonds, and to uphold the voices, culture, rights, and history of New Orleanians.” The Witness Project “seeks to give voice to affected Louisiana citizens by documenting their stories through sound and video.” The Witness Project’s mission includes a rationale for the immediacy of the project, and communicates its organizers’ sense of urgency. “We believe that now is the time to listen and provide a safe space for people to express how this storm has impacted their lives,” they write. “We also want to cultivate a forum where citizens can voice their concerns about the reconstruction, redevelopment and rejuvenation of south Louisiana and New Orleans.” Oral history interviews are the mechanism through which the archives can perform these functions. More specifically, the projects define the interviews, testimonies, and histories they collect as “stories” – both sites operate from the belief that the practice of telling, recording, and sharing survivors’ stories is integral to the work of recovery and rebuilding. In addition to their function as repositories, the archives

assembled by Alive in Truth and the Witness Project are (ideally) sites for recognition, for connection, for contributing to (or intervening in) deliberations around rebuilding efforts in New Orleans.

Though participants tell different stories, and use their interviews for varied purposes, their narratives are generally compatible with the projects' missions. Project interviewers don't use a standard schedule for their interviews; and in some cases, interview recordings or transcripts reveal a conversation between interviewer and participant, while others take the form of monologues. In an interview with Jevon L., a twenty-two-year-old HazMat worker from the Eighth Ward, the Alive in Truth interviewer asks clarifying questions ("What were some of the hurricanes you stayed for?," "At the Convention Center, you said there was nobody handing out water?," "How are you staying positive?") but also asks questions about Jevon's well-being ("They've been treating you okay in there?") and seeks information about the military presence in New Orleans after the storm – something Jevon hadn't mentioned in his responses ("Did you see any National Guard while you were in New Orleans? Army? People who looked like they were with the military?"). This conversation yields an account that addresses aspects of the crisis that groups and individuals outside the city were concerned about, and interested in investigating (i.e., what happened in the Convention Center, how police and members of the National Guard treated residents, how evacuees did or did not get seats on buses leaving the city). As he describes the ways he and his family members coped with being stranded in the city, and then trying to evacuate to Metairie, Jevon provides a rationale for some looting of hygiene products and food, and his cousin's theft

of a car. In doing so, he speaks back to depictions of residents looting stores that had circulated in the media in the days following the storm, for which New Orleanians were judged and dismissed.

In his *Alive in Truth* interview, Michael V. speaks less about his evacuation experience, or his impressions of his treatment in Austin, choosing instead to make an argument about the benefits evacuees should receive and to inform the site's audience about his treatment by an officer of the New Orleans Police Department:

I think the government should pay every person from New Orleans \$100,000 or \$200,000 so they can really make a fresh start. Not no \$2,000. Try \$200,000. Just take care of these people. Let them choose where to live and start over.

I was in the Convention Center for five days. I had two little babies in my arms, two, three month old babies that looked like they was three weeks old. And I went up to a police officer. I said, 'Ma'am, can you please take these two little babies and just let them ride around in the car with you, get an hour of air conditioning? Or better yet, take them to Trinity Hospital? They'll take them there.' You know what she did? She dropped a bottle of water out the window of the car and said, 'Write to the press.' A bottle of water.

For Michael, the purpose of the interview is dual: to provide details about his and others' mistreatment, and to shape public perception of what happened – and should happen – for evacuees. At the conclusion of his statement, he notes: “it makes me feel good to tell you about it because I want the world to know how they turned their back on their citizens.”

Miranda B., a caterer from the Eighth Ward, integrates commentary toward the Bush Administration in her testimony<sup>40</sup>, and frames her story in terms of her religious beliefs. Speaking about the lack of timely or adequate intervention and assistance from the Bush Administration, she says:

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<sup>40</sup> There are points in her transcript where it seems she is speaking to her interviewer (asking questions like “Keep going?”), but the interviewer's responses are excluded from the record. The testimony's conversational style also indicates there may have been an exchange.

I don't know what he's [President Bush's] showing. I think it might be pride. I don't know what it is. Only him and God. I mean, the thing is, this is my philosophy about it. How can you correct it if you don't address it? And if you keep justifying it and then looking at people like it's, "Okay, what could I do?" You could have done a lot. [...] If some people just put money aside... Right now to this day, the Book of Job - I love Job. If they was to get stripped like Job, they probably commit suicide 'cause they wouldn't know how to deal with it. You understand what I'm saying? So I don't know. But I know one thing: I still love them. I got no other choice but to love them. But I don't think it was fair.

Miranda conceptualizes her testimony as a counternarrative, framing her thoughts in terms of a book she could author. Recalling the way her daughter had to ride through the floodwaters in a trash can, Miranda states:

See, they're leaving a lot of parts out. When I write the book, all the parts they left out, that's gonna be all the parts I put in. They left out about how they had them people on that bridge and didn't give them no water, they didn't give them no food.

Though she references a future in which she "writes the book," Miranda's testimony also addresses the present. She is concerned with the way dominant accounts of the hurricane misrepresented (or didn't even address) the treatment of New Orleanians in the days after the storm. This misrepresentation was already apparent to Miranda within weeks of the storm's passing – she was interviewed on September 13, 2005 – and the interview provides her with an opportunity to respond.

The I-10 Witness Project does not provide full transcripts or recordings of participant interviews on its site. Instead, visitors can listen to excerpts from participants' oral histories that address specific issues around rebuilding and recovery. Because the Witness Project only presents limited content from its interviews, it's difficult to know how much participants spoke about their survival and evacuation experiences in their full histories. The issue-oriented excerpts, however, indicate what each participant wants to

accomplish with his or her interview (beyond providing a historic narrative). For example, in her interview, Cheryl Garber addresses the problematic ways in which reporters from major media outlets covered the storm, and counters those representations with information about her own experience and a friend's:

During the storm, as we were evacuating and watched CNN It was appalling how many facts and names and small details people got wrong. [...] I was disappointed; of course, there was a lot of competition, I understand all the media in the world was here, and they were competing for the bigger, better story. We all know now that a lot of the stories weren't true, especially in the Superdome. I have a friend [...] she stayed in the Superdome for five days, and she said it was nothing like the media portrayed it. She said it was hard, and after four days it did start to stink and get really bad, but there weren't gangs running around shooting people and that sort of thing.

Garber's account, like Miranda B.'s, disrupts popular perceptions of what happened in the city, and in the Superdome, in the days after the storm. She uses her friend's story as evidence of the discrepancy between what happened – as survivors experienced it – and what reporters (and their audiences) saw, and came to believe, about the situation through mainstream media coverage.

Other Witness Project interviews address the short- and long-term future of New Orleans. In her oral history, Sondra Berry expresses her concerns about the implications of the racial disparity among returning residents, due to rent hikes, the demolition of private property in predominantly-black neighborhoods, and the potential (now completed) demolition of several major housing projects (without adequate alternative housing). Before moving to New Orleans with her husband, Berry had conducted tours of historically-black areas in Hilton Head, which are now populated with white residents. She situates her concerns about the future of New Orleans in terms of that trajectory:



The whole island was black populated, that was the only place we could go and swim – Hilton Head. [...] Here is a city that once flourished as an integrated setting, as a setting where people could live harmoniously of all cultures...the thing is they [whites] took it all. You would not think that black people even lived there. What we're afraid of in our lifetime...every black person that we speak to, we're not the only ones that feel this, and the thing is, many of our white friends, they fear it because they, too, realize the flavor of new Orleans is not just one type of ingredient. It's all of the different ingredients that we put into this gumbo. And if you exclude a portion of it, the dish is not going to be the same.

When we first came to New Orleans – and I was so excited by it, all of the black people that I saw – everywhere we rode up and down the street, [we saw] all these beautiful black people, all these different statues of beautiful black people. And we're from Savannah and we didn't see black people like we saw. And now [in New Orleans]...for every ten people, count the number of blacks that you see, and it's a little frightening.

While Berry addresses the current and future recovery of New Orleans in terms of what she knows from past experience, another interviewee, Jairo Santanilla, understands the past differently in the wake of the storm. Santanilla, who was the Chief Resident at Charity Hospital when he was interviewed, reflects on conditions of health care access for the poor before Katrina, and posits that this moment of rebuilding is also a time for reinvention:

A lot of people that will tell you that Charity has to be rebuilt, that Charity serves the poor and it's the only facility for the indigent and those without insurance. I love Charity, love it to death. However, one of the things I'm starting to think is that we've been tricked. [...] I think that Charity now has been used to keep these same patients disenfranchised. Now, or even before, if you were uninsured and had a fracture [you were told] 'Oh, you have to go to Charity, you have to see a bone doctor at Charity, you have to see an orthopedic doctor at Charity.' [...] Ultimately it [the referral system] was a way to keep people from private institutions. That's my perspective now, after this. If we rebuild big Charity, my fear is that we're going to do that again.

[After the storm] Each community should have a community clinic that can see primary care, pediatrics, primary care adult medicine, adolescent medicine, and then if things are bad, there's a referral system to an institution that caters to tertiary care.

Though Santanilla refers to his involvement with Charity before Katrina, the interview excerpt on the Witness Project site doesn't tell us much about his Katrina experience (i.e., *what happened* for him, or at Charity, during and after the storm). Santanilla informs listeners about problems with health care access in New Orleans before the storm, asks listeners to think critically about Charity's role in the city's healthcare system, and describes a model for better healthcare provision throughout the city.

While some interviews on the site address storm-related events and experiences, the examples analyzed here demonstrate that, for Witness Project organizers and participants, oral history projects can accomplish much more than documenting *what happened*<sup>41</sup>. Instead, the Witness Project, like *Alive in Truth*, uses oral history interviews to help participants, organizers, and site visitors comprehend what's at stake in rebuilding and recovery efforts (e.g., a loss of cultural diversity; a return to the old way of delivering health care to the poor, or the implementation of a new model).

In its examination of critical archival practices developed by a variety of actors – artists, documentarians, researchers, genealogists, geneticists, activist-archivists, drag kings, and even ghostly historians – this dissertation has considered how archives function, and what they mean, beyond their role as repositories for records of historical value. The critical archival practices I've explored emerge in response to specific political, social, and cultural situations. They have distinct affective dimensions – they are motivated by a range of feelings, desires, and needs, and in some cases (e.g., the Atlas Group Archive), make their appeals to and through affect. They demonstrate how

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<sup>41</sup> I don't mean to suggest here that the main function of an oral history interview is to document what happened, but do want to emphasize that interviews collected and made available by *Alive in Truth* and the

archives matter at the level of the public and the private, in the making of collective histories and to the articulation of personal identities. They also show us how archives are relevant to (or can even be instruments in) struggles for social transformation, social justice, and self-determination.

Whether they engage the archives as researchers or critics, or as creators and custodians of their own collections, critical archival practitioners make archives, themselves, objects of investigation. Most of the critical archival practitioners I write about<sup>42</sup> explicitly challenge the myth of archival neutrality and objectivity, and denaturalize archival practices by drawing attention to logics that underpin them. While some practitioners (like the Atlas Group, Cheryl Dunye, and Shahar Rozen) destabilize these logics as they introduce alternative forms of evidence, others – particularly those invested in genetic genealogical research – call upon them in order to make claims about origin and identity. In addition to investigating archival logics, critical practitioners explore power relations in archives by attending to specific issues researchers encounter while doing archival work – navigating the archives’ organizational systems, gaining access to archives and records, negotiating security protocols, recruiting participants for oral history and other documentation projects, or (for prospective participants) deciding whether or not to participate in those projects.

As they engage existing archives and practices, the subjects of this dissertation develop new approaches to documenting and archiving as well. Their collections manifest in conventional and unconventional forms – in lectures, exhibits, video

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Witness Project also function as testimony, make arguments, and provide interpretive frameworks for making sense of the recent past, present, and future.

documentaries; in family trees and genetic ancestry test results; and in oral histories and zines. These subjects create records in the present, to document under- or un-documented experiences (The Atlas Group Archive, *Liebe Perla*, *The Watermelon Woman*, genetic genealogical investigations), or to articulate contemporary histories (The New Orleans Drag King Collection Project, IDKE documentation efforts, online archives for Katrina survivors). They suggest that projects to document historically underrepresented communities and constituencies can – and should – be participatory and collaborative endeavors.

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<sup>42</sup> Specifically: Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, Cheryl Dunye, Shahar Rozen, the South African archivists discussed in this chapter and the collectors of Katrina oral histories, as well as Cristina Hernandez and I.

**APPENDIX A**  
**CONVENTIONAL ARCHIVAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES**

## A.1 Archives

Archives are distinct from other kinds of collections, and have functions specific to their mission to identify, collect, preserve, and make papers and records available to patrons. “Archives” is a term with multiple, overlapping meanings. The word “archives” can refer to materials, or the “noncurrent records of an organization or institution preserved because of their enduring value” (Hunter 2). An archives is also a place, a “building or part of a building where archival materials are located,” and may also be called a repository (2). “Archives” can also be used to designate a “program office or agency responsible for identifying, preserving, and making available records of enduring value (also referred to as an archival agency, archival institution, or archival program)” (2). There is some circularity in these overlapping definitions – for example, an archives is defined by its function as a space for storing archival materials (which begs the question: what comes first: the archives or the archival material?). Strictly speaking, archival repositories are distinct from manuscript repositories: archives collect the records of an organization or institution, and their custodian is the archivist, while manuscript repositories collect the papers of individuals or families, and their custodian is the manuscript curator<sup>43</sup>.

As the definitions above suggest, the nature and treatment of collected material play a significant role in delineating between archives and other kinds of collections (for example, special collections or library collections). The emphasis in archival collection is usually on unpublished, unique, groups of related items that gain their significance from

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<sup>43</sup> While it is important to recognize the distinctions between these two kinds of collections, which referring to practices and collections in general, I use the term “archives” as the umbrella term.

their relationship to other archival items (7). In archives, the creator of these items is often an organization or institution, while in manuscript repositories, the creator may be an individual or family group.

Decisions made about the disposition of archival records are, as Hunter suggests, final; the destruction of records or papers is an irrevocable act (7). The accessibility of archival materials (and, perhaps, also some of their meaning) is determined by ordering, descriptive, and guardianship practices. Archival materials are arranged in accordance with principles of provenance and original order (to which I return later in this appendix), and are usually described at the group level, rather than at the level of the individual item (9). Finally, archival materials do not (usually) leave the archives; when access to material is allowed, researchers must use materials in the archives under the supervision/surveillance of the archivist. The security practices in archives are designed to safeguard a collection of irreplaceable, unique items, and involve not only traditional surveillance practices (e.g., staff observation, disallowance of backpacks or other bags, use of surveillance technologies), but also extend to the delivery of assistance to users. For example, the initial (entrance) reference interview serves to establish the researcher's query while confirming the researcher's identity (through the use of a sign-in sheet or registration form, and the presentation of proof of identity by the researcher) and allowing the archivist to provide information about regulations and guidelines to the researcher (191).

## A.2 Selection, appraisal, and valuation

Appraisal is “the process of determining the value, and thus the disposition, of records based upon[:] their operating, administrative, legal, and fiscal values; their evidential and informational value (research or historical value); their arrangement and physical condition; [and] their intrinsic value; their relationship to other records” (47). Appraisal practices are used to determine which records have enduring value, which are not worth preserving, and those whose preservation may happen if resources permit, but whose preservation is a secondary priority to work with other records (47-48). The appraisal process may differ for archives than for manuscript repositories (for example, a business or governmental archives might have a much greater volume of records which must be appraised, and may not have much say in what it selects to receive from the institutions it serves). In either case, those records that are not deemed to be of sufficient value to include in the archives’ collection may be subject to a variety of disposition methods; they are not necessarily destroyed (49).

Hunter identifies five reasons (values) for retaining records: operating value, administrative value, fiscal value, legal value, and archival value (49). The first four values may be primarily important to the agency that created the records, while archival value may correspond to the anticipated needs of those outside the agency (e.g., researchers, lawyers). The determination of archival value identifies which “records are worthy of ‘permanent’ preservation in an archival repository” (51). Contemporary appraisal practices are, generally, based upon Theodore Schellenberg’s classic appraisal theory, which focused on determining the evidential and informational value of records. Evidential value is possessed by those records that are “necessary to document the



organization and functioning of [an] institution or department,” while informational value is determined by the extent to which records “shed light upon persons (both individuals and corporate bodies); things (places, buildings, and other objects); events (the interactions between persons and things)” (52-53). Schellenberg further refined the practice of determining informational value by suggesting that value can be tested using three criteria: uniqueness, form, and importance. Uniqueness refers to the physical and intellectual originality of information in a record (in other words, ensuring that the information is not duplicated elsewhere). Form refers to the ratio of research value to volume of the collection, as well as to the preservation demands of the records, in testing form, the archivist considers whether records will cost a great deal to process and preserve, and if the records are worth the expense to the archives. The test of importance asks the archivist to determine how important the persons, places, or events described in the records are now or may be in the future (54). Electronic records have challenged Schellenberg’s theory – archives may want to keep files of raw data for future analysis, for example – and contemporary archivists have developed methods to refine and extend Schellenberg’s work.

The “black box” concept developed by Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, like Schellenberg’s theory, suggests that archivists base their appraisal decisions upon specific criteria. However, the black box theory suggests that archivists should *combine* a number of criteria to determine the overall value of records; the criteria are organized under three categories: the value of the information, the cost of records retention, and the “implications of the appraisal recommendation” (57). Archivists may also rely upon assessments of intrinsic value when making their appraisal decisions, and the National

Archives has determined a set of characteristics archivists may use to determine whether or not an item possesses intrinsic value. The physical form of an item usually determines its intrinsic value; if the value of an item is such that it would be reduced or altered if the item was replaced or migrated to another format, then the item may be preserved because of the significance of its physical status (62-63).

The most quantitative approach to appraisal (and the one that seems likely to be well-suited to archives with large collections of similar records, such as invoices) is sampling (64). Like social scientists employing this methodology, archivists using sampling techniques can choose to engage in probability or statistical sampling, and/or purposive or judgmental sampling (65). Both methods have their flaws; probability samples can leave important documents susceptible to disposition, and purposive sampling may be susceptible to an archivist's bias (65-66).

Finally, the functional approach to appraisal was developed by Helen Willa Samuels, who suggests that "archivists must start their selection activities not with a consideration of specific sets of records, but with an understanding of the context in which records are created" (69). Archivists employing a functional approach might consider the core functions of an institution, and then develop a documentation plan to support the collection of materials related to each of the identified functions (69).

### A.3 Acquisition of papers and records

The acquisition of papers and records involves the transfer of both physical custody and legal title, which must be secured by the archives in order for the archives to legally "own" those materials (76). The predominant methods for acquiring materials are

“transfers within an agency or institution, purchase, and gift” (77). A transfer within an agency usually involves the transfer of custody but not title, while purchases and gifts usually involve the transfer of both custody and title (78).

Acquisitions may be justified by statute (e.g., in government settings), administrative regulation, records retention schedules, permissive policy statements (a statement which authorizes an archives to acquire the records of an organization), or through an acquisition policy that is approved by a governing body (76-77). Acquisitions may also be subject to cooperative collecting agreements and a documentation strategy approach (84). Cooperative collecting agreements are made between archives in order to use the most of limited resources (such that, for example, the Cartoon Research Library at The Ohio State University and the Bowling Green State University pop culture archives do not overlap significantly in their collecting practices, but rather develop complementary collections to maximize the amount of unique material distributed between archives) (84). Archives that employ a documentation strategy attempt to focus on documenting society rather than on collecting existing records. In implementing a documentation strategy, archivists may work with “researchers, records creators, and community members” to “determine the aspects of society that need documenting, identify institutions that may have records shedding light on these aspects, and work with these institutions to preserve and create records, if necessary” (84). When items become part of an archival collection, they are subject to accessioning practices. Accessioning is defined as “the act and procedures involves in a transfer of legal title and taking records and papers into the physical custody of an archival agency, records center, or manuscripts repository” (88). During accessioning, custody, but not necessarily ownership, of the

physical medium and its intellectual content is transferred to the archives through the use of one or more legal “transfer instruments”: oral agreement, purchase agreement, letter, will, deposit agreement, deed of gift agreement, or contract (88). Physical control of materials is achieved when the materials transferred to the archives are received (after shipping or transport, for example); receipt of a collection is acknowledged with an accession form, which provides the point of entry for the archive’s intellectual control of the collection (92). Intellectual control over a collection is established when an archivist gains control over the contents of that collection (e.g., via identification, initial description, notes on restriction, temporary location, and creation of preliminary processing plans) in preparation for the processing activities (93).

#### A.4 Arrangement and organization

Archival materials are ordered and processed in order to establish control over collections and to facilitate access to those collections. The principles of provenance and original order are central to the process of arrangement, the process by which records and papers are organized to highlight their contents and significance, and to promote accessibility to archivists and researchers (97). The principle of provenance was developed by French archivists in the 1840s, and recommends that the “archives of a given records creator must not be intermingled with those of other records creators,” such that, for example, in a manuscript repository, we might find letters from Allen Ginsburg in a collection of William S. Burroughs’ papers, but would not remove those letters from the Burroughs collection to place them in the Ginsburg collection in the same repository.

The principle of original order, articulated by the Prussian State Archives in the 1880s, advocates that “records should be maintained in the order in which they were placed by the organization, individual, or family that created them. Archivists restore and present to researchers, as much as possible, the original order of the records as evidence of how the records were used by the creator” (98). Original order may be more difficult than provenance for archivists to establish and negotiate; if records are received from an institutional creator, for example, and seem to have no arranging principle (e.g., packed up in haste, packed in a way that may harm records), archivists may need to refine the original order of the records (98). When archivists are at a loss to determine original order, they may attempt to place them in the most-usable order while doing the least possible rearrangement; manuscript curators may sort papers chronologically, topically, by material/format, or based upon the functions of the creator (109-110).

#### A.5 Access to collections

The two traditions that influence access policies in contemporary archives are the historical manuscript tradition and the public archives tradition. In the historical manuscript tradition, donors (or their designees) exercise control over access by placing restrictions on the use of materials and approving each research request; as Hunter notes, the ultimate goal of this system is preservation of materials, not easy access to them (180). The public archives tradition emphasizes openness of records with high public policy value, because the records (theoretically) “belong ‘to the people,’ [so] the people should have access to them as quickly and fully as possible” (180). Restrictions in this context may be placed on items that fit into designated categories (groups of records may be unavailable for reasons of national security, for example) (180).

In negotiating access to the archives, archivists in the United States are expected to follow the guidelines outlined in the *Code of Ethics for Archivists*. The Code suggests that archivists attempt to provide access in equitable ways; researchers should be granted access on equal terms; and researchers should not be subject to discriminatory practices (238). The *Code*'s section on "Use and Restrictions" states that "once conditions of use have been established, archivists should see that all researchers are informed of the materials that are available, and are treated fairly" (238). In support of fair access policies, the *Code* (in a subsequent section) suggests that after obtaining consent, archivists should provide information about "parallel research" by other researchers in order to allow both researchers to conduct their investigations more effectively, and to allow information about archives' holdings to be known through the products of multiple research projects (238).

Outreach and promotion of archival collections are vital functions for many publicly-funded archives (198). Hunter describes the beginning stage of the outreach process as "defining publics": archivists define the publics that the archive serves, then define the needs of these publics, and create appropriate outreach strategies and programs (198). Outreach activities provide a context in which archival materials (or, more likely, their surrogates and representations) may circulate in public spaces, among members of a defined public, via exhibits, public performances, newsletters, presentations, articles, media appearances, receptions at the archives, and virtual display on the Internet (199).

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