

Article

# Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field

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## ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism, as economic doctrine, as political practice, and even as a “governing rationality” of contemporary life and work, has been encroaching on the library and information studies (LIS) field for decades. The shift towards a conscious grappling with social justice and human rights debates and concerns in archival studies scholarship and practice since the 1990s opens the possibility for addressing neoliberalism and its elusive presence. Despite its far-reaching influence, neoliberalism has yet to be substantively addressed in archival discourse. In this article, we propose a set of questions for archival practitioners and scholars to reflect on and consider through their own hands-on practices, research, and productions with records, records creators, and distinct archival communities in order to develop an ongoing archival critique. The goal of this critique is to move towards “an ethical practice of community, as an important mode of participation.” This article marks a starting point for critically engaging the archival studies discipline along with the LIS field more broadly by interrogating the discursive and material evidences and implications of neoliberalism.

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Neoliberalism's avatars have presented its doctrines as universally inevitable and its operations as ultimately beneficial in the long term—even for those who must suffer through poverty and chaos in the short term. In other words, neoliberalism is a kind of secular faith. Its priests were elected by no one, and are accountable only to the global elites whose interests are promoted by its policies.

Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), xiii

## INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism, as economic doctrine, as political practice, and even as a “governing rationality”<sup>1</sup> of contemporary life and work, has been encroaching on the library and information studies (LIS) field for decades. The shift towards a conscious grappling with social justice and human rights debates and concerns in archival studies scholarship and practice since the 1990s opens the possibility for addressing neoliberalism and its elusive presence. This shift has occurred at the same time that practitioners and scholars across LIS increasingly faced the harsh material realities of such encroachments through the continued and largely unquestioned practices that uphold neoliberalism's inequalities and inequities. Despite its far-reaching influence, neoliberalism has yet to be substantively addressed in archival studies discourse. In this article, we first examine neoliberalism and offer a tracing of the literatures addressing neoliberalism as a theoretical engagement from outside of as well as from within the LIS discipline in order to consider its reach into archives. Then we share examples of neoliberalism at play within institutional and community archival productions. Lastly, we propose a set of questions for archival practitioners and archival studies scholars to reflect on and consider through their own hands-on practices, research, and productions with records, records creators, and distinct archival communities in order to develop an ongoing archival critique. The goal of this critique is to move towards what cultural and gender theorist Miranda Joseph calls “an ethical practice of community, as an important mode of participation.”<sup>2</sup> This article marks a starting point for critically engaging the archival studies discipline along with the LIS field more broadly by interrogating the discursive and material evidences and implications of neoliberalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), ix.

## NEOLIBERALISM AND ITS REACH

Since the late 1970s, neoliberalism has become an increasingly pervasive ideology of social, political, and economic practices and processes.<sup>3</sup> Neoliberalism, according to geographer David Harvey, proposes “human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets and free trade.”<sup>4</sup> Political scientist Wendy Brown goes further to frame neoliberalism as a “governing rationality through which everything is ‘economized.’”<sup>5</sup> Through economizing, then, people are conceived of solely as interdependent “market actors,” every activity whether wealth generating or not is conceptualized as a market, and “every entity (whether public or private, whether person, business, or state) is governed as a firm.”<sup>6</sup> Such governance practices mean that entities, including ones such as archives that are not profit driven, are increasingly submitted to market metrics and managed with techniques and practices drawn directly from the market. Most profoundly, neoliberalism in Brown’s understanding casts people as “human capital who must constantly tend to their own present and future value.”<sup>7</sup> Such management can be observed through social media platforms as participants manage their individual personal identities much like ‘brands’ in order to acquire the most likes and audience attention.<sup>8</sup> The market in this case becomes those friends and followers that might further add value to one’s image. Hence, the role of the state under neoliberalism has shifted away from a political register and to an economic register to become that of protector for presumed entrepreneurial and market freedoms, liberties, and rights. In short, neoliberalism has profoundly restructured areas of economic, political, and social life in ways that focus on individual responsibilities, reduce state interventions and funding for them, draw attention away from systemic oppressions, use “chronic underfunding, disaster, and state failure” as

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<sup>3</sup> There is a great wealth of studies on neoliberalism, which do work that is beyond the scope of this project in historicizing its expansion. See for example Wendy Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Democracy,” *Theory and Event* 7 (2003); Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos*; Nicholas Gane, “The Emergence of Neoliberalism: Thinking Through and Beyond Michel Foucault’s Lectures on Biopolitics,” *Theory Culture Society* 31, no. 4 (July 2014): 3–27; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey, “Neoliberalism and Creative Destruction,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610 (2007): 22.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Brown, Interview. “What Exactly is Neoliberalism?” *Dissent Magazine*, (April 2, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See Nancy Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, 2012; and “Socially-Mediated Publicness, an Introduction,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 3 (2012).

excuses for privatization, and “obfuscates or renders invisible forms of labor that are deemed undesirable.”<sup>9</sup> It is a governing rationality that creates conditions of social injustice, placing the needs and interests of some social groups above those of others and, thereby, at the expense of others through the disparate distribution of material resources, and social, civil, and human benefits, rights, protections, and opportunities.<sup>10</sup> Under neoliberalism, people no longer exist; only markets exist.

Neoliberalism operates in direct opposition to social justice principles and aims. Drawing on an interdisciplinary corpus of writings, archival scholars Wendy M. Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen E. Suurtamm, and David A. Wallace conceptualize social justice for the archival field as the

ideal vision that every human being is of equal and incalculable value, entitled to shared standards of freedom, equality, and respect. These standards also apply to broader social aggregations such as communities and cultural groups. Violations of these standards must be acknowledged and confronted. It specifically draws attention to inequalities of power and how they manifest in institutional arrangements and systemic inequities that further the interests of some groups at the expense of others in the distribution of material goods, social benefits, rights, protections, and opportunities. Social justice is always a process and can never be fully achieved.<sup>11</sup>

Even within research into social justice and archives, neoliberal discourse is present and pervasive and makes this article timely and urgent. In spite of its goals and realities standing in direct opposition to social justice principles and aims, neoliberal projects frequently espouse the discourses of social justice through the language of “freedom” and “equality” for the good of all. Neoliberalism’s production and politics operate to universalize difference in ways that uphold damaging power dynamics and hierarchies; thus, the “all” of neoliberalism is actually an exclusive category. The history of engagement with social justice concerns and implications in the archival field spans more than three decades<sup>12</sup> and there have been a notable series of calls for the adoption of an

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<sup>9</sup> Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (2016): 29; Virginia Held, “The Ethics of Care as Normative Guidance: Comment on Gilligan,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 45, no. 1, (2014): 107-115.

<sup>10</sup> Wendy Duff et al, “Social Justice Impact of Archives: a Preliminary Investigation,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 4, (2013): 324-325.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ricardo L. Punzalan and Michelle Caswell, “Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice,” *Library Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2016): 25-42.

explicit social justice mission.<sup>13</sup> A social justice agenda requires identifying and examining power along with its abuses and operations; analyzing and promoting the expressions of agency, realities, or representations by diverse archival stakeholders;<sup>14</sup> developing and maintaining coalitions, collaborations and dialogues across cultures;<sup>15</sup> and reevaluating and expanding core archival concepts.<sup>16</sup>

In other disciplines, as social justice has been addressed as economic, neoliberalism's effects can no longer go unnoticed. It is widely accepted that one of the key tenets of social justice is to create a society where the distribution of opportunities and resources is equitable.<sup>17</sup> Despite their acknowledged centrality to social justice processes, economic inequalities remain underexplored in archival literature. As practicing archivists and as archival scholars, we assert, following cultural and media studies scholar Kate Eichhorn, that archives offer significant sites to engage with the "legacies, epistemes, and traumas pressing down on the present."<sup>18</sup> It is urgent that as archivists and archival studies scholars we engage critically and explicitly with neoliberalism and its implications. This article marks a step forward in this process.

## TRACING THE LITERATURES

### External Tracings of Neoliberalism and Its Archival Effects

The "archival turn" in cultural and feminist theories, according to Eichhorn, was in part a conceptual and material response to neoliberalism. She maintains that the restructuring done under neoliberalism prompted such an extreme erosion of political agency that it compelled feminist scholars to look to the past for new ways of negotiating the present and that archives served as an important alternative source for legitimizing forms of knowledge and cultural production in the present moment.<sup>19</sup> In terms of the

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<sup>13</sup> Verne Harris, "Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa." *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 63-86; Randall C. Jimerson, "Archives for All: Professional Responsibility and Social Justice." *American Archivist* 70, no 2 (2007): 252-281; Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009); David Wallace, "Locating Agency: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Professional Ethics and Archival Morality." *Journal of Information Ethics* 19, no. 1 (2010): 172-189.

<sup>14</sup> Anthony Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started." *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 117.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Punzalan and Caswell, "Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice."

<sup>17</sup> Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse," 116.

<sup>18</sup> Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 5.

temporal as understood through the practices and productions of the archives, neoliberalism “takes away the ability to understand the conditions of our everyday lives longitudinally, and more important, the conviction that we might, once again, be *agents* of change in time and history.”<sup>20</sup> Because rights-based discourse often shapes archival productions related to social justice, thinking about rights and the precariousness of agency in one’s everyday life highlights the urgency to recognize the lived experiences that are tethered to rights. Such an erasure of daily conditions through neoliberalism’s universalizing effects creates a lack of rights or a ‘rightlessness’ that then creates and distributes a desire for such rights and belonging to the state but only through distinct hierarchical structuring as laid out by the state. Affect is a central force in this process, forming the attachment of neoliberal subjects to the structures that serve to subordinate people, thereby making it seem impossible to ever extricate themselves.<sup>21</sup> Cultural theorist Lauren Berlant names this attachment to that which actually prevents our flourishing “cruel optimism” and provides a vital set of tools for us in neoliberal archival contexts to think, act, and maybe even to live in new ways by changing dynamics to realize what is, what is “stuck,” and what is possible.

Since the 1980s, according to Eichhorn, “our *present* has been deeply and irreparably” shaped by what we know of as neoliberalism’s expansive yet elusive reach,<sup>22</sup> which has affected economic and political structures and conditions that shape daily lives, and altered both conceptions and experiences of time, history, and social agency.<sup>23</sup> Brown, in her 1995 book *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, considers the “postmodern techniques of power” that, a few years later in her subsequent work, she calls “neoliberalism.” In *States of Injury*, Brown focuses on rights and their double-edged nature as especially urgent when identity politics were being discussed and delineated through the consideration of injury and marginalized identities as bases for political identity. In discussions about rights, the prescribed ideals of democracy such as “freedom” beg the questions of *freedom to...* or *freedom from...*? Through discursive and performative analyses, for example, her work to problematize “freedom” raises questions about people’s desire for freedom, which is often considered a key element to strive for within neoliberalism. Such an analysis forms a useful tool to objectify neoliberalism in order to recognize neoliberalism as not an extension of ‘liberal’ political theory but as inextricably linked to capitalism.<sup>24</sup> Through analyses of “freedom” as a basic human right and following Michel Foucault and Karl Marx, Brown suggests that disciplinary power

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<sup>20</sup> Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Berlant, Interview, 2; Brown, *States of Injury*, 122; Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 165.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 14-18.

resides in and is enacted through the power and practice of such discourse. Individuals were presumed to be sites of power under classical liberalism, but

the version of individualism developed under neoliberalism articulates individuals not so much as sites of power but responsibility; and thus neoliberal individualism has helped promote the expansion of inequality through privatization. The notion that we individually rise or fall on our own merit, that we are each individually responsible for all aspects of our lives, has been deployed to legitimate the decimation of social welfare provision and the privatization of many government services, producing a dramatic upward redistribution of wealth.<sup>25</sup>

The work of further marginalizing archival subjects, therefore, takes place through neoliberalism's stealth self-regulating practices that uphold hierarchies in ways that reflect certain good feelings through the 'democratic' work towards freedom, but that in effect maintain structures that include the 'good' and exclude the 'bad' citizen subject. According to Brown, in an online interview about her newly published book *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* for Dissent Magazine,

democracy requires that citizens be modestly oriented toward self-rule, not simply value enhancement, and that we understand our freedom as resting in such self-rule, not simply in market conduct. When this dimension of being human is extinguished, it takes with it the necessary energies, practices, and culture of democracy, as well as its very intelligibility.<sup>26</sup>

Therefore, through neoliberalism the state regulates and the self regulates. Further, when discipline "becomes the stuff of our desires, we cease to desire freedom."<sup>27</sup> Neoliberalism upholds state structures of organizing bodies as individuals but within tacit hierarchies that work to 'universalize' but with value categories linked to economies of power.

Berlant argues through a Marxist perspective that our very "senses and intuitions are transformed in relation to property, to labor, to presumptions about being deserving, and to enjoying the world"<sup>28</sup> by the conditions of living amidst the collective crisis of

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<sup>25</sup> Sandra K. Soto and Miranda Joseph, "Neoliberalism and the Battle of Ethnic Studies in Arizona,"

*Thought and Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal* (Fall 2010): 52; Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston, MN: Beacon Press, 2003), xiv-xv.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, Interview.

<sup>27</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Lauren Berlant, Interview. "On Her Book Cruel Optimism." Rorotoko.com (5 June 2012), 2.

neoliberalism. Following Berlant, gender studies scholars Sandra K. Soto and Miranda Joseph also contend that

citizenship under neoliberalism has been deadened and privatized: national symbols (such as patriotic monuments) and ostensibly private behaviors (such as being properly heterosexual) have displaced live citizenship, which is to say, active engagement in political processes with uncertain outcomes.<sup>29</sup>

Even for those living in relative wealth and privilege in the United States, the “conditions of attrition or wearing out of the subject” have become normalized.<sup>30</sup> Living under neoliberalism actively impedes the desire for a different way of life and even the ability to imagine one.

Because archives constitute the intersecting timescapes of past, present, and future, recognizing the difficulty in seeing one’s positioning within the present is integral to this article. One’s sense of what is just past and what is becoming must, therefore, be considered through ongoing critique. Such critique may be tiring and emotionally exhausting. However, if archives are to be the spaces of preserved collective and individual memories, the processes of critique and the openness to critical inquiry into archival productions and their effects through time and space might be best considered as an ethical practice of the archival community, those of us working in, on, and for archives. Furthermore, drawing from critical and cultural theorists who critique ‘the archive’ and archives through more externally understood representational relationships with heterogeneous peoples, histories, and politics will support our research into more distinct approaches from within archival productions and practices. Our project of connecting the archival outsides to the insides offers a distinct look into the insidious and embodied ways that neoliberalism structures from within *and* without.

### Internal Tracings of Neoliberalism and Archival Effects

Academic librarian Karen Nicholson notes, “...as a profession, librarians have largely embraced—or at least unquestioningly accepted—change rhetoric and corporate models.”<sup>31</sup> Neoliberalism has infused LIS discourse with rhetoric of “transformational change,” grounded in the unquestioning adoption of both neoliberal theory and practices. Along with its wider rise, neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology of LIS institutions, shaping how LIS professionals and academics conceptualize their work, frame

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<sup>29</sup> Soto and Joseph, “Neoliberalism and the Battle of Ethnic Studies in Arizona,” 49.

<sup>30</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” *differences* 17, no. 1 (2006): 23.

<sup>31</sup> Karen P. Nicholson, “The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change,” *College and Research Libraries* 76, no. 3 (2015): 332.



problems, and offer solutions.<sup>32</sup> Neoliberal processes have come to seem natural and inevitable parts of information, government, and academic systems. Nicholson continues, “It is precisely because neoliberalism is part of our everyday lives that it remains largely invisible to us. This might explain why LIS has paid little attention to neoliberalism to date.”<sup>33</sup> While that too often remains the case, there is an emergent and growing body of literature in the LIS field that does take on neoliberalism and its implications from a library orientation. Much of this literature examines the influences of neoliberalism on libraries’ support of democratic principles and participation. For example, information studies scholar Melissa A. Adler has recently analyzed the Library of Congress’ policies and actions under a neoliberal turn.<sup>34</sup> Significant in this arena is librarian and LIS scholar John Buschman’s body of research on neoliberalism and public libraries.<sup>35</sup> He warns readers that “the specific trends identified in librarianship that accommodate the new public philosophy of casting public cultural institutions in economic terms represent a further diminution of the democratic public sphere.”<sup>36</sup> He continues, that the accession to employing “economic models as a public philosophy” serves to actively deconstruct the traditional discourse of the public sphere and social good that libraries have long represented. Inserting “business rhetoric and models doesn’t save libraries, it transforms them into something else. We’re a profession and an institution in crisis because we have a structural contradiction between our purposes and practices as they’ve historically evolved and our adaptation to the current environment.”<sup>37</sup> Work on neoliberalism has also been done in the form of case studies such as one by geographer Lia Frederiksen on the struggle to stop proposed cuts to the public library budget in Toronto, Canada.<sup>38</sup> She proposes that libraries offer important space to contest neoliberal divestment from the public sphere.

There is notable acknowledgement and analysis of neoliberal rhetoric in literature on academic and public libraries. Information studies scholar Siobhan

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Melissa A. Adler, “Broker of Information, the ‘Nation’s Most Important Commodity,” *Information and Culture* 50, no. 1 (2015): 24-50.

<sup>35</sup> John Buschman, *Dismantling the Public Sphere: Situating and Sustaining Librarianship in the Age of the New Public Philosophy* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003); John Buschman, “Talkin’ Bout My (Neoliberal) Generation,” *Progressive Librarian* 29 (2007): 28-40; John Buschman, *Libraries, Classrooms, and the Interests of Democracy: Marking the Limits of Neoliberalism* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012); John Buschman, “The Politics of Neoliberalism in Academic Libraries: The Fiscal Front,” *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 6 (2014): 638-639.

<sup>36</sup> Buschman, *Dismantling the Public Sphere*, 170.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Lia Frederiksen, “‘Our Public Library:’ Social Reproduction and Urban Public Space in Toronto,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 48 (2015): 141-153.

Stevenson examines the neoliberal rhetoric and policies surrounding efforts to bridge the digital divide in public libraries.<sup>39</sup> She argues that such projects, while holding up the long-held ideal of universal access, have actually served the neoliberal state, private enterprise, and information capital, while they insufficiently address actual barriers to participation among the public. Similarly, academic librarian Maura Seale has written of the codification of neoliberal discourse in library science education and American Library Association core competencies for librarianship. She argues that employing a *critical* information literacy “could work to challenge neoliberal discourse, rather than eagerly adopting it.”<sup>40</sup> An extensive study by information scientists Margaret Greene and David McMenemy analyzes neoliberal rhetoric and policy in the U.K. to examine the discursive functioning of neoliberalism in libraries.<sup>41</sup> Academic librarian Jonathan Cope provides an explanation of how neoliberal language and concepts help shape the ways in which academic libraries conceive and approach information. He writes, “Neoliberalism creates a discursive framework in which the value of information is determined by its ability to be monetized.”<sup>42</sup> It is for this reason that he argues that “...LIS must address how neoliberal conceptions of the market have shaped the ways in which information and knowledge are viewed.”<sup>43</sup>

There is also a still small but powerful LIS literature emerging on the ways that neoliberalism influences labor in the information professions from within library discourses. This literature speaks clearly to the implications of economization and incorporation of market logics that Brown describes as central to the neoliberal project. Information studies scholars Tami Oliphant and Michael McNally argue, for example, that the neoliberal restructuring of the National Archives of Canada and the National Library of Canada into one institution, Library and Archives Canada, in 2004 has weakened the entire LIS profession in Canada.<sup>44</sup> Such neoliberal restructuring promoted deprofessionalization and the undermining of civil service traditions. Academic librarian

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<sup>39</sup> Siobhan Stevenson, “Digital Divide: A Discursive Move Away from the Real Inequities,” *The Information Society* 25, no. 1 (2009): 1-22.

<sup>40</sup> Maura Seale, “The Neoliberal Library,” in *Information Literacy and Social Justice: Radical Professional Praxis*, ed. Lua Gregory and Shana Higgins (Duluth, MN: Library Juice Press, 2013): 58.

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Greene and David McMenemy, “The Emergence and Impact of Neoliberal Ideology on UK Public Library Policy, 1997-2010,” in *Library and Information Science Trends and Research: Europe*, ed. by Amanda Spink and Jannica Heinstrom (Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012), 13-41.

<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Cope, “Neoliberalism and Library & Information Science: Using Karl Polanyi’s Fictitious Commodity as an Alternative to Neoliberal Conceptions of Information,” *Progressive Librarian* 43 (2014): 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Tami Oliphant and Michael McNally, “Professional Decline and Resistance: The Case of Library and Archives Canada,” *Radical Teacher* 99 (2014): 54-61.

Ian Beilin describes the neoliberal management strategies aimed at improving “performance, value, return” from the public sector being deployed in contemporary academic libraries.<sup>45</sup> Such management strategies serve to challenge the traditional values of LIS institutions and their workforces.

In archival studies, economic inequalities are only just beginning to be introduced as a component of the larger literature on social justice. The first explicit mention of neoliberalism in the field was not until a couple of sentences in a 2007 piece by archivist Lajos Kormendy reviewing contemporary changes in archives’ philosophy and functions.<sup>46</sup> In their recent article, information studies scholars Ricardo L. Punzalan and Michelle Caswell highlight the need to examine economic systems, structures, and infrastructures as manifestations of power as key to addressing systemic structural inequalities in the archival field.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, Caswell and Marika Cifor develop a framework based on feminist ethics of care that can be used to problematize neoliberal rhetoric in archives<sup>48</sup> that dangerously identifies individuals as free agents operating in a market economy and that draws attention away from systemic forms of oppression. Turning to feminist ethics directs critical attention back to neoliberalism and its endemic injustices. In another recent piece, Cifor addresses with greater detail than is possible in this article how affect theory, through an examination and application of the work of Lauren Berlant, might contribute to critical analyses and imaginative possibilities to contest neoliberalism in the archives on theoretical and practical levels.<sup>49</sup> There is an urgent need in archival studies to address neoliberalism more directly and with much greater depth than has been done to this point. Given the influence that neoliberal conceptions of information and markets have had on global politics and economics and the archives since the 1970s, this is a major lacuna in archives literature.

## NEOLIBERALISM IN ARCHIVES

Neoliberalism influences the government and academic structures in which much archival work takes place in profound ways. The introduction of market rhetoric and the submission of archival work to market metrics and other practices drawn directly from the market plays out in numerous ways including in new emphases within the

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<sup>45</sup> Ian G. Beilin, “Promoting and Resisting Student “Success”: Critical Information Literacy Instruction in the Neoliberal Academic Library,” Presentation CAPAL Ottawa, CA, (2015).

<sup>46</sup> Lajos Kormendy, “Changes in Archives’ Philosophy and Functions at the Turn of the 20th/21st centuries,” *Archival Science* 7 (2007): 167-177.

<sup>47</sup> Punzalan and Caswell, “Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice.”

<sup>48</sup> Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 23-43.

<sup>49</sup> Marika Cifor, “Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (March 2016): 7-31.

administration of public institutions on “cost efficiency” and “profitableness.”<sup>50</sup> A prime example is the increasingly pervasive rhetoric framing archival users as “customers,” the “entities receiving and/or using the products or services produced or provided,” by government archives like National Archives and Records Administration in the U.S. This adoption of market language and practices require the provision of “proactive” and “positive” “customer service” based on private sector models in archives.<sup>51</sup> Among the numerous submissions of archival work to market metrics the increased emphasis providing the economic,<sup>52</sup> social, and pedagogical impact and other measurements of archives is notable. Particularly complex is the insistence on measuring social justice impact.<sup>53</sup> In a neoliberal framework the language of social justice can be easily co-opted to serve neoliberal aims where everything must lead to a demonstrable outcome.

Shifts in archival processing practices and processes under neoliberalism clearly illustrate the extent to which neoliberalism has reshaped archival work. Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner’s extremely influential concept of “More Product, Less Process” (MPLP) and its user-center approach for revamping traditional archival practices utilizes a cost-benefit analysis paradigm.<sup>54</sup> MPLP is aimed at making archival practices more efficient; however, it has not necessarily resulted in more effective practice. Under MPLP archivists become workers on an assembly line aiming for standardization, ever-greater amounts of linear feet processed, and at increased speed. There are dangers in adopting such a method of archival production that is so easily deskilled. MPLP is often adopted across repositories over more critical approaches that are social justice-oriented and that recognize heterogeneous collections and records creators as integral to the breadth and depth of archival collections. The neoliberal agenda seeks to make things more efficient and economical through universalizing and erasing differences in ways that continue to embody tacit hierarchies that are inherent in archival work.

Neoliberalism has resulted in a widespread reduction of public resources. Such reductions are often key factors in the de- and under- funding of archives, libraries, and other institutions of the public good. Partnerships and other arrangements with private corporations became a popular survival strategy in the face of dire austerity measures.

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<sup>50</sup> Kormendy, “Changes in Archives’ Philosophy and Functions at the Turn of the 20th/21st centuries,” 173.

<sup>51</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, “Strategic plan 2014-2018,” D-1.

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Yakel, Wendy Duff, Helen Tibbo, Adam Kriesberg, and Amber Cushing, “The Economic Impact of Government Archives,” *American Archivist* 75, no. 2 (2012): 297-325; Caroline Wavell et al., *Impact Evaluation of Museums, Archives and Libraries: Available Evidence Project* (Aberdeen: Robert Gordon University, 2002); Sarah Horton and Jaqueline Spence, “Scoping the Economic and Social Impact of Archives,” *Museums, Libraries and Archives (MLA) Council Yorkshire*, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Wendy Duff et al, “Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation.”

<sup>54</sup> Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *The American Archivist* 68 (2005): 225.

Such privatization significantly shifts substantial control over public data from birth and death certificates to biometric identifiers to private corporations. As part of this larger trend the increase in the collecting, digitization of, and subsequent placement of archival records into privately owned, managed, and for-profit subscription databases deserves greater attention. Subscription databases like those of Archives Direct now hold digitized records ranging from those resources documenting American Indian Histories and Cultures from the Newberry Library to materials on and for women in Britain and its colonies from the National Archives, U.K. The decrease in public funding comes at the same time as expectations for digital access amongst users of archives are on the rise. Private databases offer archives the tantalizing opportunity to make previously difficult to access records to available to a broader population of users. However, the digitization and hosting of materials has real social, political, ethical, and affective costs. Too often such databases serve to replicate and reify systematic power differentials. These digitized records are made accessible, but only to the privileged users who have access to them behind notoriously costly paywalls putting in danger access, use, and intellectual freedom. Such databases are framed as promoting a better future for archives, but with growing social inequality, private and intellectual property rights, unencumbered markets and free trade, pricey academic publishing, and increasingly expensive and, therefore, more inaccessible higher education, these goals are not actually achievable. Privatized digitization models have not always been unquestioningly accepted; there has been notable resistance to extractive, corporatized efforts especially from archival actors in the Global South.<sup>55</sup> Clearly the economic survival of and provision of access to archives is necessary and desirable; however, operating uncritically within the status quo is not the best response for repositories' or society's long-term thriving.

It is not just the archives themselves that are undervalued with the rise of neoliberalism, but also archival laborers. Without sufficient funding for adequate and well-qualified staff many archives turn to unpaid internships and other volunteer laborers for their survival. While there is much to be gained for students and new professionals through such opportunities, there are also high costs to consider. For archives, establishing an unstable, often short-term workforce and the perception thereby that archives' needs have been met and at a low cost means that such conditions of deprivation can easily become the new status quo. This puts the long-term survival of archives at risk, which challenges the archival paradigm of long-term preservation and historical importance. These labor models, especially of unpaid internships mean that the archival profession opens itself just to those in the privileged financial situation to be able to undertake such labors thereby replicating problematic inequalities in the profession. Neoliberal models for archival labor, which favor outsourcing and cost above all else, can

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<sup>55</sup> Siro Masinde and Rahim S. Rajan, "Aluka: Developing Digital Scholarly Collections from and about Africa," (Paper presented at the Conference on Electronic Publishing and Dissemination, Dakar, Senegal, October 6-7, 2008).

also serve to support unjust and damaging institutions such as the prison industrial complex. The digitization of government documents is work done in some states by prisoners. Prisoners in Utah earn somewhere between \$0.60 and \$1.75 per hour for their digitization labors.<sup>56</sup> At the same time in Utah, the Mormon Church enlists inmates in two different prisons to index genealogical records collected by the Church as unpaid volunteers. Digitization work may indeed help inmates to gain valuable computer and other skills; however, it is problematic for archives to engage uncritically in the support of such unjust institutions and exploitations.<sup>57</sup> The gross inequities, inequalities, and oppressions that neoliberalism perpetuates are also certain to have an influence on the emotional well-being of those engaged in archival work impacting long-term retention and their daily labors.

### Community Archives

Neoliberalism influences government archives, institutional archives, as well as figures into eroding support for community archives that demand that such community entities either collapse or conform to such institutional norms and standards. Similarly to neoliberalism's influence on government archives, community archives face reductions or complete losses in the public sector funding.<sup>58</sup> As Cifor has described, community archives in Canada have been subject to a complete loss of federal funding and support since the elimination of National Archival Development Program in 2012.<sup>59</sup> The elimination of this program was preceded by a long period of "inertia and retrenchment."<sup>60</sup> The situation of Canadian community archives is but one example of a much larger problem. Under-resourcing of all sorts under neoliberalism disproportionately affects smaller and more geographically remote archives. In Canada, these are the archives that most often serve Canada's First Nations communities.<sup>61</sup> The few funding streams still available to these community archives focus on short-term goals and emphasize above all the need to create revenue and to demonstrate the archives' economic value.<sup>62</sup> Funding concerns also affect particular community archives that resist,

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<sup>56</sup> Shane Bauer, "Your Family's Genealogical Records May Have Been Digitized by a Prisoner," *Mother Jones*, August 13, 2015, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/05/mormon-church-prison-geneology-family-search>.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Andrew Flinn, "Archival Activism: Independent and Community-led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions," *InterActions* 7, no. 2 (2011).

<sup>59</sup> Cifor, "Affecting Relations"; Canadian Council of Archives, "Memorandum on the Elimination of the National Archival Development Program," (2012).

<sup>60</sup> Lois K. Yorke, "Nine Hundred Points of Light: The Canadian Community of Archives," *Canadian Issues* (2014): 44-49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

as part of their social justice missions, the corporate funding models that are taking the place of public funding. Without public funding these archives must devote much of their small resources to seeking out individual donors.<sup>63</sup>

As government and institutional archives work directly within a neoliberal frame, community archives emerge as spaces for often underrepresented and marginalized peoples to collect and preserve histories based on being pushed out of and left out of mainstream archival representations. Following Joseph's work, *community* might be considered as a definite 'good' as well as a marker of a certain quality of life. The community produces and is produced by the affective urgency to come together in a seemingly caring sort of way. Invoking the word 'community,' then, arouses a certain feeling and sense of belonging while also a sense of non-belonging to something 'good' and worthy. Value and worth constitute the community in ways that raise certain individuals while squashing others; meanwhile, the emotional work within the community makes 'community' the space that people are drawn to. Through political theorist Sara Ahmed's work, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, we contend that community archivists—whether professional or everyday archivists—might interrogate the affective bonds that pull communities together around a distinct affinity, which is often identity-based and linked to identity politics through which politically and socially some identities are pulled into state-sanctioned belonging while others are pushed to the margins into un-belonging status. Although community archives do good when produced critically for and with distinct communities, these same spaces often hold the hierarchies and exclusions that, through the politics of respectability in the processes of the archiving and interpretation of the records/collections as well as the records creations themselves, further instantiate the neoliberal agenda. An ongoing archival critique is integral to recognizing and challenging neoliberalism. Archival scholar Jamie A. Lee's *Queer/ed Archival Methodology* is a flexible framework to help "guide archivists along with their staff, communities, contributors, and volunteers through the unsettling technological, societal, cultural and archival shifts in what might be considered 'normal' and standardized concepts and practices of archival productions."<sup>64</sup> Creating an archival critique moves the archival 'community'—from practitioners to scholars—into deeper conversations about the basic tenets of archives alongside the basic elements of democracy that neoliberalism is quietly undoing: "...vocabularies, principles of justice, political cultures, habits of citizenship, practices of rule, and above all, democratic imaginaries."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Punzalan and Caswell, "Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice."

<sup>64</sup> Jamie A. Lee, "A Queer/ed Archival Methodology: Theorizing Practice through Radical Interrogations of the Archival Body" (Phd diss. University of Arizona, 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 17.

## Archival Studies Education

In the academic arena, neoliberalism has contributed to an ever-increasing pressure on archival academics to engage only in research that is easily fundable. This greatly influences the projects that are done and turns attention away from many urgent concerns for the field. Like other archival labors there is an increased emphasis on framing academic work around market measurable ‘impacts.’<sup>66</sup> Over the past decade there have been numerous studies that in this paradigm seek to measure the social, economic, and pedagogical impact of museums, libraries, and archives. Graduate programs in archival studies are now pressured to focus solely on the employability of their students in the market when designing courses and curricula.<sup>67</sup> Oftentimes, curriculum focuses on preparing students for archival certification<sup>68</sup> and the hands-on practical how-tos of archival development rather than the theoretical breadth and depth that supports students to be critical thinkers and actors as technological, social, and cultural changes influence workplaces in more local ways. These neoliberal models for academic work reward the forms of research and teaching that produce and reproduce corporate values and interests and, in turn, de-incentivize doing social justice-oriented work that requires the challenging and dismantling such values and interests.<sup>69</sup>

From this brief review of the state of the neoliberal archival field it is clear that across the board the field has yet to come to terms with the ways in which neoliberal funding structures are increasingly dictating priorities. These neoliberal priorities both produce and replicate structures of inequality in archives. In particular there is an urgent need to strategize alternative funding structures that reflect social justice aims for scholars, archivists, and communities.<sup>70</sup> Further research is needed, both conceptual and empirical, on the consequences and implications of neoliberalism in archival studies. This section points to a number of issues and arenas that might provide fruitful grounds for such research including the adoption of models and metrics for processing and other core archival functions, private-public partnerships, labor and compensation structures, archival education, funding models, and community archives.

## TOWARDS AN ARCHIVAL CRITIQUE

In his March 2015 presentation titled “The Security Archipelago,” political theorist and anthropologist Paul Amar argued that “all security is built upon insecurities,

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> See <http://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/c/certified-archivist> to read about the Academy of Certified Archivists and their requirements.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.



control, marking, patrol, fears, and desires (manufactured in particular...).”<sup>71</sup> Considering the archives in this paradoxical positioning between secure and insecure under neoliberalism, we ask how might the urgency to collect and produce archives, especially in community archival contexts, be inextricably connected to the urgency to secure the future within a historical context? As community comes together around certain events, affinities, identities, and so forth, perhaps this urgency in coming together creates a crisis of history<sup>72</sup> but based in the minds of those who have been marginalized and erased. Therefore, a coming together as a community makes for a future in which they are visible and intelligible as participants. We raise a series of provocations for archival practitioners and scholars to reflect on and consider through their own hands-on practices, research, and productions with records, records creators, and distinct archival communities.

As an archival critique—one that is linked to an ethics of community within the archival community—we raise a number of questions to consider through a closer look into archival productions: How might archives be attentive simultaneously to both a visibility and a critique of community in this visibility? In the production and practice of community archives, how is the community formed and re-formed? Who and what are included? Excluded? What value structures are put into place by community? By archivists? What does participation look like? As community formation often occurs during challenging times, what happens within social movement when the movement changes? How is the movement reframed? How might power be reframed? Power may be taken out of governance, but is in the hands of community and, in neoliberalism, power is enacted still through hegemonic discourse but under the guise of community good and togetherness. Power then becomes self-regulation. Together as archivists and archival scholars, how might we together re-script a new archival imaginary? One that recognizes neoliberalism’s hold on our histories and futures? One that can critique community? These questions, like this paper, are but a first step in forming a substantive and sustainable archival critique of neoliberalism.

## CONCLUSION

The ideology of neoliberalism governs all aspects of life in this contemporary moment. The LIS field has been highly subject to neoliberal encroachments into aspects

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<sup>71</sup> Paul Amar, “The Security Archipelago: Rethinking Sexuality Politics in an Age of Global Counter-revolution,” Miranda Joseph Endowed Lecture through the Institute for LGBT Studies (lecture, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, March 26, 2015).

<sup>72</sup> See Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (March 2016): 53-75. Caswell and Gilliland’s research on invisible records or imaginary records to understand the challenges of a materiality-based archival paradigm when records take the form distinctly within individual and collective experience and memory.

of practice, scholarship, and professionalism. As archival scholars and practitioners, it is urgent to turn our attention to the continued and too-often unquestioned practices in our field that both reflect and uphold neoliberalism's devastating inequalities and inequities. By offering a brief engagement with literatures on neoliberalism from within and beyond the LIS discipline, we have framed and traced neoliberalism and its troubling encroachment into the archives. By turning attention to examples of neoliberalism in diverse archival settings, archival studies research, and archival education, it is possible to grasp and to begin to address the neoliberalism at play in both institutional and community archival productions. The neoliberal paradigm limits the possibilities for even imagining another way of life or work; however, there is vital potential for an archival critique. Archivists and scholars might together develop such a critique into a framework for addressing, and perhaps even undoing neoliberalism's reach. This critique offers the possibility for the archival field to transform itself in line with Joseph's "ethical practice of community." This paper marks a starting point in what we hope will become a rich trajectory of research, practice, and critique of neoliberalism in archival studies and across LIS.

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