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2020

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**“Conditions of Possibility:” Towards an Archival Praxis Informed by  
Black Feminist Anarchism and a Critical Trans Politics**

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**“Conditions of Possibility:” Towards an Archival Praxis Informed by  
Black Feminist Anarchism and a Critical Trans Politics**

**by**

**Aems DiNunzio Emswiler**

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## **Abstract**

# **“Conditions of Possibility:” Towards an Archival Praxis Informed by Black Feminist Anarchism and a Critical Trans Politics**

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Grassroots and radical archives have increasingly been presented as more socially just alternatives to dominant institutions. This increased recognition is weighted with a set of risks that minoritized memory-workers must navigate. Under the auspices of the gendered, racial-capitalist settler state, dominant institutions will ultimately work to diffuse the potentials of radical memory work and organizing that threatens their hegemony while continuing to profit from this work. In this thesis, I ask, what are we to do—as trans, queers, crips, criminals, whores, dykes, fags and anarchists—who hope to do liberatory memory work while existing in spaces that at best are extracting from us, and at worst, killing us? Can memory work existing under the auspices of the white supremacist settler-state, within these institutions, be truly revolutionary? How can we document our social movement histories, working class resistance, and lawless subversion without replicating the administrative violence, surveillance, and carceral logics of the nation-state?

To address these questions, I draw upon my experiential knowledge organizing with the books to prisons collective, Inside Books Project (IBP) over a span of nine years. As a queer-crip, non-binary anarchist and prison abolitionist, my political praxes formed the basis of an archival methodology that enabled me to navigate some of these questions in my capacity as the project archivist for IBP. I argue that frameworks of Black feminist anarchism and critical trans politics can inform an archival praxis that emerges in the interstices of impossible being and becoming embodied by the enslaved, incarcerated, detained, maimed, undocumented, disabled, and disposable. Drawing on the work of Black archivists and anarchists, I will discuss how I have applied these praxes in my work documenting the narratives of incarcerated people in Texas. In doing this, I hope to promote a more sustained engagement with Black feminist anarchism and a critical trans politics in the field of memory work and archives. I also hope to encourage anarchists and others organizing towards collective liberation to more actively engage in memory work as a praxis of disruption, subversion, and radical futurity.

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## INTRODUCTION: “LIVES LIVED IN SPACES OF IMPOSSIBILITY”

Trans people are told by the law, state agencies, private discriminators, and our families that we are impossible people who cannot exist, cannot be seen, cannot be classified, and cannot fit anywhere...that we are not politically viable; our lives are not a political possibility that can be conceived. Inside this impossibility, I argue, lies our specific political potential- a potential to formulate demands and strategies to meet those demands that exceed the containment of neoliberal politics.

- Dean Spade<sup>1</sup>

If we are to restore and document our humanity, we must refuse the spectacle for the everyday. The archive has privileged the spectacle to our detriment. Today we can chant the names of a handful of the dead, but these are not litanies for survival. Even community-based archives have proven woefully inadequate in recording the names suffering slow deaths of incarceration, poverty, and environmental toxicity. We must first seek to archive lives lived in spaces of impossibility.

– Yusef Omowale<sup>2</sup>

In “We Already Are,” Yusef Omowale, an activist and staff member at the Southern California Library, discusses how “community-based” or “oppositional” archives have increasingly been presented as more socially just alternatives to dominant institutions. This shift is a result of decades of organizing on the part of activists and minoritized communities that has paved the way for conversations on power and violence in the field.<sup>3</sup> For example, Black Power movements from the 1960s-on organizing against white supremacist violence have set the stage for work like the Boston Uprising Archive, the People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, and the Black Youth Project 100

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<sup>1</sup> Dean Spade, *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 19.

<sup>2</sup> Yusef Omowale, “We Already Are,” *Sustainable Futures*, September 3, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> “Minoritized” is used here rather than “minority” to reflect a “process [action v noun] of...minoritization” and the subjective construction of minority status in specific societal contexts; Michael Benitez, Jr. “Resituating Culture Centers Within a Social Justice Framework: Is There Room for Examining Whiteness?,” in *Culture Centers in Higher Education: Perspectives on Identity, Theory, and Practice*, ed. L. D. Patton, (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2010), 119-134.

(BYP100) She Safe, We Safe Story Collection Project. Similarly, organizing led by queer, trans, feminist, Indigenous, and disabled activists has spawned community-led projects preserving histories of resistance and survival. As I write this, for example, there are projects developed to document the intersections of covid-19 and mass incarceration, and others rising from the global movement in the wake of the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Tony McDade, and the many others lost to state violence.<sup>4</sup>

What does it mean to “archive lives lived in spaces of impossibility”? To address subjection and symbolic annihilation- those invisibilities in the historical record- and to reassert agency and autonomy? What risks do we face, as memory workers unearthing these “political potentials”? And what frameworks can inform an archival praxis that enables us to subvert these threats?

Before delving into these questions, I want to briefly describe what an “archive” is, as it has nebulous and multifaceted meanings. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) defines an archive as “materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, to archive is to identify, acquire, and save materials considered important due to their historical, evidentiary value. An archive may also work to provide access to these materials for the public or a specific community, such as a university archive

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<sup>4</sup> “Sheltering Justice,” Texas After Violence Project, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://shelteringjustice.texasafterviolence.org/>; “BLM PROTEST ARCHIVING RESOURCES,” Google Docs, accessed June 8, 2020, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1g8\\_2YqB0inbvn9os5GCp8zmTuWvIC9h45RgX2L1oy\\_8/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1g8_2YqB0inbvn9os5GCp8zmTuWvIC9h45RgX2L1oy_8/edit?usp=sharing); Kyle Harris, “ArtHyve Is Archiving This Turbulent Historical Moment,” last modified July 16, 2020, <https://www.westword.com/arts/arthyve-collects-material-from-black-lives-matter-protests-and-covid-19-11737790>; “Rebel Archives in the Golden Gulag,” accessed August 10, 2020, <https://rebelarchives.humspace.ucla.edu/>.

<sup>5</sup> “What Are Archives? | Society of American Archivists,” accessed June 2, 2020, <https://www2.archivists.org/about-archives>.

like the Joseph A. Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan. An archive may also be a “division of an organization” in charge of record-keeping, or an entity that collects the records of a specific community, such as the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). Some archives serve spaces of activism, community education, and camaraderie. Interference Archive, MayDay Rooms and The Long Haul are examples of this, hosting events, exhibits, and workshops using materials in collections. Archives like this are unique from those specifically intended for academic research with strict policies for use of materials and conduct in the space.

The “archives field” or “profession” has traditionally referred to these collections in libraries, academia, and government that are often staffed by degreed archivists.<sup>6</sup> When I refer to the archives field, however, I am also referring to the various forms of non-institutionalized memory work conducted by individuals, collectives, and organizations, often defined as “community based” because they are often more accessible to those who have been disproportionately impacted by the economic, racial, physical, and educational barriers of dominant institutions.<sup>7</sup> I use the terms “memory work” to refer to labor that may fall outside the realm of the “archival,” either rhetorically or methodologically, and “memory workers” to refer to the many public scholars, oral historians, activists, librarians, and documentarians who are doing this type of labor.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “The Archival Profession: Meeting Critical Institutional and Social Needs,” The Academy of Certified Archivists, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.certifiedarchivists.org/other-resources/articles/the-archival-profession-meeting-critical-institutional-and-social-needs/>.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the rhetorics of “community-based archives,” see Jarett Drake, “Seismic Shifts: On Archival Fact and Fictions,” *Sustainable Futures*, August 20, 2018, <https://medium.com/community-archives/seismic-shifts-on-archival-fact-and-fictions-6db4d5c655ae>.

<sup>8</sup> My understandings here are indebted to the scholarship of Doria D. Johnson, Jarett M. Drake, Michelle Caswell, Verne Harris, and Terry Cook. See, Verne Harris, “Featured Commentary: Nelson Mandela, Memory, and the Work of Justice,” *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 8, no. 2 (2012), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4ng874xp>.

While dominant institutions such as universities, media, non-profits, and professional organizations (those that create the norms and policies in the field) have increasingly recognized these grassroots forms of memory work that derive from social movements, Omowale and others point to the risks inherent in this recognition. Although many individuals in these hegemonic spaces are dedicated to dismantling white supremacy and affirming forms of knowledge and memory work that have historically been eclipsed, these institutions are inherently founded upon and buttressed by white supremacy, racialized and gendered capitalism, ableism, settler-colonialism, nationalism, and neoliberalism. On public endorsements of Black Lives Matter, for example, Saidiya Hartman says

Everyone has issued a statement—every elite racist university and cultural institution...These institutions feel required to take part in this kind of performance and this kind of speech *only* because of the radically capacious demands of those in the street, those who are demanding abolition, and who have said: “We are not a part of the social contract, we will riot, we will loot.” These are legitimate political acts.<sup>9</sup>

Empty statements on equality, diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism all represent neoliberalism’s “stripped-down, non-redistributive form of ‘equality’...compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources.”<sup>10</sup> Neoliberalism is a political framework that arose in the late 20th century in response to threats to corporate profit and Western hegemony posed by social movements aimed at the redistribution of wealth from the hands of minority elite to majority population. It offered “a new vision of national and world order, a vision of competition, inequality, market ‘discipline,’ public austerity, and ‘law

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<sup>9</sup> “Saidiya Hartman on Insurgent Histories and the Abolitionist Imaginary,” *Artforum*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/saidiya-hartman-83579>.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), xi.

and order...aimed at dismantling the limited U.S. welfare state, in order to enhance corporate profit rates.”<sup>11</sup> Lisa Duggan specifically examines how neoliberalism assumes a “neutral” guise of economic rationality while it is deeply entrenched in and operates through facets of identity, culture, and politics.

These neoliberal diversity and inclusion (or D&I) initiatives make millions for such “allies” as Robin DiAngelo, a white academic who has made approximately two million dollars from her book *White Fragility*, and hundreds of thousands more annually on workshops, trainings, and speaking engagements.<sup>12</sup> DiAngelo is representative of many who peddle anti-racist instruction and diversity training for immense profit, particularly in times of heightened attention to racial violence. Companies unabashedly share their end goal is to “leverage the effects of diversity to achieve a competitive business advantage.”<sup>13</sup> Speakers promoting “booming” diversity and inclusion opportunities describe how “corporations have invested human capital” in order to “create better products.”<sup>14</sup> A 2003 study estimated that these companies spent eight billion a year on D&I initiatives; since then the business has only expanded to profit from the increased racial and political unrest since the election of Trump in 2016 and growing Black Lives

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, x.

<sup>12</sup> DiAngelo's representatives quoted an hour long keynote for \$30,000, a two-hour workshop for \$35,000, and a half-day event for \$40,000; “The Wages of Woke: How Robin DiAngelo Got Rich Peddling ‘White Fragility,’” *Washington Free Beacon*, July 25, 2020, <https://freebeacon.com/culture/the-wages-of-woke-2/>.

<sup>13</sup> “Diversity And Inclusion: A Complete Guide For HR Professionals,” *Ideal*, June 13, 2020, <https://ideal.com/diversity-and-inclusion/>.

<sup>14</sup> “Diversity and Inclusion Is a Growth Industry. These Experts Explained Why,” *NBC News*, November 10, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/know-your-value/feature/diversity-inclusion-growth-industry-these-experts-explained-why-ncna1076726>.

Matter movement.<sup>15</sup> According to the employment networking site, Indeed, D&I postings have increased by thirty-five percent as of March 2018.<sup>16</sup>

The D&I industry and other neoliberal permutations have permeated the information studies profession, including archives and librarianship. These conversations are represented in textbooks, scholarship, conferences, grant proposals, diversity and inclusion committees, employment and enrollment practices. For example, *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion* was published by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 2014 and focused on developing “a common understanding of what diversity and inclusion are or can be, “recruiting diversity to the profession.” and “retaining a diverse workforce.”<sup>17</sup> The textbook pushes for marginalized epistemologies to be incorporated into the profession and into archival institutions. Other examples of these conversations are represented in conference themes and policies. The SAA and CoSA (Council of State Archivists) joint annual meeting in 2019 centered on the theme of “Transformative!,” and “our profession’s goal of inclusivity” as well as “accountability, creating space for underrepresented voices, and challenging the status quo.”<sup>18</sup>

As is true for most contexts in which these conversations are occurring, there are many who are actively and genuinely committed to social justice and anti-racism in their spaces of work and education. Under the auspices of neoliberal capitalism however, dominant institutions will ultimately work to diffuse the potentials of truly radical memory

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<sup>15</sup> Pamela Newkirk, “Diversity Has Become a Booming Business. So Where Are the Results?” last modified October 10, 2019, <https://time.com/5696943/diversity-business/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Mary A. Caldera and Kathryn M. Neal, eds., *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> “A Transformative Experience!” Society of American Archivists, accessed April 29, 2019, [https://www2.archivists.org/am2019/A\\_Transformative\\_Experience](https://www2.archivists.org/am2019/A_Transformative_Experience).

work and organizing that threatens their hegemony while continuing to profit materially and symbolically from this work. April Hathcock writes on the failure of D&I initiatives in the information studies profession saying “Our diversity programs do not work because they are themselves coded to promote whiteness as the norm in the profession and unduly burden those individuals they are most intended to help.”<sup>19</sup>

In “Diversity's discontents: in search of an archive of the oppressed,” Jarrett Drake also calls attention to the failures of neoliberal D&I initiatives in the field. He first discusses how racial-capitalist notions of property and belonging inform discourses of “keeping” Black archivists and other minoritized identities in the field, and how the desire for “keeping” particular people around is also informed by who is more easily claimed by white liberal notions of security.<sup>20</sup> Samudzi and Anderson similarly warn,

The nonprofit industrial complex and liberal power structures find and reward the writers, activists, and so-called leaders (selected on our behalf) who least threaten the status quo...Our movements and our work need to avoid neoliberal enticements to corporatize or commoditize or otherwise become caught in the gears of capitalist accommodationism.<sup>21</sup>

This manifests as the tokenization of individuals as keynote speakers, unpaid facilitators, and recipients of symbolic awards that often come with no tangible benefits for the organizers being lauded. Performances of inclusion come with expectations of praise, gratitude, and printed “allyship” badges to tape on office doors.

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<sup>19</sup>April Hathcock, “White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, last modified October 7, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/>.

<sup>20</sup>Jarrett M. Drake, “Diversity’s Discontents: In Search of an Archive of the Oppressed.” *Archives and Manuscripts* 47, no. 2 (2019): 270–79.

<sup>21</sup>William C. Anderson and Zoé Samudzi, *As Black as Resistance: Finding the Conditions for Liberation* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2018), 42.



While tokenized individuals are brought into these spaces, the communities they are expected to represent continue to be excluded from access to the privileges of these institutions, such as paywalled scholarship, institutional technologies (archival scanners, printers, and AV equipment, for example), decision-making power, the economic ability to take on unpaid internships, and free or discounted access to cultural heritage institutions. Public scholars and activists outside of academia are not seen as legitimate theorists, but their intellectual contributions and labor are taken up by academics who then publish progressive articles behind paywalls without citing the individuals and movements their work originally derived from. They also attend conferences to present these ideas while public scholars and activists are charged hundreds of more dollars than institutionally affiliated presenters and students. For example, at the SAA and CoSAA "Transformative!" conference, on-site registration for members was \$439 and \$659 for non-members.<sup>22</sup> These broader institutional barriers will continue to uphold exclusion and minoritization based on race, gender, class, and ability, despite organizer's intentional labor to address power dynamics in the space. Hartman addresses this when she says

The possessive investment in whiteness can't be rectified by learning "how to be more antiracist." It requires a radical divestment in the project of whiteness and a redistribution of wealth and resources. It requires abolition, the abolition of the carceral world, the abolition of capitalism.<sup>23</sup>

Many individuals committed to this project of divestment inhabit minoritized identities themselves, and recognize that these conversations are embedded within larger systems that seek to diffuse radical critiques and movements through institutional assimilation. This

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<sup>22</sup> "Registration Rates," Society of American Archivists, accessed June 9, 2020, <https://www2.archivists.org/am2019/attend/registration-rates>.

<sup>23</sup> "Saidiya Hartman on Insurgent Histories and the Abolitionist Imaginary," *Artforum*.

recognition involves an added layer of labor and critical interrogation that is too often placed at the feet of Black, brown, and indigenous people, particularly those who are women, queer, and trans. For example, the co-chairs of the SAA and CoSA annual meeting included in the conference theme discussion an acknowledgement of “the power structures that underlie our collaborative work as a committee” and “the emotional and invisible labor that is required for [those] who navigate the systems of power under which our institutions and organizations operate.”<sup>24</sup> There was also an email sent out to presenters, urging them to critically reflect on their positionalities in regards to their topics, saying “as the nature of archives is a colonialist project, to not acknowledge the power structures that control our work reproduces that power.”<sup>25</sup> These interventions reflect genuine and crucial labor that individuals take on both within professional and institutional spaces, despite fundamental challenges of these environments.

Others work outside of dominant institutions through smaller workshops and “unconferences,” alternatives to conferences that may be free or sliding-scale, open to community members without professional affiliations, and specifically inclusive of activists and public scholars whose knowledge is devalued at academic conferences. For example, the Breaking Library Silos for Social Justice (BLS4SJ) collective held a free one-day workshop that took place in Austin, Texas in 2018. The workshop was focused on critical discussion and collaboration among local information workers to advance principles of social justice in work-places and to combat oppression in the field.<sup>26</sup> The collective's mission is to utilize the framework of critical

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> “The BLS Workshop,” Breaking Library Silos for Social Justice, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://breakinglibrarysilos.weebly.com/the-bls-workshop.html>.

librarianship in order to “challenge [our] personal and professional biases via resources, dialogue, and events that decenter whiteness and emphasize voices of color and queer, trans perspectives in pursuit of racial and social justice.”<sup>27</sup> This workshop was inspired by the 2015 Portland #critlib unconference and Radical Reference and other examples of work in the field that moves to disrupt institutional power dynamics.

Despite the critical reflexivity of organizers, educators, and scholars working to transform these spaces, in which I also situate myself, the structural conditions we work within continue to pose overwhelming barriers for those without academic or institutional affiliations. These institutional barriers will continue to exclude those most marginalized by educational, financial, racial, and ableist hierarchies. Entire communities are kept out of these spaces through a neoliberal politics that infringes upon radical memory work and archival labor that, as Omowale reminds us, has “always been present;” he warns that accepting manifestations of legitimacy is “to be incorporated into the existing order of capitalism, American exceptionalism, patriarchy and violence” that continue to commodify, consume, and colonize those who “do not meet the requirements of empire.”<sup>28</sup>

What are we to do then, those who are trans, queers, crips, criminals, whores, dykes, fags and anarchists—those who “cannot exist, cannot be seen, cannot be classified, and cannot fit anywhere”—who wish to unearth and document the political potentials of impossibility, not only as a testament to historical struggle but as a praxis of resistance?<sup>29</sup> How are we to do revolutionary memory work while existing in spaces that at best are extracting from us, and at worst, killing us? Can

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<sup>27</sup> “Mission + Vision,” Breaking Library Silos for Social Justice, accessed August 8, 2020, <https://breakinglibrarysilos.weebly.com/mission--vision.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Omowale, “We Already Are.”

<sup>29</sup> Spade, *Normal Life*, 19.

memory work existing under the auspices of the neoliberal settler-state, within these institutions, be truly revolutionary? As Samudzi and Anderson ask, “how does a movement protect itself from co-option by individuals and institutions eternally endowed with the structural capacity and mandate to divert political energy and direction?”<sup>30</sup>

As a queer-crip, non-binary anarchist working towards prison abolition, I have struggled with these questions through my work providing access to information and books to people in prison and documenting their narratives in my capacity as a project archivist for Inside Books. These are populations systemically denied access to educational resources and privileges, with selective interventions (such as university classes within prison units) that often sustain reformist solutions to mass incarceration rather than addressing the roots of its violence. How can we facilitate access to education and information while disrupting the conditions that enable carceral systems to operate? In my capacity as the community archivist for this project, I must similarly ask, how can we document these “lives lived in impossibility”—those surviving 20 years in solitary confinement only to face execution, or as a trans woman in an all men’s unit, or those in perpetual lockdown within crammed cages during a global pandemic—without extracting pain, recreating violence, and co-opting the autonomy of individuals who are historically represented as archival subjects rather than agents?

Omowale’s short piece has articulated these dilemmas most powerfully for me, especially as I have pursued these questions into the space of academia to develop my knowledge of archival practice. Within the first week of my program I was told “incarceration is the new sexy thing in academia,” but to successfully complete my academic work I should drop my organizing commitments because they were

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<sup>30</sup> Anderson and Samudzi, *As Black As Resistance*, 42.

a "distraction."<sup>31</sup> This response reflects the ways that social movement labor and the violence faced by minoritized identities is fetishized and "recognized" as a subject to be profited from, but not truly engaged with. It is no surprise that I resonated with Omowale's argument that:

The values we must practice are ones of refusal. Refusal not as an act of negation but as a condition of possibility...Most materially, by refusing offers of inclusion and recognition, and instead demanding redistribution...It's being dispossessed of things like our land, our housing, even our health that have made our archives unsustainable. What we need most are not new institutions with new foundation support, as welcome as that may be, but to continue the struggles for justice and sovereignty for all our communities so that we can continue doing the memory work we have been doing from the beginning.<sup>32</sup>

Jarett Drake similarly argues that to address white supremacy in the field, we must:

abandon the legalistic discourse of diversity and adopt an archive of the oppressed, a working concept of archives that foregrounds black feminist analyses and praxis as foundational for any future of archives claiming to be just, inclusive and liberatory.<sup>33</sup>

These values —redistribution of resources, refusal of neoliberal capitalist inclusion, sovereignty and autonomy for minoritized communities, access to housing and healthcare for all, abolition, and Black feminist praxis—are all foundational to my politics as a queer-crip, trans anarchist and archivist. Drawing on the work of Black archivists who are invested in radical and liberatory praxis, I will expand on these frameworks and how I have specifically applied them in my work documenting the narratives of incarcerated people in Texas. In doing this, I hope to promote a more sustained engagement with Black feminist anarchism and a critical trans politics in the field of memory work and archives. I also hope

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<sup>31</sup> Personal conversation with a faculty member.

<sup>32</sup> Omowale, "We Already Are."

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

to encourage anarchists and others organizing towards radical futurities to more actively engage in memory work as a praxis of disruption, subversion, and liberation.

## **“SO-CALLED IMPOSSIBLE WORLDVIEWS”**

Removing oppression, not reforming it, demands the creation and radicalization of new dissidents. It is an exercise in imagining new communities...Channeling collective racial trauma into world-imagining energy and analysis is one of the ways we express care for our fellow Black people and our desire to improve their conditions...[W]e should be radically defining what will bring about our freedom from our unacceptable conditions. Until then rebellion will continually bring us closer to where we should rightfully be. When the work of our struggle settles beyond the turbulent waves of our current predicament, what lies in our depths can grow as a foundation to create a world free of oppressive violence, fear, and perpetual disruption.

- Anderson and Samudzi<sup>34</sup>

### **Black Feminist Anarchism**

While anarchism is not reducible to a simple definition, it has been described as a philosophy, praxis, an "intellectual current," and "shared orientation towards ways of doing politics."<sup>35</sup> Central tenets of anarchism include a rejection of hierarchical power and domination, social relations based upon mutual aid and reciprocity, individual autonomy, and community-based modes of organizing. As a praxis rejecting the state and the upward distribution of resources, anarchism has been targeted by authorial institutions (government, police, organized religion, systems of higher education, etc.) with delegitimizing attacks. These institutions ascribe violence, destruction, and disorganization to anarchism in order to reduce and discredit it as a political viability. While the dismantling of current systems of power is indeed an integral aspect of

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<sup>34</sup> Anderson and Samudzi, *As Black As Resistance*, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (Pluto Press, 1989), 1; 9.

anarchism, this does not preclude it as a site of creativity, organization, and constructive world-making.

Despite these principles that purportedly reject hierarchical domination, classical anarchism is fraught with Eurocentric, white, cis, heteronormative male hegemony. This is not to say that other modes of anarchist thought and being have not existed, even that which may not describe itself as such. For example, Hartman asks,

How do we bring into view *the constancy* of Black radical practice— practice that has overwhelmingly fallen from view—and a certain lexicon of what constitutes the political, or the radical political, or an anarchist tradition, or a history of anti-fascism?...Black people have been abandoned by the law, positioned outside the nation, and excluded from the terms of the social contract—and this recognition is in fact hundreds of years old.<sup>36</sup>

In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman explores this recognition, centering young Black women and “their acute understanding of relations of power...the ways they tried to live and sustain themselves, never forgetting the structure of enclosure that surrounded them.”<sup>37</sup>

In *As Black As Resistance: Finding the Conditions for Liberation*, Samudzi and William C. Anderson also forefront Black women, girls, and trans people in their analysis of Black anarchism. They explore “the anarchistic nature of Blackness,” or the ways that Black liberation, autonomy, and community defense are antithetical to the existence of the settler-state, which will always position Blackness as “exploitable, commodifiable, and enslaveable.”<sup>38</sup> Rather than arguing for reform to address this white supremacist, carceral violence, their work warns that corporate capitalism and the non-profit industrial complex are “inextricably linked to the anti-Black carceral system and

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<sup>36</sup> “Saidiya Hartman on Insurgent Histories and the Abolitionist Imaginary,” *Artforum*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Anderson and Samudzi, *As Black As Resistance*, 33-4.



complements” and inherently work to “compromise and neutralize political movements.”<sup>39</sup> For example, institutions profess disdain for “looters,” anarchists, and rioters who are in the streets protesting police violence, and instead push for a politics of consumption and performance; we should buy shirts, gear, and certificates displaying an investment in Black lives while avoiding unlawful protest. Companies like Amazon, Coca-Cola, JPMorgan Chase, Google, Apple, Wal-Mart and Facebook make financial pledges in support of Black equality while devaluing the lives of their Black workers and communities impacted by environmental devastation, resource dispossession (otherwise known as looting), and racialized capitalist technologies of production.<sup>40</sup>

Black women and girls are doubly exploited by the racialized and gendered nation-state. Therefore, a Black feminist anarchism asserts that any analysis of capitalism and nation-state power must be grounded in understandings of racialized, gendered violence; Samudzi says “black feminism is a modality for understanding how the anti-black settler state is a fundamentally illegitimate construction.”<sup>41</sup> Slavery, colonization, and patriarchy all form the foundations through which the state has accumulated power and sustained that power through racial-capitalism.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>40</sup> "World: Black Friday: Amazon Workers' Union Calls Strike." *Asia News Monitor* (Bangkok, 2018); Jessica Guynn, "Black workers: Do we matter to corporations?" *USA Today*, last modified June 18, 2020, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2020/06/17/george-floyd-protests-black-lives-matter-employees-corporate-america-racism/3195685001/>; 01B. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed August 8, 2020). [https://link-gale-com.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu/apps/doc/A626949160/AONE?u=uarizona\\_main&sid=AONE&xid=f0a15c87](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy1.library.arizona.edu/apps/doc/A626949160/AONE?u=uarizona_main&sid=AONE&xid=f0a15c87).; John Stehlin, "The Post-Industrial 'Shop Floor': Emerging Forms of Gentrification in San Francisco's Innovation Economy," *Antipode* 48, no. 2 (2016): 474-93; Naomi Klein, "If Black Lives Mattered..." *Nation* 300, no. 1 (2015): 10-11.

<sup>41</sup> Zoé Samudzi, "On A Black Feminist Anarchism," YouTube Video, OC Anarchist Bookfair 2017, March 25, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F09BowIVEQo>.

In response to these maneuvers of white supremacist settler colonialism and capitalism, Samudzi and Anderson offer up visions for liberatory organizing that include community self-defense, dual power organizing, Black autonomy and self-sufficiency.<sup>42</sup> Samudzi, for example, says that her “most important and foundational left politics have been derived from observing organizations and political formations themselves.”<sup>43</sup> Participatory activism and embodied experience inform her praxis rather than a hegemonic anarchist canon or neoliberal praxis of consumption and performance.

Fundamental to Black feminist anarchism is a praxis of abolition and a world-building that radically departs from the current state of things. In the preface to *As Black As Resistance*, organizer, educator, and curator Mariame Kaba discusses the interconnectedness of abolition and Black anarchism, saying:

Abolishing the prison industrial complex (PIC) is not just about ending prisons but also about creating an alternative system of governance that is not based on domination, hierarchy, and control. In that respect, abolitionism and anarchism are positive rather than negative projects. They do not signal the absence of prisons or governments but the creation of different forms of sociality, governance, and accountability that are not statist and carceral.<sup>44</sup>

Abolition, derived from the Latin “abolere” or “to destroy,” refers to the dismantling of “a system, practice, or institution.”<sup>45</sup> It is most commonly associated with the U.S. anti-slavery movement before and after the Civil War, led by activists and former enslaved people such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth. In a contemporary context, abolition movements have focused on the death

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<sup>42</sup> William C. Anderson and Zoé Samudzi, *As Black as Resistance: Finding the Conditions for Liberation* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2018), 29-30.

<sup>43</sup> Zoé Samudzi, “On A Black Feminist Anarchism,” 2017.

<sup>44</sup> William C. Anderson and Zoé Samudzi, *As Black as Resistance*, 44.

<sup>45</sup> “Abolition | Definition of Abolition by Oxford Dictionary,” Lexico Dictionaries, accessed May 8, 2020, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/abolition>.

penalty and dismantling prisons and police.<sup>46</sup> Abolition pushes back against reformist responses to gendered racial-capitalism and instead imagines a radical restructuring of society and new social relations based on transformative justice.

Transformative justice presents alternative responses to violence that do not rely on punitive systems of the state. This world-view asserts that the root of violence lies in systemic oppression rather than individuals, and while people must be held accountable for harm they have caused, this process should not reify the traumas of surveillance, discipline, and disposal propagated by the state.<sup>47</sup> In this way, transformative justice rejects disposability politics that deny the humanity of those deemed criminal, deviant, guilty, and lawless.

### **Critical Trans Politics**

*Normal Life* proposes a politics based upon the so-called impossible worldview of trans political existence. Such a politics builds from the space created by the insistence of government agencies, social service providers, media, and many nontrans activists and nonprofits that the existence of trans people is impossible and/ or that our issues are not politically viable. *Normal Life* suggests these challenges are potential starting points for a trans politics that openly opposes liberal and neoliberal agendas and finds solidarity with other struggles articulated by the forgotten, the inconceivable, the spectacularized, and the unimaginable.

– Dean Spade<sup>48</sup>

In coalition with Black feminist anarchism and abolition, activist, author, and teacher Dean Spade presents a critical trans politics as a space for unearthing the radical potentials of impossibility. This politics "demands more than legal recognition

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<sup>46</sup> craigsummers, "Comment on: Ruth Wilson Gilmore Makes the Case for Abolition," *The Intercept*, accessed July 8, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/10/ruth-wilson-gilmore-makes-the-case-for-abolition/?comments=1>.

<sup>47</sup> Walidah Imarisha et al., "The Fictions and Futures of Transformative Justice," *The New Inquiry*, April 20, 2017, <https://thenewinquiry.com/the-fictions-and-futures-of-transformative-justice/>.

<sup>48</sup> Spade, *Normal Life*, 12.

and inclusion, seeking instead to transform current logics of state, civil society security, and social equality.”<sup>49</sup> Here, Spade addresses lesbian and gay rights movements that center legal reform through hate crimes legislation, gay marriage, and participation in the military as sole conditions of queer liberation. These responses to the historical exclusion of queer people from state benefits and privileges reinforce carceral and militaristic systems that target Black, brown, trans, Indigenous, undocumented, and disabled people, and excludes these same populations from the privatized social safety nets legal marriage affords.<sup>50</sup> I draw upon this critical trans politics as provides a

framework for our resistance [that] will also contribute trans understandings of necessary analytical, strategic, and tactical tools and models to other emerging formations that are struggling to formulate resistance to neoliberalism in these complex and difficult times.<sup>51</sup>

In this way, a critical trans politics has much to offer those organizing and documenting social movements struggles around environmental racism, incarceration, colonialism, and other appendages of the U.S. empire. This is crucially needed in a moment where radical activism and memory work is increasingly facing neoliberal incorporation into the very institutions enabling hierarchical domination.

Furthermore, Spade's work offers up a politics that can inform how we go about documenting these struggles without reinscribing state surveillance and disciplining, particularly of queer, trans, and racialized populations. He describes how data collection, standardization, and use operates to manage populations and distribute life chances (for example, social welfare, criminal punishment systems, and identity documentation

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Spade, *Normal Life*; Ryan Conrad, "Gay Marriage and Queer Love," chapter in *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*, (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2012).

<sup>51</sup> Spade, *Normal Life*, 12.

programs).<sup>52</sup> These practices work to “constitute the nation” and are entrenched in gendered racialization, which continues to delineate the “distinction between the national population marked out for protection and cultivation and those deemed ‘internal enemies’ or ‘threats’ or ‘drains.’”<sup>53</sup> By deploying a critical trans politics and Black feminist anarchism, archivists and memory workers can better identify the ways that their work may echo these processes of the nation-state, and subvert some of its power.

### **Conclusion to Frameworks Section**

We want liberation, but finding what liberation truly entails means thoroughly interrogating the past, understanding how that past has enabled this present, and then imagining and beginning to actualize a future in meaningful material ways...Envisioning Black liberation is necessarily the act of creating a new world.

– Samudzi and Anderson<sup>54</sup>

Rather than falling into a neoliberal equality politics, Black feminist anarchism and critical trans politics present radical, liberatory alternatives to hegemonic domination; co-constituting a world-building praxis that emerges in the interstices of impossible being and becoming embodied by the enslaved, incarcerated, detained, maimed, undocumented, disabled, and disposable. I argue that archives and memory work play a crucial role in this type of world-building, documenting social movement histories, working class resistance, and lawless subversion. The methods and frameworks utilized for this memory work must be firmly rooted in these “impossible worldviews,” so that, rather than reaffirming hierarchical power and domination, we build autonomous, community-based, coalitional sites of liberatory world-building.

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<sup>52</sup> Spade, *Normal Life*, 57.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> William C. Anderson and Zoé Samudzi, *As Black as Resistance*, 42.

For example, memory work like the “She Safe, We Safe Story Collection Project” by Black Youth Project 100 sets out “visions for what our communities need in order to build a world without state and gender violence,” firmly rooting this vision in the safety of Black women, girls, and gender-nonconforming people.<sup>55</sup> This project represents the revolutionary potentials of an archival praxis that is “abolitionist...unapologetically Black...generative and empowering,” with the end goal of gathering information that “will be actionable.” In creating these visions of safety and liberation, this project seeks to destroy gendered and racialized police violence, the funding and resources of carceral power, technologies of surveillance and annihilation that Black women, girls, trans and queer folks are subjected to.

In “Call to Action: Archiving State-Sanctioned Violence Against Black People,” Zakiya Collier articulates a response, co-signed by many other Black memory workers, to the intersecting crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing murders of Black lives at the hands of police. Collier begins by naming recent losses to state-sanctioned violence, connecting white supremacist police brutality to institutional state violence that “prop up our healthcare, education, economic, social, and cultural infrastructure,” specifically naming Black trans people and women who are often glaringly absent in public declarations of outrage.<sup>56</sup> She connects this violence to legacies of archives and memory work, saying:

We offer this call to action because we know moments of crisis and Black suffering are also opportunities ripe for institutional exploitation and professional opportunism in the cultural memory sector, where harmful activities involved with

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<sup>55</sup> “She Safe, We Safe,” BYP100, accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.shesafewesafe.org/>.

<sup>56</sup> Zakiya Collier, “Call to Action: Archiving State-Sanctioned Violence Against Black People,” *Black Voice News*, last modified June 10, 2020, <https://www.blackvoicenews.com/2020/06/10/call-to-action-archiving-state-sanctioned-violence-against-black-people/>.

building collections for institutions that don't care about Black people, become more important than documenting the root causes of why Black people are suffering in the first place. We do not offer this call to action on behalf of our affiliated cultural memory institutions. Instead, we offer this call in solidarity with our Black communities all over the world.<sup>57</sup>

This is significant considering the wide-spread phenomenon of institutions, corporations, and individuals offering up symbolic statements of support for Black Lives Matter. Collier distinguishes this call from these performances, actively naming the exploitation that arises from these moments, and instead grounds the call to action in the needs of Black communities across the globe. Rather than embracing a neoliberal equality politics that pushes for diversity and inclusion within systems of domination, the call to action resists incorporation into systems enacting structural violence.

Collier continues by outlining a vision of liberatory and radical memory work that divests from this nation-state violence targeting Black, queer and trans people, saying “our work must support efforts to defund the police, abolish prisons, and redirect resources to the communities that have suffered the most under these racist structures that exist and thrive solely because Black people’s lives are consistently devalued around the world.”<sup>58</sup> Here, memory work is tied to anarchic world-views of abolition and resource distribution grounded in an understanding that the state and its attendant institutions perpetuate Black death through gendered, racial capitalism. Furthermore, this work resists the state's desire to obscure its violence, and the tendency to gloss over or minimizes radical social movements once widespread public pressure has eased.<sup>59</sup> The call to action ends with a statement on the archival praxis the Black memory workers posit, saying:

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

We commit to an intersectional archival practice that also presents a global perspective of Black suffering and the response to it because we acknowledge that Black people with disabilities, and from working-class, queer and immigrant communities have suffered negative and disproportionate harm due to white supremacy and capitalism. We believe that Black memory workers should lead the documentation response when Black people are suffering. And we believe Black memory workers should be supported and given the space and resources to do this work.

This praxis aligns with a worldview of Black feminist and trans anarchism that is intersectional, rhizomatic, and autonomous from racialized and gendered capitalist institutions. I will now describe how I came to the archives field through a project rooted a vision of abolition, and the ways that world-views of Black feminist anarchism and a critical trans politics have fundamentally informed my praxis as an organizer, scholar, and archivist.



## INSIDE BOOKS PROJECT (IBP) ARCHIVE

### IBP History

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, at 737 of every 100,000 people, and the highest total number of incarcerated people with 2,193,798 behind bars.<sup>60</sup> Despite having less than five percent of the world's population, the U.S. has twenty-five percent of the world's imprisoned population.<sup>61</sup> Texas' incarceration rate surpasses that of the U.S, at 891 people imprisoned of every 100,000, and over 250,000 people are dispersed across a variety of state, federal, and private facilities.<sup>62</sup>

According to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) website, there are 103 units in Texas, comprised of fifty state prisons, seven private prisons, fourteen transfer facilities, fourteen state jails, and three private state jails. There are also five Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities, a Developmental Disabilities Program unit, three psychiatric units, a geriatric unit and two general medical facilities.<sup>63</sup>

Unit type	Number of units
State prison	50
Private prison	7
Transfer facility	14

*Table 1 continued on next page.*

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<sup>60</sup> "Highest to Lowest," World Prison Brief, accessed August 6, 2020, [https://prisonstudies.org/highest-to-lowest/prison-population-total?field\\_region\\_taxonomy\\_tid=All](https://prisonstudies.org/highest-to-lowest/prison-population-total?field_region_taxonomy_tid=All).

<sup>61</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>62</sup> "States of Incarceration: The Global Context 2018," Prison Policy Initiative, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/global/2018.html>; "Texas profile," Prison Policy Initiative, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/TX.html>.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

State jail	14
Private state jail	3
Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facility	5
Developmental Disabilities Program	1
Psychiatric	3
Geriatric	1
Medical facility	2
Parole confinement facility	3

Table 1: Amount of TDCJ units by category of facility.<sup>64</sup>

These facilities and patterns of incarceration point to the ways that the white supremacist, ableist, settler-colonialist nation-state operates to criminalize and constrain particular bodies. Black Americans are incarcerated at a rate that is over five times that of whites, except in five states, where they are incarcerated *ten times the rate* white Americans are; in twelve states, over half of the prison population is Black.<sup>65</sup> Medical, educational, social and cultural institutions are all implicated in carceral capitalism. The school to prison pipeline—or the systemic criminalization and incarceration of juveniles for minor infractions—has resulted in lower education and literacy rates for people in prison, particularly impacting poor, Black, brown and disabled individuals.<sup>66</sup> For example, a fifteen year old Black girl with ADHD was incarcerated for seventy-eight days during the

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<sup>64</sup> “Unit Directory,” Texas Department of Criminal Justice, accessed July 15, 2020, [https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/unit\\_directory/index.html#:~:text=Unit%20Directory%20%20%20Unit%20Name%20,%20%20II%20%2034%20more%20rows%20](https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/unit_directory/index.html#:~:text=Unit%20Directory%20%20%20Unit%20Name%20,%20%20II%20%2034%20more%20rows%20).

<sup>65</sup> “The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons,” The Sentencing Project, last updated June 14, 2016, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/color-of-justice-racial-and-ethnic-disparity-in-state-prisons/>.

<sup>66</sup> Lily Laux, “Teaching Texas: race, disability, and the history of the school-to-prison pipeline,” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2016), <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/68301>.

shift to online learning in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic due to "failure to submit any schoolwork and getting up for school."<sup>67</sup> Her case is representative of many more instances where racialized, gendered and ableist carcerality punish youth and disrupt their life chances.<sup>68</sup>

Increasingly militarized police "security" and surveillance proliferate in school systems in the place of guidance counselors, administrators, and nurses. This cycle is perpetuated in prisons, where access to education, books, and information resources are incredibly limited or non-existent, despite ample research that shows access to these resources is proven to decrease recidivism rates, or the number of people who are released and later re-incarcerated. In addition to impacting recidivism rates, deprivation of information resources such as legal guides prevent incarcerated people from self-advocating and fully understanding arbitrary and nebulous judicial processes. This is particularly damaging given inadequate access to legal guidance and advocacy that criminalized populations, such as poor people, are subjected to.<sup>69</sup>

In 1998, the Inside Books Project (IBP) was founded in by a small group of anarchists and anti-authoritarians responding to these educational and informational barriers. Their work was founded on principles of solidarity and direct action, sending packages of books based on individuals' written requests and specific needs. Since its

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<sup>67</sup> Jodi S. Cohen, "A Teenager Didn't Do Her Online Schoolwork. So a Judge Sent Her to Juvenile Detention," *ProPublica*, last modified July 14, 2020, <https://www.propublica.org/article/a-teenager-didnt-do-her-online-schoolwork-so-a-judge-sent-her-to-juvenile-detention?token=N4k88uB8H681Q13s7NXVvflOxrkBWSTf>.

<sup>68</sup> Elyshia Danae Aseltine, "Juvenile justice in the shadows: Texas' municipal courts and the punishment of school misbehavior," (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2010), <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/ETD-UT-2010-05-1227>.

<sup>69</sup> aems emswiler, "LibGuides: The Literacy Needs of Incarcerated People," last updated March 27, 2019, <https://ischool-utexas.libguides.com/c.php?g=922086>.

founding and first years IBP has grown exponentially. The collective receives over 2,000 requests for books and information resources every month from people imprisoned across the state. During volunteer sessions, which occur twice a week and are predominantly attended by first-time volunteers, collective members train newcomers to choose books based on the incarcerated person's request and write a personalized letter of solidarity. Incarcerated patrons can send requests every three months with no limit on total requests; some have been writing IBP for over 10 years. Based on average requests responded to over the years, which have been logged in a database as of 2007, and average amount of books per package, collective members estimate that IBP has sent over half a million books into Texas prisons since 1998.

In 2012 IBP obtained 501(c)(3) nonprofit status but has remained a grassroots organization funded entirely by local communities rather than state or foundation grants. Most volunteers and many collective members do not explicitly identify as anarchist, and the IBP website has no mention of this history, unfortunately.<sup>70</sup> However, anti-authoritarian praxis continues to inform many aspects of the project. For example, decision-making is collective rather than hierarchical, there is no reliance on single individuals or government for funding, and the core principles of the work are of solidarity and mutual aid. Volunteer orientations emphasize these principles as an alternative to institutional philanthropy or charity. This is an important intervention for many students coming in to get service hours who may be considering their contributions as a one-way act of charity, disconnected from the entrenched structural violence prisons sustain. This disconnectedness is further broken down by the individual and often intimate correspondences between those requesting books and those answering them.

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<sup>70</sup> Preserving and sharing this history is a major aspect of the IBP Archive.

During these volunteer sessions, individuals are trained to choose books based on requests accompanied by a hand-written letter that serves as both a receipt for their books and a small act of humanizing support. Many incarcerated people writing IBP do not receive mail or have contact with people on the outside, so this personalized letter is often as meaningful as the books themselves. In gratitude, many imprisoned patrons send back contributions such as art, poetry, prose, essays, grievances, photographs, and crafts. People send these as a thank you to our volunteers for the free resources, an outlet of expression, and as a means of sharing their experiences.

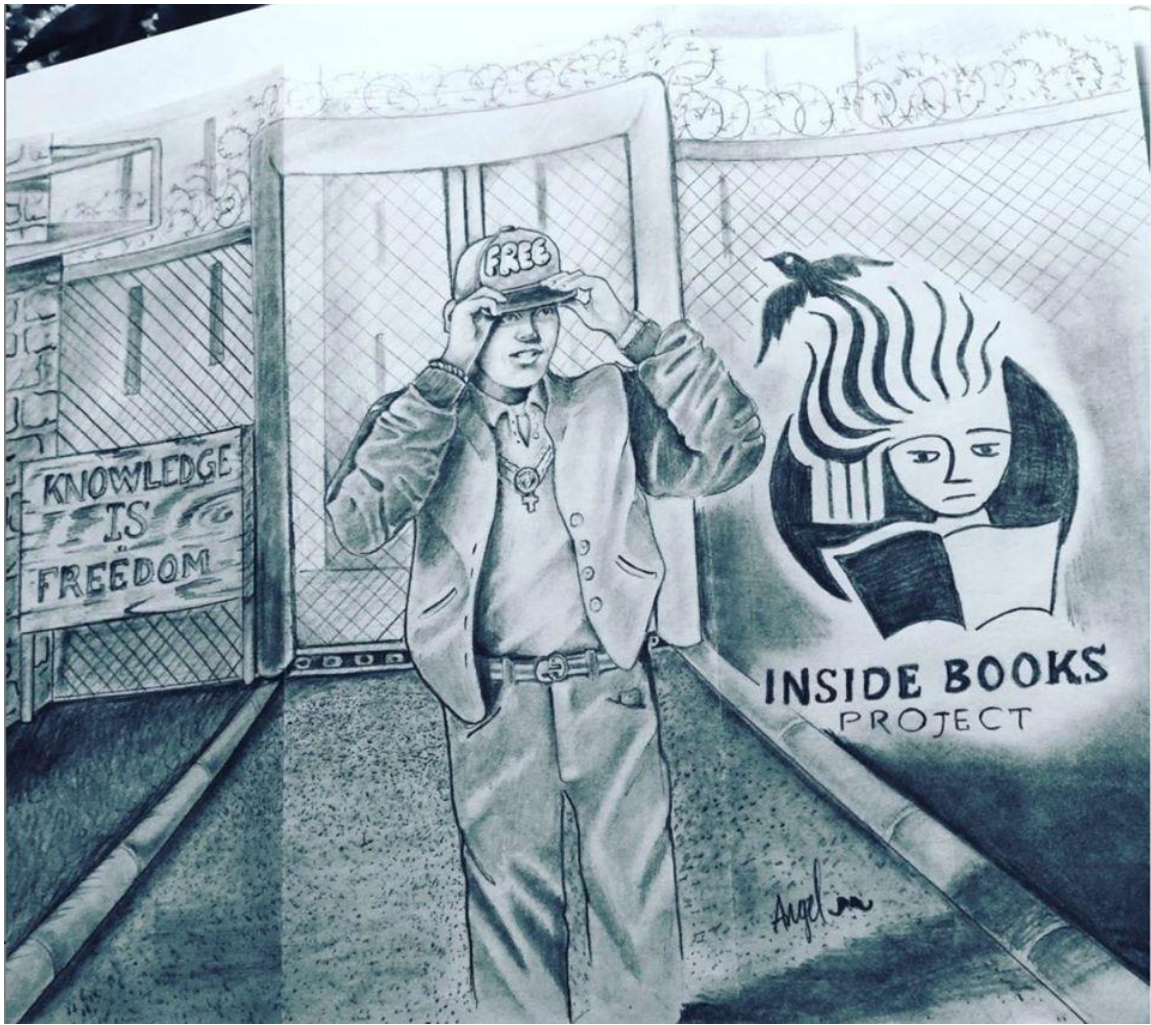


Figure 1: Photograph of a pencil drawing by Angel M., 2019, Art Collection, Inside Books Project Archive, Texas After Violence Project, Austin, Texas.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> The digital collection is being migrated from [insidebooksarchive.omeka.net](http://insidebooksarchive.omeka.net) to [ibparchive.texasafterviolence.org](http://ibparchive.texasafterviolence.org).



Figure 2: Pen and ink submission by Inker Nora, January 2018, Art Collection, Inside Books Project Archive, Texas After Violence Project, Austin, Texas.

## **The Inside Books Project Archive**

Over time I conceived these materials as a “counter-archive” to that of the state. By this I do not mean that the narratives of incarcerated people are a homogenous voice speaking up against the brutalities of the state, as this would be an essentializing and simplistic assertion. Rather, I see these materials as a counter-archive in that they offer up a collection of primary sources that oppose predominant understandings of incarceration touted by the state, and represented in the archive collection on prison censorship, which I will discuss later. Incarcerated people’s narratives encompass a spectrum of experience and assert the humanity of the imprisoned despite state subjection. The writings and art challenge simplistic understandings of guilt, innocence, and justice that volunteers may hold, and demonstrate how people express agency in spaces of impossibility. Over a period of years, I witnessed these affinities between volunteers and incarcerated people facilitated by the exchange of narrative, and I felt expanding these engagements beyond volunteer sessions through an archive could be a transformative project. I began saving, preserving, and digitizing these materials in 2015.





Figure 3: Color pencil illustration, “Pride” by Edee Allynna Davis, January 2017, Art Collection, Inside Books Project Archive, Texas After Violence Project, Austin, Texas.



Figure 4: Pencil drawing by Joshua, “In loving memory to the victims of the June 12th attack in Orlando Florida,” 2017, Art Collection, Inside Books Project Archive, Texas After Violence Project, Austin, Texas.

I first became involved with IBP in 2012 through my undergraduate program in English and Feminist studies at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. Dr. Alison Kafer organized a trip to an Inside Books volunteer session as a part of her “Introduction to Feminist Studies” course for a number of years. This visit was supplemented with readings

on the relationship between gender, race, disability, and carcerality.<sup>72</sup> This class visit and my subsequent capstone work facilitated an 8 year relationship with IBP first as a volunteer, collective member, and finally, project archivist. Organizing for book access to incarcerated people with IBP helped me build connections with other local groups aligned with prison abolitionist, anarchist, and feminist praxis. I also formed a working group at IBP focused on meeting the literacy needs of people on death row, of whom there are over 200 in Texas alone. We were able to send packages and personalized letters to every individual on death row along with legal resource guides and introductory information on how to continue to use IBP's services. These experiences, particularly visits into juvenile and death row units, informed my own politicization as an anarchist dedicated to transformative justice and prison abolition; a trajectory that brought me to the archival field.

When I founded the IBP Archive, I was immediately overwhelmed with the immensity of the project regarding accountability, representation, and incarcerated people's safety. I pursued an information studies education at the University of Texas, Austin in 2017 hoping I could learn best archival methods and practices for addressing the type of questions I was navigating. While I have gained an invaluable set of skills and knowledge, which is why I have chosen to pursue a PhD in this field, I continued to struggle

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<sup>72</sup> Such as *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada* by Nat Smith and Eric A. Stanley; *Are Prisons Obsolete?* by Angela Davis; and *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander.

with the question of how to do this work—to archive narratives of violence, survival, and resistance—without reifying carceral surveillance, administrative control, and institutional exploitation.

What I have ultimately found is that my experiential knowledge organizing towards prison abolition, information access for incarcerated people, and transformative justice responses provides a roadmap for a liberatory archival praxis that the information studies profession never could. This praxis, informed by my education in feminist studies as well as my politicization as a queer-crip and trans anarchist, subverts neoliberal imperatives faced by radical memory workers in a variety of contexts. While I am able to deploy the valuable knowledge provided by the many other justice-oriented memory workers who critically navigate and contribute to the archival field, the project will always be guided by incarcerated people and others most impacted by the violence of gendered racial-capitalism.

### **Core Archival Principles**

The past was never singular, nor will the future be. In order to generate these futures, memory work should be dangerous...It should aim to upend hierarchies of power, to distribute resources more equitably, to enable complex forms of self-representation, and to restore the humanity of those for whom it has been denied.

– Doria D. Johnson, Jarett M. Drake, and Michelle Caswell<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Michelle Caswell, Jarrett M. Drake, and Doria D. Johnson, “From Cape Town to Chicago to Colombo and back again: towards a liberation theology for memory work,” in *Reflections from the 2016 Mandela Dialogues*, Nelson Mandela Foundation, last modified February 27, 2017, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/reflections-from-the-2016-mandela-dialogues>.

## APPRAISAL AND ACQUISITION

There are a set of “core archival principles” set forth by professional organizations in the field that include appraisal, acquisition, description, access, preservation, and “controlling and promoting use” of archives.<sup>74</sup> These principles are historically entangled in legacies of white supremacist, settler colonialist looting, dispossession, surveillance, and genocide. This authority of western, white hegemony has historically determined what is worthy of inclusion in the historical record (“appraisal”) and how to get it (“acquisition”). While the profession presents a facade of neutrality and objectivity, these processes are very much guided by the subjectivities of those in power and embedded within capitalist state-building that continues today.

In order to resist these legacies, the Inside Books Project Archive centers anarchist principles informed by a critical trans politics and Black feminism; these principles are rooted in agency, autonomy, and consent of the incarcerated individuals contributing to the collection. For example, rather than extractive acquisition of materials, those represented in the archive are able to offer up their submissions freely and guide how they are preserved and shared. Initially this process was difficult, as prior to the founding of the archive in 2015, there were no established procedures on finding out individual's preferences for citation, web-publishing, and use of their submissions. People would

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<sup>74</sup> “Core Archival Functions”, Society of American Archivists, accessed June 27, 2020, <https://www2.archivists.org/node/14804>.

simply send items as a thank you for the books, sometimes requesting it would be included in newsletters, art shows, or just given away to volunteers.

The IBP Collective has always honored these requests, but when the digital archive was developed to share submissions with the public, this required more communication with creators about best practices, safety, goals, and accountability. This is especially true due to the high number of individuals who have been imprisoned for many years, and therefore have less digital literacy, such as an understanding of web-publishing, tags, and social media. Incarcerated people's narratives are often extracted, fetishized, and displayed without reciprocity to serve the gaze of the public, academia, and art institutions. Even activists participate in this culture by seeking to utilize minoritized voices to build a cause without properly communicating with and honoring the creator's intentions. Avoiding these dynamics required guidance from currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, as well as activists and archivists.

To transparently inform incarcerated creators about the project, provide guidelines on appraisal and inclusion processes, and make space for guidance on each aspect of archival processing, the IBP Archive developed an information and permissions pamphlet. This pamphlet, which goes out in newsletters and to anyone who submits an item, provides a statement on how we appraise materials, or choose which we digitize and share online. Our appraisal policy, rooted in Black feminist anarchism and a critical trans politics, states that given limited resources and capacity to digitize, those voices who are most absented historically and excluded from the social contract, such as

queer, trans, Black, brown, Indigenous and disabled people, will be amplified through digitization and web-publishing. While all submissions are accepted into the archive to be preserved and available to the public, even if not digitized and put online, those voices targeted by the gendered and racialized state apparatus are uplifted so that the archive can act as a space of radical imagination and subversion.

Furthermore, submissions of all mediums and genres are encouraged, rather than strict, specific standards for acceptable content. This makes space for expressions beyond violence and subjection; moments of joy, banality, and desire are an integral part of this memory work. Queer ephemera and cultural production in particular can act as “world-making,” a practice of “‘building’ and ‘doing’ in response to that status of nothing assigned to us by the heteronormative world.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 118.



Figure 5: Photograph of an intern processing submissions of cloth handkerchiefs and crafts, IBP History Collection, Inside Books Project Archive, Texas After Violence Project, Austin, Texas.

#### DESCRIPTION AND ACCESS

For whom are these knowledges? For whom are these memories and what are the implications of a singular hegemonic memory or entry contingent on disposable income? Who is deserving of knowledge and access to it? What is the nature of knowledge and knowing processes when these archival spaces as fundamentally exclusionary?

– Zoé Samudzi<sup>76</sup>

The Society of American Archivists (SAA), defines archival description as “the process of analyzing, organizing, and recording details....to facilitate the work’s identification,

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<sup>76</sup> Zoé Samudzi, “Matatu White Paper 2018,” MATATU performative think tank, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://www.matatu.co/matatu-white-paper>.



management, and understanding”<sup>77</sup> Archival materials must be described to enable access and provide contextual information about the materials. Description takes place in online “finding aids,” in tags used to make content more discoverable, and in metadata categories that contextualize content online (“creator,” “source,” “date,” “type,” “medium,” etc).

Thinking about archival description and access, we must ask:

- How do our subjectivities inform how others will access and interpret content?
- How can we make items accessible for all, rather than just those who are academically trained, economically advantaged, and able to access materials without structural barriers in design (both physical and digital)?
- What kind of language can we use in this process that affirms the agency of creators, rather than reifying dehumanization and surveillance?
- How do we document these narratives without replicating the administrative violence of data collection, classification, and control?

For the IBP Archive, description involves accessing and interpreting data about incarcerated creators that is produced, organized, and published by the carceral nation-state. This includes binary gender categories, assigned prison identification number, categories of race, ethnicity, ability, and even educational levels.<sup>78</sup> While using this information can help make items more findable, archivists can also easily fall into the shoes of the state, participating in processes of surveillance and categorization. For example, many people have ongoing legal cases, and content posted online could be used

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<sup>77</sup> “SAA Dictionary: Description,” Society of American Archivists, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/description.html>.

<sup>78</sup> “Offender Search,” Texas Department of Criminal Justice, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://offender.tdcj.texas.gov/OffenderSearch/start.action>.

in litigation to the possible detriment of their case if found and exploited by the prosecution. Furthermore, while most materials are creative expressions like art and poetry, there are a fair number of grievances and essays describing prison conditions, sexual assault, and abuse by TDCJ employees and other incarcerated individuals. Should this information be discovered, it could result in legal or extralegal repercussions for those submitting it.

It is here that a critical trans politics is pivotal, pointing to the ways that data collection, standardization, and norms operate to inequitably distribute life chances.<sup>79</sup> Through these processes of gendered racialization and administrative violence, those bodies considered deviant or “impossible” are deprived of life chances, and excluded from the social contract. On queer-crip individuals, for example, Alison Kafer says “In our disabled state, we are not part of the dominant narratives of progress, but once rehabilitated, normalized, and hopefully cured, we play a starring role: the sign of progress, the proof of development, the triumph over the mind or body.”<sup>80</sup>

How can we disrupt these violent processes of normalization and compulsory reintegration into the nation-state's notion of belonging and being? What methods can memory workers deploy to critically interrogate these imperatives, ethically documenting the humanity and liberatory refusals of so-called impossible subjects? A critical trans politics “refuses to take for granted stories about what counts as change that

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<sup>79</sup> Spade, *Normal Life*, 57.

<sup>80</sup> Alison Kafer, *Feminist, queer, crip* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 28.

actually maintain certain structures and categories...[and] is about practice and process rather than arrival at a singular point of ‘liberation.’”<sup>81</sup> In this way, a critical trans politics and Black feminist anarchism can inform archival praxis as means of challenging dominant narratives, interrogating the gendered-racialized logics of the nation-state, and constantly reflecting on how our work is functioning to challenge these logics.

Information Page	Communicates what an archive is, what web-publishing entails, who is involved in developing the archive, and who owns materials (incarcerated creators). Conveys how data is shared and the implications of its use.
Appraisal policy	Statement on how the IBP Archive chooses which materials to prioritize for preservation, digitization, and access. The narratives of Black, queer, trans, Indigenous, and disabled people are specifically centered in this statement.
Citation and use preferences	Establishes clear guidelines on how incarcerated contributors want their work to be used, how they want to be cited, and what information they would like posted with their work. Affirms chosen anonymity and gaps in the record that center the safety of creators.
Description and tag fields	Rather than using census style documents that uphold state defined categories of identity, creators are able to use their own language, choosing tags and providing descriptions of their submission to be included with the item online.
Open space for guidance, feedback, and questions	Makes space for open feedback and guidance on any aspect of the archives project.

Table 2: IBP Archive Information and Permissions Document Components

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<sup>81</sup> Spade, *Normal Life*, 2.

**SHELTERING JUSTICE PERMISSIONS FORM: Send along with your submission. Required for inclusion in the archive.**

Name (however you want to be cited-- can be legal name, chosen name, anonymous, pen-name, or even just initials): \_\_\_\_\_

TDCJ # \_\_\_\_\_  
(this is only for our records so we can look up your address if we need to contact you, your TDCJ# will not be included with your submission unless you specifically ask for this).

Please only include identifying information (such as my TDCJ#) on your submission if you want it online, otherwise make sure to remove it.  
 Check here if you agree:

Check here if you would like your contact information listed along with the submission online. Please understand that this does not guarantee you will get mail, and TAVP can not control what kind of mail you may receive. Contact us at the included address if you decide to change this preference at any time or if your address changes:  
 Check here if you want your contact info listed:  *I want all my info listed*

Would you like us to also use your submission for social media and fundraising purposes? All fundraising goes towards supporting the archival work of TAVP and IBP:  Yes  No

Title of your submission: "Innocence Lost"

Brief description of the submission (genre, summary, medium, etc):  
Trouble story and my life consequences

We use keywords or "tags" to help make your submission easier to find online. Applying terms without knowing what you identify with can be a tricky process, so we invite you to choose your own tags that you feel relate to your work. You can use the examples below (circle all that apply) or provide your own:

abolition, accessibility, activism, ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act], ad-seg, African, African-American, age, agender, Asian, Asian-American, asexual, atheist, bisexual, biracial, Black, books, censorship, Chicano/a, Chicanx, children, christian, civil rights, class, college, commissary, community, coping, covid-19, court, crafts, creative writing, death-row, detention, disability, education, elderly, employment, ESL (English as a second language), Español, family, father, fiction, food, gay, grievance, Hawaiian, health, health-care, Hispanic, history, immigrant, Islam, Indigenous, jail, jail-house lawyer, Jewish, Judaism, justice, juvenile, labor, Latino/a, Latinx, law, law library, legal system, lesbian, LGBTQ, library, life sentence, medical, medical care, mental health, men's unit, Mexican, Mexican-American, Muslim, mother, Native American, non-fiction, Pacific Islander, pansexual, parole, poetry, prison, prose, probation, Puerto Rican, queer, racism, reading, recidivism, relationships, religion, safe-keeping, school, school to prison pipeline, sentencing, sign-language, solitary confinement, Spanish-language, spirituality, Texas, trade, transgender, transition, UCC, work, woman, women's unit, youth, young adult.

You can add any other key-words, tags, and identifiers here.  
*I am sending an original drawing - I named it "Togetherness in the Pandemic."*

Feedback and comments about the archive project of this form:  
*she never seen this type of information and am glad I ran across ~~it~~ it. Thanks!* 2

Figure 6: Permissions form filled out by incarcerated creator, July 2020, Administrative Records, Inside Books Project Archive, Texas After Violence Project, Austin, Texas.

### Preservation and Use

Another major aspect of traditional archival work is "controlling and promoting the use" of materials.<sup>82</sup> These guidelines include "considering possible theft" (ironic considering the vast amount of archival materials that were stolen to begin with) and only allowing those who "abide by the archives' rules and regulations" to access

<sup>82</sup> "Core Archival Functions," Society of American Archivists.

materials.<sup>83</sup> These rules usually include strict supervision, maintaining noise levels, requiring photograph ID, and having patrons fill out a form with their name, address, and records they will be accessing. This information can be used against patrons, especially activists accessing resources for organizing work. How can radical memory workers challenge these barriers to access and participation in our own histories?

Memory workers invested in liberatory archival praxis must interrogate how policies are entrenched in nation-state processes of surveillance and discipline leveraged against particular identities, particular Black, queer and trans folks, activists and organizers. For example, how does an archival worker's subjectivity inform who they feel poses a risk of theft, misuse of materials, or of being too loud in reading rooms? How do policies on how one should physically navigate these spaces, such as requirements to use a limited selection of chairs and desks and disciplining of those who may need to move about the room constrain particular bodies deemed non-normative, or impossible to accommodate? These policies elucidate how Black, brown, trans, disabled and neurodivergent people have historically been construed as intruders in reading rooms designed for "normative" presenting bodies (i.e. read as cisgender, able-bodied, white, middle to upper class, of a specific age group, etc.).

Strict policies on use of archival materials may also constrain the original intentions of creators who would prefer specific communities are encouraged to engage with materials in a variety of ways. For example, many submissions to the IBP Archive are

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

personalized cards that unfold and expand in intricate, beautiful ways. Putting these into folders within boxes stored away from the public removes the intimacy and intention behind creative ephemera. Limitations on how one can engage with items, such as wearing gloves, not taking them out of plastic sleeves, or placing them onto small reading platforms does not allow for a multi-modal, tactile, and accessible engagement of many items.

I appreciate the guidance of Agnes Inglis, anarchist and first archivist of the Labadie collection at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Inglis privileged use and interest in the materials over policies that barred access to them, even lending materials out and forgiving the occasional loss or damage (a criminal act—literally—to most modern archivists!). Her letters to Emma Goldman and other anarchist friends reveal her radical praxis; in one letter dated 1934, Inglis describes lending materials to Italian anarchists in the Twentieth Ward in Detroit saying “the Twentieth Ward sure is hard on a rare book!”<sup>84</sup> Drawing on Black feminist anarchism and a critical trans politics, the IBP Archive follows these principles regarding preservation and use of materials:

Resisting Surveillance	<p>Question how policies of preservation and use reify state surveillance and policing of Black, queer, trans, and disabled people—both those represented in the archive, and those visiting it. Avoid gathering, saving, and sharing unnecessary data on both creators and users, or those accessing archival materials.</p> <p>Move from surveillance (a “top-to-bottom approach of watching”) to <i>sousveillance</i>, or watching from below).<sup>85</sup></p>
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<sup>84</sup> July Herreda and Tom Hyry, “Agnes Inglis: Anarchist Librarian,” Spunk Library, accessed February 29, 2020.

<sup>85</sup> RESET.to. “Sousveillance | Responsibility.” Accessed August 1, 2020. <https://en.reset.org/knowledge/sourveillance-11152016>.

	Collect and publish compromising data on the prison system instead of the imprisoned.
“Preservation Through Use”	Follow a policy of “preservation through use.” Interference Archive, for example, focuses on “using the materials in its collection as a means of helping others (re)discover marginalized social histories and continue to build new social movement culture,” and “activating materials via their accessibility.” <sup>86</sup>  Center the agency and intention of creators over traditional archival principles; ask how they would like their material accessed and used. If people want their pop-up cards engaged with, we will digitize them then give them to supporters of the project.
Access	Critically think through the implications of “open access.” Sometimes this means allowing for gaps in the archive. Many incarcerated people have cases that are still open and any information published online could be used in litigation.

Table 3: Principles for Preservation and Use of Materials

### FUNDING GRASSROOTS ARCHIVES

Neoliberal racial-capitalism deploys access to funds and resources as a means of manipulating, diffusing, and co-opting social movements and activism. Radical change and liberatory organizing is reduced to reformist policy changes and performative progress. Even when there are initiatives to support community archives, the parameters for what constitutes such an archive are prohibitive. For example, steep annual budget requirements and other eligibility stipulations often bar grassroots projects from applying. Many such projects are already disenfranchised, run off unpaid labor, and have no or limited funds. Rather than acknowledging these conditions and affirming the invaluable labor and skillsets of grassroots activists and memory workers, they remain

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<sup>86</sup> Sellie et al., “Interference Archive.”

delegitimized by larger non-profits and organizations that have foundation grants and institutional funding to sustain their work. These same archives will only pay select individuals (if any) while relying on unpaid internships and glorified volunteer labor for the bulk of their work. “Structural patronization” and gatekeeping is prevalent in the archives field, where “savior allies” perform inclusion and diversity while “controlling and/or withholding information, resources, connections, and support [that] create dependency on them and their function as support.”<sup>87</sup> For example, institutional archives often swallow up smaller projects that do not have the funding, training (ie., degrees), or resources (ie., fancy folders) to sustain their collections. In this way grassroots projects lose ownership of their materials in an act of patronizing intervention. Finally, conversations determining the distribution of funds and resources are restricted to those already in power, typically larger non-profits, academia, and other dominant institutions. These individuals cherry-pick which organizations are worthy of funding and what parameters a grassroots organization must meet in order to qualify for funding.<sup>88</sup>

Black feminist anarchism and a critical trans politics are both frameworks that critically address the ways that “foundation money disciplines movements in practices of 'professionalization,' which lead folks to emphasize and prioritize careerism and the expectation that political struggle should be externally funded.”<sup>89</sup> In order to remain autonomous, self-sustaining, and retain agency, funding for the IBP archive comes from small monthly or one-time donations rather than depending on foundations, institutions, or

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<sup>87</sup> “Accomplices Not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex,” Indigenous Action Media, last modified May 4, 2014, <http://www.indigenouaction.org/accomplices-not-allies-abolishing-the-ally-industrial-complex/>.

<sup>88</sup> For more on this, see *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, edited by Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007).

<sup>89</sup> Anderson and Samudzi, *As Black as Resistance*, 41.



individual philanthropists. All monthly donors are considered archive collective members, invited to attend meetings and guide project directions. In this way, the archive's mission and work is rooted in anarchist principles of consensus decision-making and decentralized leadership, rather than manipulated by accumulations of money and power. When possible, funding goes towards paying people for their labor on the project, rather than maintaining a model that asserts any justice-based organizing should be a "labor of love" that often falls upon minoritized communities. Individuals who are most impacted by gendered and racialized capitalism are given priority for paid work. Finally, money raised from art shows or from other uses of submissions goes towards incarcerated people's commissary funds.

## CONCLUSION

I, though, animated by anarchism's critical praxis—its practice of a criticality—do not place my crosshairs on a moment beyond now, when things might come to a close. This is not motivated by a nihilistic pessimism...It is motivated by a kind of zeal, in fact, one where refusing an end allows for a perpetual openness that enables, always, the possibility of another beginning...So why is there no 'end'?..I submit that one's concern must be an ethical one that...*fertilizes the conditions of possibility for otherwise and unsung and unknown emergence*...Thus, our critical praxis, our interrogative social enactment, does something precisely when it commits to a political endeavor proliferating life where no life is said to be found. [emphasis in original]

–Marquis Bey<sup>90</sup>

As I critically interrogate the role of archival practice and education in a neoliberal project of upward distribution, I situate myself within these embedded power relations that are integral to the functioning of academia in this current moment. Samudzi and Anderson affirm that “Non-participation in the systems that harm us is not a choice for many of us, but we can learn to undermine them when opportunities present themselves.”<sup>91</sup> Instead of pursuing lukewarm reform, accomplices must “find creative ways to weaponize their privilege (or more clearly, their rewards of being part of an oppressor class) as an expression of social war.”<sup>92</sup> We must “seek ways to leverage resources and material support and/or betray [our] institution to further liberation struggles. An intellectual accomplice would strategize with, not for, and not be afraid to pick up a hammer.”<sup>93</sup> While dominant institutions will continue to push a neoliberal inclusion politics that constrain and contain the radical futurities we hope to build, a praxis informed by Black feminist

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<sup>90</sup> Bey, *Anarcho-Blackness*, 24.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>92</sup> “Accomplices Not Allies,” 6.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

anarchism and critical trans politics, set forth a roadmap of creation and destruction, for “the passion for destruction is a creative passion to.”<sup>94</sup>

I will continue to collaborate with radical memory workers and anarcho-queer comrades to sabotage, expropriate, and redistribute resources from these accumulations of power. Those of us afforded the privileges of academia (even as we struggle to survive within it) must work as accomplices in solidarity with those without access to the same material benefits.<sup>95</sup> It is my hope that more archivists, academics, and others in positions of power choose to take up this hammer and dismantle the conditions that sustain violence against minoritized communities and against us all. Archives and other forms of memory work are integral to our social movements, building sites of transformative learning, community sovereignty, and shared imaginations of liberatory futures.

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<sup>94</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, "The Reaction in Germany," accessed July 10, 2020, <http://libcom.org/library/reaction-germany-mikhail-bakunin>.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

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