The Pandemic at Home: Learning from Community-engaged Covid-19 Documentation Efforts in the Southeastern US

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Introduction

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, all types of cultural heritage institutions worldwide have launched collecting efforts aimed at documenting history as it is happening. Though varied in scope and approach, many of these collecting efforts have centered around submissions solicited directly from community members. Made By Us,[1] a collaborative network of organizations fostering public engagement in cultural heritage, created a map charting these projects, which included over 450 such collecting efforts as of August 2020.[2] Just focusing in on North America, examples include public libraries, state historical societies, museums, university archives, and community organizations. Proactive efforts by cultural heritage professionals to directly engage community members have a long history, notably spurred on by Howard Zinn's famous exhortation for archivists to confront gaps and silences in the historical record by compiling "a whole new world of documentary material about the lives, desires, needs, of ordinary people."[3] In recent years, cultural heritage professionals have generated this new world of documentary materials through event-based collections, responding especially to moments of crisis and trauma. The projects documenting the Covid-19 pandemic participate in this longer tradition of community-engaged collecting, representing perhaps the largest set of collections all responding to a shared phenomenon.

While the effects of the pandemic have been global in scale, the immediate impacts have been felt at a local level: through emergency regulations placed on particular spaces, through alterations in the delivery of private and public services, and through changes small and large to the routines of daily life. To document this local experience of a global phenomenon, on March 26, 2020—shortly after nationwide shutdowns in the United States—the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNCC) University Archives invited students, faculty, and staff to contribute self-documentation in the form of writing, photographs, social media posts, or other audiovisual media about their experiences shifting to remote learning and teaching. As Katie Howell, the UNCC University Archivist, states on the webpage describing this effort, existing records management practices will capture the University's response to the pandemic as an organization, but "there are no such provisions in place to ensure that personal experiences and reactions are included in the permanent archives."[4] The UNCC effort seeks to document the closure of residence halls and the opening of virtual classrooms on campus, among other stories that would not be captured in the university's organizational records. These are localized stories that resonate with the global transformations wrought by the pandemic but constitute the history of a particular community.

In the present research, the authors have endeavored to carefully and critically reflect on efforts documenting a global pandemic starting from this local perspective. Focusing on libraries, archives, museums, and historical societies in the Southeastern United States, we have worked with cultural heritage professionals at these various types of institutions to better understand both the particular practices that they have developed to build and manage these collections as well as some broader issues that have shaped their approaches to these community-engaged efforts.

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[1] https://historymadebyus.com/

[2] https://medium.com/history-made-by-us/you-are-the-primary-source-211c33053bcf

[3] Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *The Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 25.

[4] As we discuss below, we captured information about collecting efforts via institutions' public-facing webpages in our own web archives collection using Conifer. References to these webpages will include links to this collection. [excluded link here because it contains info that would identify author – will include link in final version]

Though working in a common geographic region, these cultural heritage professionals are documenting diverse communities and building collections varying in size, scope, and approach. Due both to these similarities and differences, this research presented an opportunity for the cultural heritage professionals participating in the study to form a regional community of practitioners involved in Covid-19 collecting efforts, fostering discussion about challenges, issues, and lessons learned among this group.

Across the cultural heritage professions more broadly, the global prevalence of community-engaged Covid-19 documentation efforts presents similar opportunities for critically reflecting on this emerging mode of collecting. Despite important precedents for collecting materials outside of the typical "record life cycle," such as oral history collections and web and social media archiving, cultural heritage professionals launching efforts that directly solicit community members to submit materials related to recent or ongoing events will likely need to adapt existing workflows, learn new skills and technologies, and reframe ethical questions for responsibly acquiring and providing access to collections. Starting from an examination of how cultural heritage professionals are undertaking these collecting efforts in the Southeast, this research highlights major questions that the cultural heritage professions more broadly need to address in order to bolster community-engaged collecting as an approach to responsively and equitably document local histories as they unfold.

Proactive Collecting Approaches

In a significant departure from typical archival collecting programs, Covid-19 documentation efforts involve cultural heritage institutions soliciting recently or even newly created records for inclusion in their holdings. This contrasts with the "life cycle model," in which archivists appraise and acquire some small set of records that are no longer actively used but hold enduring value for future use. As Helen Samuels urged in 1986, however, "our modern, complex, information-rich society requires that archivists reexamine their role as selectors."[5] Even more pronounced today, recorded information documenting historically-significant phenomena exists in many media formats and is created in capacities both personal and professional, often outside easily defined organizational boundaries. Samuels developed the documentation strategy approach as a method for formally identifying the types of records needed to document ongoing social issues or activities and to then coordinate the collection, or in some cases, creation of these records among archivists and other stakeholders.[6] Although current Covid-19 efforts have not necessarily been planned as documentation strategies, they stem from a shared recognition that proactive collecting now will contribute to capturing a rich historical record of the complex, unfolding phenomena of the pandemic.

These current projects incorporate techniques and methods from existing cultural heritage frameworks for collecting outside the record life cycle. For example, many of the current Covid-19 documentation projects are expressly modeled as oral history collecting efforts, such as the Covid-19 Oral History Project at Indiana University - Purdue University Indianapolis.[7] Traditionally used to document lived experiences from the past, current Covid-19 collecting efforts are adapting these methods to record narrative accounts of recent and ongoing

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[5] Helen Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *The American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 110.

[6] Ibid., 115.

[7] Jason M. Kelly, "The COVID-19 Oral History Project: Some Preliminary Notes from the Field," *The Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (July 2, 2020): 240–52.

experiences of the pandemic. Testifying to the relevance of oral history methods in these efforts, *The Oral History Review* dedicated a special issue to early reflections on applying this mode of documentation to capture ongoing experiences of the pandemic.

In addition to oral histories, Covid-19 documentation efforts have been collecting a wide range of other types of records from community members like photographs, journals, videos, and content shared on social media platforms. As many records are now created using digital technologies and shared through networked platforms, Covid-19 collecting projects have necessarily employed specific tools and more general approaches from web and social media archiving. Sylvie Rollason-Cass and Scott Reed discuss a "living archives" model for developing archival collections of ongoing events, specifically responding to the enormously significant online presence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the wake of Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson, Missouri.[8] Though many institutions have only recently begun web archiving efforts, tools and techniques have been steadily evolving since shortly after the popular adoption of the Web in the 1990s.[9] Efforts to document the Black Lives Matter movement, though, catalyzed this evolution, notably driven by the Documenting the Now (DocNow) organization.[10] Recognizing that web and social media platforms present both new technical and ethical challenges for historical preservation, such as a lack of traditional forms of informed consent in collecting data from social media platforms,[11] DocNow has been a leader in developing new tools and facilitating conversations between communities and cultural heritage professionals to address these issues. As we discuss below, earlier projects to document the Black Lives Matter movement and resources developed by DocNow have been fundamental in informing current Covid-19 documentation projects.

As community-engaged collecting projects, the history of community archives is another major touchstone for current Covid-19 documentation efforts. Though the Covid-19 documentation projects discussed in this paper are decidedly institutional collections, there is an overlap with community archives understood as "collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control."[12] Andrew Flinn and the other authors make clear that this definition is itself ambiguous as both 'communities' and 'archives' can be configured in many ways, including collaborative interactions with cultural heritage institutions. The Invisible Histories Project is a good example of this: a non-profit organization dedicated to documenting Queer communities and their histories in the American South, Invisible Histories facilitates partnerships between communities and local libraries and archives to foster collecting efforts and resource sharing.[13]

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[8] Sylvie Rollason-Cass and Scott Reed, "Living Movements, Living Archives: Selecting and Archiving Web Content During Times of Social Unrest," *New Review of Information Networking* 20, no. 1/2 (May 2015): 241–47.

[9] For a concise history, see Masashi Toyoda and Masaru Kitsuregawa, "The History of Web Archiving," *Proceedings of the IEEE* 100, no. Special Centennial Issue (2012): 1441–43.

[10] https://www.docnow.io/

[11] Bergis Jules, Ed Summers, and Vernon Mitchell Jr., "Ethical Considerations for Archiving Social Media Content Generated by Contemporary Social Movements: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations" (Documenting the Now, April 2018), https://www.docnow.io/docs/docnow-whitepaper-2018.pdf.

[12] Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* 9, no. 1–2 (2009): 73.

[13] James Baggett et al., "The Invisible Histories Project: Documenting the Queer South," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 37, no. 1 (2021), https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol37/iss1/6.

For Covid-19 documentation projects, cultural heritage professionals are gathering and managing the material, but this material has been generated by members of a given community and, in many cases, submitters have contributed metadata used to arrange, describe, and provide access to the collections. In another paper, Flinn connects the growth of community-generated archival collections in institutional holdings with independent community archives; in both cases, communities outside the cultural heritage profession are helping to shape the historical record by gathering materials as well as influencing how those materials are managed.[14] Current Covid-19 documentation efforts perhaps present a hybrid model of community-engaged collecting, though as we discuss below, cultural heritage professionals are engaging in critical self-reflection about the extent to which communities actually exert control over these projects as well as the diversity of communities being documented by these efforts.

This section has only offered a brief sketch of a much broader history of engaging with records creators for the proactive collection or care of records pertaining to ongoing events. The documentation efforts studied in the present research have drawn on these and other approaches to collecting outside the record life cycle. The cultural heritage professionals who participated in the research discuss web archiving and oral history techniques as part of workflows derived for accessioning and managing community-submitted materials. Already, cultural heritage professionals are reflecting on these recent efforts and looking back to these historical precedents to address deeper theoretical questions that such approaches raise about the role of cultural heritage professionals collaborating with communities to document history as it unfolds. In the present paper, we analyze a sample of Covid-19 collecting projects with the aim of contributing to these ongoing conversations about the further development of community-engaged approaches.

Study Overview

For this study, we sought to investigate community-engaged Covid-19 documentation projects at cultural heritage institutions in the coastal Southeastern United States, encompassing North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. While there are certainly differences across and within these states, the shared geography and related sociopolitical landscapes contribute to commonalities that support comparative analysis and, as we discuss below, promote regional communities of practice among cultural heritage professionals.[15] The research began in October 2020, at a point when racial justice movements sparked by the murder of George Floyd had been developing for several months in communities across the Southeast, the United States, and internationally. These significant political movements have been shaping the local histories of communities in ways that cannot be fully separated from the simultaneous unfolding of the pandemic—the effects of which have been disproportionately felt in communities of color due in part to longstanding racial disparities in

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[14] Andrew Flinn, "Independent Community Archives and Community-Generated Content 'Writing, Saving and Sharing Our Histories,'" *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 16, no. 1 (2010): 39–51.

[15] Baggett et al., "The Invisible Histories Project," 55. Though the present research started before the authors were aware of the Invisible Histories Project, this work resonated with our own regional approach to studying community-engaged Covid-19 collecting projects.

access to health care along with other critical resources.[16] These concurrent racial justice movements were a crucial part of the context for this research, as made clear by the deep considerations of racial and socioeconomic diversity and representation in community-engaged Covid-19 collecting efforts discussed in the findings below.

That said, we made the decision to scope our sample to only include those collecting efforts dedicated primarily to documenting the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite important interrelationships, cultural heritage institutions have largely approached documentation efforts for the pandemic as distinct from that of the racial justice reckonings of 2020. These two phenomena have impacted communities in quite different ways, necessitating some vastly different considerations in terms of collecting approach and access to materials. For example, the documentation of participants at racial justice rallies, parades, and other events raises serious concerns about privacy and lack of informed consent that do not have direct analogues in Covid-19 projects where submitters voluntarily share their own personal stories. There are certainly valuable research questions that could be pursued by comparing across community-engaged projects for both phenomena, but we felt that focusing on Covid-19 documentation projects would better serve the aims of the present research.

After deciding to focus on Covid-19 documentation efforts in the coastal Southeast, we developed a study sample by identifying projects within this scope from two lists: the aforementioned History Made By Us list and a collaboratively developed list initiated by DocNow.[17] These are two leading organizations driving the development of tools and frameworks for community-engaged collecting; several study participants singled out DocNow, in particular, as a critical information source for their documentation efforts. In addition to projects included on one or both lists, we added projects at East Carolina University and the Museum of Durham History to the sample. We encountered these collecting projects in the early planning stage of the research and added them as they fit within the scope and augmented the diversity and breadth of the sample. In total, the sample size for the first phase of the research totaled 30 cultural heritage institutions of varying size across the coastal Southeastern United States, including university archives, medical libraries, historical societies, public libraries, and museums.

After compiling the list of institutions, the study consisted of three main phases: collecting web archives of public-facing collection pages, a survey, and semi-structured interviews. In October of 2020, we used Conifer, a free web archiving tool supported by Rhizome,[18] to create a collection of the public-facing websites for the Covid-19 collecting efforts at each of the 30 institutions.[19] In addition to the collection pages, we also captured the front pages of the institutions' websites to see how or if the broader institution spotlighted the Covid-19 documentation effort. We gathered some initial data about the Covid-19 collecting efforts from these web archival captures of the institutions' websites, identifying the type of institution, the community they collected from, and what and how materials were being collected. We conducted a second round of web archival captures in February 2021 and noted any changes to

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[16] Lauren Rossen et al., "Disparities in Excess Mortality Associated with COVID-19 — United States, 2020," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 70, no. 33 (2021): 1114–19, https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7033a2.

[17] https://docs.google.com/document/d/1v5tso8spFq6SpW53h2OJULcdRoPEbyI6xpah31kW-H0/edit

[18] https://conifer.rhizome.org/

[19] The web archives collection that we created for the research can be accessed here: https://conifer.rhizome.org/colincpost/covid-19-archives-research-collection.

how the Covid-19 documentation efforts were described and presented via the institutions' public-facing websites.

Building on the preliminary data we gathered from analyzing the web archival captures, we sent out a survey to all 30 institutions identified in the sample with the goal of gaining further information about the collecting efforts not represented on the public-facing websites. Questions on the survey covered aspects of how and when collecting projects were first developed, what staff roles were involved in the collecting effort, and details about the response thus far from community members. The survey also gauged the interest of respondents in further participation in the study in the form of semi-structured interviews or sharing internal documents related to the collection. We kept the survey open for 3 weeks and sent out a reminder after 2 weeks, resulting in 17 replies. Of the survey respondents, 11 expressed interest in taking part in semi-structured interviews with 10 cultural heritage practitioners in total participating (see table 1). The interviews enabled us to ask more in-depth questions about the techniques and approaches used in the collecting efforts and provided a space for dialogue and reflection on challenges and lessons learned. We started the semi-structured interviews in November 2020 and continued through January 2021. Interview sessions were conducted virtually over web conferencing software and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

The interviews were transcribed, and these transcriptions were coded to identify significant themes, similarities, and differences across how the 10 cultural heritage professionals undertook their Covid-19 documentation efforts. Using ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software, one author conducted the coding iteratively across two cycles. In the first cycle, a structural coding method was applied to the interview data with codes derived from the research questions.[20] In the second cycle, a pattern coding method was applied to identify broader themes across the interview data and group the codes developed in the first cycle into thematic categories.[21] After these two coding cycles were completed, the other author reviewed the code book and the coded transcripts from three of the 10 interviews. Together, the authors discussed the codes and thematic categories defined in the code book along with how these codes had been applied across the three transcripts. These and other conversations between the authors throughout the data collection and analysis process helped to establish a "shared interpretive validity,"[22] building a consensus among the two authors that we both broadly agreed on the interpretation of the interview data.

For this research, coding was used as a method to both organize and interpret the data, recognizing that the aims of the research and the perspectives of the authors directly influenced how codes were applied and analyzed. Though this is not a grounded theory study, our approach to qualitative data analysis is largely informed by Kathy Charmaz's constructivist reframing of this methodology that acknowledges the active role played by the researcher in shaping knowledge.[23] How this particular sample of institutions approached their Covid-19 documentation efforts is not necessarily representative of other institutions that pursued similar collecting projects, but our analysis does illuminate major issues and challenges faced across the cultural heritage profession, especially as community-engaged collecting efforts become more

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[20] Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 3rd edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2016), 96.

[21] Ibid., 236.

[22] Cynthia Weston et al., "Analyzing Interview Data: The Development and Evolution of a Coding System," *Qualitative Sociology* 24, no. 3 (2001): 393.

[23] Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd Edition. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 13.

readily adopted to document ongoing events like the Covid-19 pandemic. A summary of findings from the web archives and survey are presented in the next section, and findings from the interpretivist analysis of the 10 semi-structured interviews are presented in the following three sections.

Institution	Type	Location	Collection
Amelia Island Museum of History (Amelia)	Local History Museum	Amelia Island, FL	Oral histories, news stories, social media archives documenting Amelia Island and surrounding area
Atlanta History Center (AHC)	Local History Museum	Atlanta, GA	Photographs, textual and audiovisual submissions, and social media archives documenting Atlanta
Duke University (Duke)	University Archives, Health Sciences Library	Durham, NC	Photographs, textual and audiovisual submissions documenting Duke students, faculty, and staff
East Carolina University (ECU)	Academic Library, Special Collections & Archives, Health Sciences Library	Greenville, NC	Photographs, textual and audiovisual submissions documenting ECU and surrounding community
Florida State University (FSU)	University Archives	Tallahassee, FL	Photographs, textual and audiovisual submissions, and social media archives documenting FSU faculty, students, and staff
Foxfire	Regional History Museum	Mountain City, GA	Oral histories documenting southern Appalachia
Kennesaw State University (KSU)	University Archives	Kennesaw, GA	Photographs, textual and audiovisual submissions documenting KSU faculty, students, and staff
Louisiana State University (LSU)	Academic Library, Special Collections & Archives	Baton Rouge, LA	Photographs, textual and audiovisual submissions documenting LSU faculty, students, and staff
Matheson History	Local History	Gainesville,	Texts, photographs, and

Museum (Matheson)	Museum	FL	audiovisual submissions documenting Gainesville and surrounding area
Wake Forest University (WFU)	Academic Library, Special Collections & Archives	Winston-Salem, NC	Oral histories, photographs, textual and audiovisual submissions documenting WFU and surrounding community

Table 1. Overview of participants involved in the second phase of the research

Overview of Collecting Efforts

We first reviewed the web archival captures of institutions' public-facing websites as a way to further familiarize ourselves with how institutions were approaching documenting Covid-19. Of the 30 institutions in the sample, 14 were affiliated with a university, 14 were local or regional history museums, and the remaining were a racial and ethnic history research center (Amistad Research Center) and a civil rights museum (Birmingham Civil Rights Institute). The community they collected from varied based on the type of institution and their collection scope. The university-affiliated collection efforts mainly focused on their campus communities and sometimes included their broader community of alumni and students' families. The history museums solicited donations from their surrounding area either locally or regionally, depending on the size and mission of the institution. For instance, the Cape Fear Museum solicited donations from communities "within a 50-mile radius from Wilmington [North Carolina],"[24] and the Bandy Heritage Center highlighted its responsibility to document the history of the broader northwest Georgia region.[25]

During the web archives analysis, we also examined what and how the institutions were collecting. 27 institutions collected textual submissions of community members' responses to specific prompts and/or general reflections on how their daily lives changed due to Covid-19. 20 institutions collected audio submissions created by community members; several of these institutions also conducted oral histories facilitated by staff members. 28 institutions collected photographs and 23 accepted video submissions. Nine institutions solicited submissions of born-digital or digitized versions of original artwork. 13 institutions reported collecting social media content in some way, though the survey did not ask participants to specify the social media archiving tools or methods used. Six institutions reported collecting physical artifacts and an additional five indicated future plans to collect physical artifacts. Institutions accepted submissions through a variety of methods, including online survey tools like Qualtrics or Google Forms, submission portals on their website, sharing social media posts with the institution's social media account, or directly emailing a staff member.

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[24] https://conifer.rhizome.org/colincpost/covid-19-archives-research-collection/list/cape-fear-museum/b2/20201003224904/https://www.capefearmuseum.com/donate-collections/

[25] https://conifer.rhizome.org/colincpost/covid-19-archives-research-collection/list/bandy-heritage-center/b1/20201003225151/http://www.bandyheritagecenter.org/news/bandy-heritage-center-collecting-coronavirus-related-documents-photographs-and-more

From the survey sent to all 30 institutions included in the sample, we gained more detailed information about the scope of the collecting efforts and how these related to other collecting efforts at the institution. The collections ranged in size from 11 submissions to 21,500 digital files, though most collections contained a few hundred submissions. The survey did not specify a unit to report collection size, with some institutions reporting the number of submissions and others also reporting size in amounts of digital storage. While the variation in how institutions reported the size of their collections inhibits us from making exact comparisons in the extent of collections, we can broadly characterize the range in the size of collections. The dramatic range—from just a handful of submissions to tens of thousands—could reflect many factors, such as differences in size of the community or the extent of the resources put into promoting the collecting effort.

In the following three sections, we relate the experiences and reflections of the 10 cultural heritage professionals who participated in the semi-structured interviews that followed on from the survey (see Table 1). Throughout this section, we refer only to the names of the collecting institutions where documentation projects took place and not the individual practitioners. In cases where we discuss a finding shared across several institutions, we state the number of institutions and list the particular institutions in parentheses. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are taken from the semi-structured interviews conducted as part of the research.

Reshaping Collecting Practices

Across the study participants, the collecting practices involved in the Covid-19 documentation efforts ranged from slight adaptations of existing approaches to the development of essentially new workflows involving the adoption of unfamiliar tools and techniques. Seven participants (AHC, Amelia, Duke, FSU, Matheson, KSU, LSU) reported that at least some aspect of this collecting effort was a new sort of undertaking either for themselves as practitioners and/or for their institutions as a whole. As the practitioner at AHC states, "we had never engaged in a process that involved both outreach and collection acquisition, that included collections that were generated contemporaneously."[26] While the Covid-19 collecting effort involved some familiar practices, like community outreach and acquiring materials, the combination of these practices at AHC made this collecting effort novel. For Matheson, this effort represented an even more radical departure from the norm, skirting the typical acquisition procedures and involving experimentation with digital curation tools. The practitioner at KSU framed their effort as a "pilot project,"[27] an opportunity to try out a new way of developing collections but also an opportunity to reflect on what worked well and what could be improved.

Even in cases where some aspect of the collecting effort involved new practices, several participants (Amelia, ECU, Foxfire, KSU, LSU, WFU) discussed drawing on existing collecting techniques or already established workflows. The practitioner at WFU reflected that "we just saw it as another collecting area. It just so happens that we're experiencing it as well."[28] In particular, WFU had previously engaged in oral history projects to document various local communities, and they were able to build directly on these earlier projects. Similarly, Foxfire, a non-profit organization with a long history of empowering student fellows to collect oral histories documenting Appalachian culture, applied their existing workflows as the 2020 student cohort

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[26] Interview with the practitioner, December 8, 2020.
[27] Interview with the practitioner, December 18, 2020.
[28] Interview with the practitioner, November 30, 2020.

conducted oral histories about the impact of the pandemic. Still, the extreme, extenuating circumstances of the pandemic and the resulting health and safety protocols introduced significant changes, such as learning to conduct oral history interviews using remote video conferencing tools.

After materials were acquired, participants took varying approaches to managing the Covid-19 collections in relation to their overall holdings. Four participants (Duke, FSU, KSU, WFU) started special Covid-19 collections that are in some way distinct from the other collection groups in their university archives. Others (Amelia, ECU, Foxfire, LSU, Matheson) discussed integrating incoming Covid-19 materials into existing categories, records groups, or classification schemes. In both cases, though, institutions are not necessarily creating entirely separate collections management workflows nor are they necessarily using existing workflows without any adaptations for the Covid-19 materials. While WFU is organizing community-submitted materials as a distinct collection, they are also acquiring pandemic-related materials from campus offices through typical university archives records acquisition procedures. ECU has an existing workflow for accessioning born-digital materials that they have readily adapted for Covid-19 documentation submissions, though they are presenting this as a special collection online via Omeka.[29] Amelia and Foxfire have both integrated Covid-19 materials into existing vertical filing systems, though Foxfire, for instance, added new subject terms like 'social distancing' to aid in discovery.

While many institutions balanced existing practices with new approaches to some degree, the community-generated Covid-19 projects necessitated more significant changes for some institutions—namely, in sparking or significantly advancing practices for born-digital collections. For many institutions (AHC, Amelia, ECU, KSU, LSU, Matheson, WFU), these efforts either represented the first significant forays into collecting born-digital materials or motivated renewed discussions about digital curation workflows and tools. KSU has staff dedicated to digital archiving and an institutional repository for managing and providing access to digital materials, though this Covid-19 project advanced ongoing discussions about representing born-digital materials in finding aids. As the practitioner at WFU pointed out, the dual challenges of handling incoming submissions of born-digital materials and rapidly adjusting to remote work as a result of the pandemic intersected to prompt a thorough reassessment of their digital curation practices. The practitioner at Amelia made a related observation from the user perspective: the pandemic closed off in-person access to collections and thus put greater pressure on making collections accessible online.

These collecting efforts highlighted important areas for learning and skill building pertaining to born-digital materials. For ongoing events of historical significance, much relevant documentation will be born-digital, and so institutions need to build up expertise and adopt tools to effectively acquire, manage, preserve, and provide access to digital collections. Though necessary, this is by no means easy, especially for institutions with limited staffing and information technology resources. For Matheson, an institution with one full-time staff member undertaking the bulk of day-to-day collections management activities, quickly launching their first substantial born-digital collections project presented mounting challenges that they will be addressing for years to come. Confronting digital curation as an entirely unfamiliar area of practice, the practitioner at Matheson surmises, "I know enough about it to know that I don't know anything."[30] Like Matheson, many cultural heritage institutions are still quite early on in

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[29] https://ecucovid19.omeka.net/
[30] Interview with the practitioner, November 30, 2020.

the development of digital curation programs; the pandemic and responses to documenting the pandemic have illuminated these gaps in expertise that will need to be addressed moving forward.

Reframing an Ethics of Collecting

Related to questions about reshaping collecting practices, adapting workflows, and exploring new tools and techniques, practitioners grappled with ethical questions about how to document an unfolding phenomenon that continues to take lives and sow social and economic instability. These questions are now being actively discussed across the profession, including important considerations as to whether cultural heritage institutions should be proactively soliciting community submissions documenting experiences of the pandemic at all. Early on in the pandemic, Eira Tansey articulated a generalized critique of community-engaged collecting projects, pointing out the potential of these efforts to produce "archival commodities" from deeply traumatic experiences.[31] Though well-intentioned, archivists' impulses to collect materials toward a representative historical record is not in itself an ethical maxim; rather, historical documentation needs to proceed based on an ethics that privileges the well-being of communities over and above the materials. I do not introduce this critique to suggest that community-engaged Covid-19 collecting efforts are intrinsically unethical, but instead that these projects need to proceed from an ethics of collecting that has been reframed to account for the distinct challenges and pitfalls that documenting an unfolding, traumatic phenomenon presents.

Reflecting on the number of Covid-19 oral history projects that launched in the early months of the pandemic, Jennifer Cramer suggests that documentarians design their projects after thorough consideration of their motivations and approach, recommending that practitioners partner with healthcare professionals possessing expertise in treating trauma and apply trauma-informed collecting practices.[32] As Cramer emphasizes for oral history specifically, these documentation projects are taking place and will likely continue in the future,[33] so it is imperative for professionals to advance ethical frameworks for this mode of historical documentation. For cultural heritage professionals, these community-engaged Covid-19 documentation efforts have demonstrated the value of this collecting approach—but also the pressing ethical questions that demand further critical reflection and discussion.

Participants in the research likewise grappled with these issues, reflecting on questions that were discussed in the planning stages of their documentation efforts, decisions made in light of those discussions, and lingering concerns that have developed in the wake of their collecting projects. How institutions framed these collecting efforts to their targeted communities on their websites and web submission portals represented major points where decisions about how to collect ethically and responsibly manifested. All participants used some version of a deed of gift or donor agreement as part of the acquisition process, in some cases reusing existing forms, in other cases altering the language of existing forms to reflect the differences of this mode of collecting, and in other cases creating new donor agreement policies specific to this project. For

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[31] Eira Tansey, "No One Owes Their Trauma to Archivists, or, the Commodification of Contemporaneous Collecting," June 5, 2020, http://eiratansey.com/2020/06/05/no-one-owes-their-trauma-to-archivists-or-the-commodification-of-contemporaneous-collecting/.

[32] Jennifer A. Cramer, "'First, Do No Harm': Tread Carefully Where Oral History, Trauma, and Current Crises Intersect," *The Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 209.

[33] Ibid., 204.

instance, the practitioners at KSU and LSU both described modeling new donor agreements after other institutions' policies that they found especially effective.

Relationships with donors is a fundamental aspect of the typical archival acquisitions process, even if rarely examined in professional discourse, as Rob Fisher suggests.[34] These community-engaged collecting efforts involve quite different interactions with donors, though: brief and indirect, in most cases mediated by an online submissions process. More than just adapting deed of gift forms, practitioners also sought ways to inform submitters about their donation and offer different donation options—aspects of the donation process that would typically be covered in discussions with donors prior to donating records. Three practitioners (Duke, KSU, WFU) expressly discussed ensuring the informed consent of submitters, integrating into the online submission form clear and straightforward descriptions of what information was being collected and how it would be used by the institution. Recognizing the potentially sensitive nature of submissions, participants described building more flexibility into the donation process, including options for submitters to remain anonymous, reviewing submissions for disclosures of health information or naming of other individuals, and enabling submitters to determine access restrictions or embargoes for their submissions. Though in some cases mediated through online submission portals, these donation processes still make space for donor agency, which Fisher defines as "the ability of donors to exert and promote their interests and influence archival practice."[35] While practitioners could not, in most cases, hash out the details of these donor agreements on an individual basis, they took significant steps to afford agency to submitters in determining the terms of their submissions.

These adaptations to donor agreements represent accommodations for individuals interested in participating in these collecting efforts, though several practitioners (AHC, Duke, Foxfire, FSU, WFU) also considered the situation of people who were not yet ready to submit documentation of their experiences. Recognizing that the target communities for these collecting efforts were contending with health and safety threats as well as the added stress and anxiety brought on by the pandemic, practitioners observed that requests to submit documentation of this strenuous experience may be just too much to handle at the moment. As the practitioner from Foxfire noted, "it may simply be that people aren't ready to talk about it. It may be easier to talk about it when it's a memory. As historical organizations, we deal in the business of memory. Maybe we just need to let it get to that point."[36] Presenters in a panel discussion at the 2021 Society of American Archivists (SAA) Annual Meeting raised similar concerns, reflecting on this factor as a major lesson learned that will shape future community-engaged collecting efforts—and perhaps cause some practitioners to refrain from launching such documentation efforts while traumatic events are still unfolding.[37]

One takeaway is that community-engaged collecting efforts to document ongoing traumatic events may be too emotionally demanding on the intended community to be warranted. Depending on the institution and the community, this will likely be true in many instances; and identifying when not to launch proactive collecting efforts is certainly an important lesson to

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[34] Rob Fisher, "Donors and Donor Agency: Implications for Private Archives Theory and Practice," *Archivaria* 79 (2015): 91–119.

[35] Ibid., 94.

[36] Interview with the practitioner, November 18, 2020.

[37] Rebecca Pattillo, Kyna Herzing, Katherine Schlesinger, Heather Stecklein, Leanna Barcelona, Elizabeth James, Summer Shetenhelm, "Active Collecting During Difficult Times: Critical Reflections on COVID-19 Documentation Projects," Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, August 4, 2021.

learn from the Covid-19 documentation projects. The rollout and continued support of these Covid-19 collecting efforts, though, can offer additional guidance on nuanced approaches to responsibly soliciting materials from community members pertaining to ongoing events of historical significance. The practitioner at Duke, for instance, described how their collecting project emphasized that the timeline for collecting submissions is intentionally open-ended:

> I really wanted to make sure that people didn't feel like they were being hustled into sharing a story that they might regret later...it was such a huge difference in our lives that I wanted to really communicate that we'd be happy to take your story, if you're ready to share something now, but we also will be here and you can take time to work on whatever you want to work on or decide I'm not going to be ready to talk about this until next summer. That was something that we tried to build into our project.[38]

Although proactive collecting efforts around ongoing events may indicate a rush to amass materials generated out of a transitory experience, these efforts might instead be presented to communities as the opening of a door that will remain open indefinitely. The anxiety to document for posterity may be acutely felt by cultural heritage professionals, but this is not a stressor that needs to be foisted onto the communities served by these institutions. While inviting submissions from those community members who are eager to contribute documentation, framing community-engaged collecting efforts as enduring capsules open to memories and recollections many years hence may garner wider participation and richer submissions reflecting a broader diversity of experiences.

 Related to the issue of those who are not ready to share their stories, participants also reflected on segments of communities—namely, communities of color and other marginalized groups—that largely did not respond to invitations to submit materials. Several practitioners (AHC, ECU, FSU, Matheson, WFU) recognized that the body of submissions received did not reflect the full diversity of their community's experiences of the pandemic. The practitioners from AHC and Matheson both observed that their calls for submissions were met mostly by older, White populations that have traditionally engaged with the respective institutions; community members that already felt connected to the institutions were the ones who felt motivated to contribute documentation of their experiences. While both practitioners appreciate the value of the submissions they received, they also acknowledge that their collections present a rather homogenous perspective of the pandemic. The practitioner from AHC soberly stated that "it's not really a collection that shows, in too many ways, the nightmare that this really is for so many people. I don't really know that this is a project that has documented this event in a comprehensive way."[39]

 If a central motivation for collecting directly from community members is to document perspectives and voices that have historically been excluded from cultural heritage institutions, much more needs to be done to ensure that these efforts actually achieve this end—and these Covid-19 documentation efforts present difficult object lessons for the profession at large to work through. Archival practitioners cannot expect communities that have long been excluded from archival collections and research spaces

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[38] Interview with the practitioner, December 9, 2020.
[39] Interview with the practitioner, December 8, 2020.

to immediately participate in community-engaged collecting efforts. As Anne Gilliland reflects, "archives that were designed to be trusted by government, academia, science, business, and other powerful sectors in society, have been and continue to be much less trusted by those whose experiences of such institutions have been negative or exclusionary ones."[40] It should not be surprising that communities that have historically been marginalized by memory institutions may look on invitations to submit materials in the midst of a crisis with suspicion.

Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson propose a "slow archives" framework as a way to rethink and restructure archival practices based in reciprocal, respectful, and restorative relationships with communities.[41] Though this framework is based on the authors' reflections on the exploitative relationship between archival institutions and Indigenous communities, the ideas can be applied to other communities that have been marginalized by cultural heritage institutions. Core to this framework is the creation of space and time for the listening, community engagement, and reflection necessary to foster "collaborative curation processes that do not default to normative structures of attribution, access, or scale."[42] The purposefully deliberate approach of the "slow archives" framework may seem contradictory to the rapid-response mentality of the Covid-19 documentation efforts—but even as Covid-19 came on fast, the pandemic has slowed to a pervasive, moored presence. As these collecting efforts also slow down, memory workers may be compelled to switch them off and turn their attention to the next event demanding a rapid response. However, we may look to the "slow archives" approach as an invitation to deeply reflect on and learn from the ethical challenges raised by the current projects.

Reflections, Lessons, and Professional Growth

As discussed in the previous sections, these collecting efforts have required practitioners to develop or adjust workflows as they acquired new types of materials and implemented unfamiliar tools, and caused practitioners to confront ethical questions without any immediate or straightforward resolutions. Throughout the process of planning, undertaking, and now maintaining these community-engaged collecting efforts, practitioners have drawn on a wide range of information sources and initiated ongoing processes of learning and growth. Especially in regard to soliciting materials from communities during moments of crisis and trauma, the current Covid-19 projects have highlighted significant lacuna in professional guidelines, educational resources, and discussions of ethics and best practice. Evidenced by conference presentations and literature discussing these collecting efforts, the professional community is already engaging in this reflective discourse.

Consideration of both past and current community-engaged collecting efforts was a crucial source of information for the practitioners in this study. All the practitioners discussed looking at Covid-19 documentation projects already underway to inform their own decisions regarding aspects of what to collect, how to acquire materials, and how to frame and present these efforts to their respective communities. Several practitioners identified UNC-Charlotte as a

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[40] Anne Gilliland, "Trust Matters," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 35, no. 2 (2019), 11.

[41] Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, "Toward Slow Archives," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 87-116.

[42] Ibid., 90.

leading example, especially for documenting the impact of the pandemic on university communities. The practitioner from Foxfire, which launched its effort quite early in the pandemic, lamented that they were not able to learn more from how other institutions structured their submission forms and deeds of gift, though they still benefited from looking at other institutions' collecting practices even while their own collecting was already underway.

In addition to Covid-19 documentation efforts, practitioners learned from consideration of other similar projects to solicit materials from community members and reflection on previous collecting experiences. Seven practitioners (AHC, Duke, ECU, WFU, KSU, FSU, LSU) noted looking at community-engaged collecting projects around earlier events, like the 2016 Women's March on Washington, as well as more generalized efforts to crowdsource the documentation of community life. The practitioner at LSU, for instance, mentioned a nearby public library system that incorporates local history documentation into its outreach programing. Six practitioners (Amelia, ECU, Foxfire, WFU, KSU, FSU) drew directly on previous involvement in community-engaged collecting. As noted above, Foxfire and other practitioners have engaged in oral history projects, a major feature of many of the Covid-19 documentation efforts globally and a longstanding component of archival practice. The practitioner at FSU detailed a recent project to commemorate the "Mud Angels," a group of study abroad students who provided impromptu humanitarian assistance when Florence flooded during their stay in 1966.[43] Despite some key differences between the documentation efforts—the Mud Angels project documented the anniversary of an event from the past and involved a delimited group of people—the FSU practitioner discussed this as an important precedent for considering methods to engage the university community directly in collecting materials.

Many participants (Amelia, AHC, Duke, ECU, Matheson, KSU, FSU, Foxfire, LSU) expressly described specific instances of learning and growth prompted by the Covid-19 collecting projects, in many cases encountering novel tasks or activities demanding the acquisition of new skills. As discussed above, several participants grappled with the challenges of collecting born-digital materials for the first time. For others, the project made clear the need for publicity and promotion activities for community-engaged collecting, which are not typical features of archival acquisitions processes. The practitioner at ECU discussed how addressing the promotion of the collecting effort highlighted larger issues with community engagement. At the start of their collecting effort at ECU, all informational materials about the project were initially presented in English only, effectively excluding the substantial Spanish-speaking community in eastern North Carolina. The practitioner and colleagues addressed this oversight by adding Spanish-language descriptions to public-facing websites and brochures and by promoting the collecting effort through Spanish-language radio stations and direct outreach to community organizations, though the translations were not integrated until the project was already well underway. This is a lesson that will surely inform future community-engaged collecting efforts at ECU and serves as an example of issues raised by current Covid-19 documentation projects that all manner of memory workers and cultural heritage institutions can learn from.

In particular, community-engaged Covid-19 collecting projects have highlighted the importance of developing conversations around archives and trauma, which Kristen Wright and Nicola Laurent observe can include documenting trauma as well as the power of archives to

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[43] Lindsay Fasce, "The Mud Angels: Florence During the Flood," *Illuminations: An FSU Special Collections Blog*, May 3, 2017, https://fsuspecialcollections.wordpress.com/2017/05/03/the-mud-angels-florence-during-the-flood/.

trigger traumatic experiences and induce vicarious trauma for archival workers.[44] Wright and Laurent call for a trauma-informed archival practice that would not eliminate trauma from archives but would rather prioritize the safety of archival workers and researchers and reduce the likelihood of harm.[45] While Wright and Laurent critique Covid-19 collecting efforts specifically as straying from these principles, for instance fearing that individuals may submit materials without fully being aware of how the documentation of their experiences of trauma will be used by the collecting institution,[46] the considerations discussed by participants in the previous section speak to these concerns. Practitioners in this study took concrete steps to clearly describe the submission process, afford submitters a range of options to retain anonymity or embargo materials, and make the collecting institutions' plans for the use of materials transparent at the point of submission. Even still, these collecting efforts raise questions that challenge current ethical frameworks for cultural heritage practitioners.

While the current projects have highlighted key issues for ongoing discussion, participants mentioned existing resources that have provided a foundation for approaching community-engaged collecting. The practitioners from Duke and WFU both looked to DocNow as a leading organization in this area, and the practitioner from WFU also noted the SAA "Documenting in Times of Crisis" toolkit as a helpful resource.[47] Practitioners (ECU, Matheson, KSU, FSU, WFU) mentioned participating in webinars, informal coffee chats, and social media threads hosted by various professional organizations to learn about how other institutions were documenting Covid-19. Recognizing the benefit of these discussions, practitioners in the study showed interest in engaging with the other study participants to discuss common challenges and lay the groundwork for sharing resources. With the permission of all participants involved in the third phase of the research, we set up a virtual meeting to foster this exchange and to also present some of the initial findings from the research.

Though coming at the end of this current research effort, this cohort meeting suggested the potential for participatory networks of cultural heritage professionals engaged in the development of an emerging area of professional practice. Alison Clemens, Wendy Hagenmaier, Jessica Meyerson, and Rachel Appel relate their experiences with just such a participatory network of practitioners to advance approaches for access to born-digital archives.[48] The authors emphasize the strengths of practice-based research happening in participatory networks, which foster skill building, discussion, and learning within the support of communities of practice.[49] For the present study, this community included practitioners from a variety of cultural heritage institutions, from university archives to local history museums. Meeting together virtually, participants discussed many of the issues and challenges detailed in this paper, presenting their perspectives from these distinct but related professional backgrounds. Spanning all kinds of cultural heritage institutions, the current Covid-19 documentation projects have highlighted issues that span these different professional communities: developing new workflows for born-digital materials, reshaping ethical frameworks for collecting, and confronting obstacles to

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[44] Kirsten Wright and Nicola Laurent, "Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 91, no. 91 (2021): 40.

[45] Ibid., 51.

[46] Ibid., 49.

[47] https://www2.archivists.org/advocacy/documenting-in-times-of-crisis-a-resource-kit

[48] Alison Clemens et al., "Participatory Archival Research and Development: The Born-Digital Access Initiative," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 36, no. 1 (2020): 4–24.

[49] Ibid., 20.

mutually trusting relationships with diverse communities. The cohort of research participants offered a model in miniature of how different segments of the cultural heritage profession can come together to promote critical self-reflection on these complex issues.

Conclusion

Community-engaged collection efforts are becoming more common, catalyzed both by events of enormous historical significance like the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the maturation of digitally networked technologies that facilitate the collection of multimedia documentary sources from community members. As this research has demonstrated, there are continuities between community-engaged collecting and traditional archival approaches, as the participants in this study have adapted existing policies, workflows, and practices. But there are also significant departures from traditional archival approaches, both in collecting practices as well as in the theories undergirding these practices. While these projects are not entirely new in the archival profession or the cultural heritage field more broadly, the Covid-19 documentation efforts represent the widespread adoption of contemporaneous community-engaged collecting as a legitimate approach to collecting.

As much as these Covid-19 projects have highlighted the value and utility of community-engaged collecting, these efforts have also surfaced complex ethical questions and practical challenges that all areas of the cultural heritage field need to address if these approaches are to become part of the suite of standard practices for constructing and preserving societal memory. How cultural heritage professionals solicit materials pertaining to traumatic events demands much more critical attention, discussion, and reflection—recognizing that, in some cases, choosing *not* to document a phenomenon as it unfolds may be the appropriate decision. The Covid-19 collecting projects have also highlighted how materials documenting the present are, more so than ever, in digital formats and shared over networked systems. Whether or not these materials are solicited in the moment or collected at a later time, cultural heritage professionals must continue to hone skills, practices, and workflows for curating digital, web, and social media data.

This research has demonstrated that cultural heritage workers can address these challenges through professional communities of practice, formally and informally sharing experiences through workshops, toolkits, webinars, and special interest groups. Along with professional development opportunities to gain skills and grapple with issues related to community-engaged collecting, these educational resources can be integrated into graduate education so that emerging professionals can begin thinking critically about the challenges and questions involved in various collection strategies at the start of their careers. However, these conversations cannot just be insular discussions among professionals working at cultural heritage institutions. At the root of these issues is the relationship that cultural heritage institutions have with their local communities, and so community members must be involved in the reflective conversations that will likely happen in the months and years to come about community-engaged collecting frameworks. Community engagement in contemporaneous collecting can extend beyond the solicitation and submission of materials to encompass real agency in the planning and decision-making stages of these projects. Without mutually trusting relationships in place, cultural heritage professionals cannot responsibly and responsively document their local histories—either through contemporaneous collecting or through traditional acquisition approaches.

For the Covid-19 collecting efforts, specifically, another important question remains open: when should these community-engaged documentation projects end? After more than two years, the pandemic continues to claim lives and disrupt social and economic stability, even as public health precautions and protocols recede. The pandemic is no longer an event or easily bounded phenomenon—if it ever was—but now a thread woven into the fabric of local communities and their histories. As noted above, many of the study participants intend to keep their collecting efforts open indefinitely, both to capture a dynamic picture of how the pandemic has elapsed over time and to hold open the invitation as more community members become ready to submit materials documenting their experiences of the pandemic. Cultural heritage professionals will need to determine how the materials collected in the spring and summer of 2020 will be contextualized within the long durée of the pandemic.