

# Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

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Volume 13  
Issue 1 *Bury the Empire: Cultivating Resistance*

Article 10

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2024

## Beyond the Institution: Radical Archiving Practices in Community-Based Archival Work

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### Recommended Citation

Bender, G. (2024) "Beyond the Institution: Radical Archiving Practices in Community- Based Archival Work," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 10.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol13/iss1/10>

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# **Beyond the Institution: Radical Archiving Practices in Community-Based Archival Work**

*G. Bender*

## **Abstract**

Throughout my time at Macalester, I have become increasingly aware of a tension that exists between those housing the archive and what the archive seeks to document. Many of the archives that document the lives of those who have been victims of structural violence and those forcibly pushed to the outskirts of society, are housed within large institutions. Oftentimes these large institutions rest upon the very colonial and white supremacist harm they work to document. In this paper, I acknowledge this tension and ask what it looks like to move beyond housing identity-based history at an institution and in the hands of the perpetrators, and instead what it looks like to place these histories back into the communities they emerge from. Drawing upon the Lesbian Herstory Archive, Queer Newark Oral History Project, and Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre Community Archive as case studies for community archival work, this paper will examine radical archiving as a theoretical framework geared towards equity and justice in archival spaces. Using case study review as a methodology, I will draw conclusions as to what community-based archiving looks like as a practice. Together these case studies will illustrate what community archiving looks like in practice and how radical archiving, as a framework, provides the tools necessary to engage in community-based archiving.

**Keywords:** archival theory, radical archiving, community archives, collective memory, archival studies, archives and power relationships, critical archival studies

## Contextualizing This Work

I find it important to contextualize the space from which I approach this work. I am not an archivist, nor did I really know much about archival studies as a discipline before writing this paper. The primary way in which I've engaged with archival work is through my undergraduate academic research. Engaging with archives in such a mundane way, I often was not actively thinking about archives critically. Yet, the more time I spend engaging with archives, the more I begin to understand them as a contested and complex space rather than *just* a field of study or source for my next research paper. The more I interacted with archives, the more I became conscious of the social power they yield. Archives are powerful; they house the ability to cohere identity and produce collective memory; they hold the ability to document stories and construct narratives in which people feel seen. To reach this understanding, I had to engage with the archive in a manner that had personal meaning to me. Much of this work happened in Dr. Myrl Beam's "Telling Queer and Trans Stories: Oral History as Method and Practice" course, where we were continuously asked to engage with the stories of queer and trans elders, using oral history as a methodology. In a final reflection for the class I wrote, "As a queer and trans person, I keep finding myself feeling grateful to hold and bear witness to all of these wonderful and striking stories we have looked at. Watching and listening to these oral histories, I was completely present; I laughed, I cried, and truly what a gift that is."<sup>1</sup> It was through that laughter and those tears that I found myself personally recognizing what essential role the archive holds. Beyond just documenting histories, archives make place for these stories to be immortalized. It was through understanding the beauty of archives in my personal life that I began to see the contradiction and nuance that exists in archival spaces. I saw the ways these stories were documented and the importance of documenting stories like the ones of the queer and trans elders I encountered during this class. I began to realize that if queer people were not documenting their past, then who was? It became abundantly clear to me the ways in which archives housed in large institutions operate and whose stories they are actively choosing to preserve. This paper seeks to answer

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<sup>1</sup> Bender, G. "Blog Post #3". ( Queer and Trans Oral Histories, Macalester College, St. Paul, MN, May 5, 2023).

the question: How can we recognize the inequity that exists within archival spaces, and move beyond, building an archival framework that values agency and equity? In this paper, I establish community-based archiving under a radical archiving framework as the place where this work is being done.

## A General Introduction

We *literally* understand an archive to be the place in which historical and material records are kept and preserved. We think them to be the old dusty collections stored in the basement of an academic institution that someone, at one point or another, deemed important, worth immortalizing. Cambridge Dictionary defines an archive as: “the documents showing the history of a place, organization, or family or the place where these are kept.”<sup>2</sup> While this definition is accurate—an archive *is* a collection of items—understanding archives as merely a location or collection fails to recognize both the social conditions it emerges from and the social conditions it reinforces. Traditional understandings of archives associate the archive with a fixed place, the archive becomes the location and/or collection and not much more. Yet, this paper explores an alternative where I work to understand the archive as much more expensive than just the physical collection it makes up. Understanding archives as merely a collection of physical items from the past renders them passive and static. When we challenge ourselves to think of the archive as more so a conceptual framework, we are made aware that the archive is nuanced and instead an active site.

The archive as something more conceptual is the focus of the first section of this paper. In this section, I look to both establish a basis for approaching the archive and critique traditional archival frameworks based upon their inherent inability to acknowledge power. I will then use Michel Foucault’s concepts of *social power* and *discourse* as the language necessary to grasp the role power plays in the construction and maintenance of archives. The second half of this paper works to both grapple with recognizing the inequity that exists within traditional archival spaces and looks towards reimagining archival work, emphasizing a community focus. In the second half, I

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<sup>2</sup> Archive | definition in the Cambridge english dictionary, 2023, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/archive>.

establish community-based archiving that utilizes a radical archival framework as the path towards change. Using case study review as a methodology, I draw conclusions as to what community-based archiving looks like as a practice. I analyze the archival practices of three different archives, those being, Lesbian Herstory Archive, Queer Newark Oral History Project, and Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre Community Archive in order to create a clear picture of the implementation of radical archiving in community-based archival spaces.

### **Understanding Power Within the Archive**

One school of thought has dominated the ways of thinking about archives since their inception. For the sake of this paper, I will identify this understanding as the “traditional archival framework” or “traditional archiving.” Traditional archiving understands the basics of what archival work is, but lacks the critical perspective necessary in the broader field of archival studies. In the context of traditional archiving, archives themselves are collections of documents, objects, and ephemera deemed worthy of saving. The traditional archival framework understands that archives themselves are historically significant; “they are documentary evidence of past events[,] facts we use to interpret and understand history.”<sup>3</sup> Additionally, within a traditional archival context, archivists are “the professionals who assess, collect, organize, preserve, and provide access” to the records.<sup>4</sup> While these general understandings are true and fitting from a technical standpoint, it is important to recognize that there are dangers in viewing the archive so simply. The field of traditional archiving refuses to acknowledge one key thing: power. What the field of traditional archiving is failing to recognize is that the archives and the archivist that construct them are constantly engaging in a discourse of power; they are not neutral but rather play an active role in the construction of history.

In order to better understand the role power plays in traditional archival work, we look to French social theorist and philosopher, Michel Foucault. Foucault provides us with the framework and language necessary to grasp the role power plays in the

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<sup>3</sup> “What Are Archives?,” What Are Archives? | Society of American Archivists, <https://www2.archivists.org/about-archives>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

construction and maintenance of archives. Two of Foucault's central concepts are key to understanding archives: *discourse* and *power*. Foucault understands power to be diffused, embodied, and enacted; to Foucault, power is constant and everywhere.<sup>5</sup> Foucault also advocates for the ways in which power exists socially, classifying certain forms of power as "social power." Foucault is alert to the ways power "transcends politics" and instead "sees power as an everyday, socialised and embodied phenomenon."<sup>6</sup> Foucault views power as discursive rather than coercive, meaning power doesn't exclusively exist to constrain, but also has the ability to be productive.<sup>7</sup> Discourse, to Foucault, is the process by which a thing becomes a truth. Thus, Foucault would view the archive as a discursive space, a space rooted in truthmaking.

Foucault's concepts of discourse and social power present us with the ability to question the ways in which power informs the archive and, "power recognized becomes power that can be questioned, made accountable, and opened to transparent dialogue and enriched understanding."<sup>8</sup> With Foucault's concepts of social power and discourse in mind, I argue that the archive is a contested space and that you cannot separate archives from power. Thus, understanding that archives do not exist in a vacuum, we become aware that archives "are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed."<sup>9</sup> With these understandings, we are able to develop a critical perspective on the construction and maintenance of archives, a critique necessary within the field.

## Radical Archiving

Prior to the mid 1970s, the prominent belief in archival communities was that of the traditional archivist school of thought, which asserted that the archivist was a neutral figure and the archive was solely a historical record. In 1977, historian Howard Zinn released an article, "Secrecy, Archives and the Public Interest" calling on archivists to

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<sup>5</sup>"Foucault: Power Is Everywhere: Understanding Power for Social Change: Powercube.Net: IDS at Sussex University," Understanding power for social change | powercube.net | IDS at Sussex University | Understanding power for social change, March 8, 2010, <https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/foucault-power-is-everywhere/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Schwartz, J.M., Cook, T. "Archives, records, and power: The making of modern memory." *Archival Science* 2, 2, (2002). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435628>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 1

consider the mechanisms of power present in their field of work. Zinn acknowledged that the “existence, preservation, and availability of archives, documents, and records in our society are very much determined by the distribution of wealth and power.”<sup>10</sup> This acknowledgement of power paved the way for what would become known as radical archiving—a power-aware field of archiving. In order to understand radical archiving as a power-conscious field of archiving, we must first understand what is meant by use of the word radical in the context of the archive. Radical as a signifier is often overused to the point of dilution; it loses its direct meaning when it is frequently misused as a prefix. Scholar Kim Schwenk points us to understanding “radical” within the archive, writing: “applied to an archivist methodology, the word reflects an essential reason to collect and preserve history and memory, as a means to represent equality, integrity, and justice by the people who create it.”<sup>11</sup> Simply put, radical archiving is about finding a place to intentionally bring integrity and justice into archival work as a response to acknowledging the hoarding and unequal distribution of wealth and power that exists in archival spaces. Radical archiving presents an alternative, a critique of traditional archival frameworks, and a concrete path towards change in our understanding of the archives. Radical archiving understands that archives themselves are significant; they hold the power to decide whose stories are worthy of documenting. Radical archiving asks us to hold both the importance of building a historical record, as also argued by the traditional archival school of thought, and the need to alter the field as truths.

When we understand archives in this way, the role of archivist, also, moves beyond just being a profession and instead an active agent in the creation of collective societal memory. As previously mentioned, traditional archival frameworks rest on this myth that the archivist is the antithesis of power.<sup>12</sup> Yet, “the principles and strategies that archivists have adopted over time , and the activities they undertake – especially choosing or appraising what becomes archives and what is destroyed – fundamentally influence the composition and character of archival holdings and, thus, of societal

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<sup>10</sup> ZINN, HOWARD. “SECRECY, ARCHIVES, AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST.” *The Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 20. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41101382>.

<sup>11</sup> Schwenk, Kim. 2011. “ANOTHER WORLD POSSIBLE: RADICAL ARCHIVING IN THE 21ST CENTURY.” *Progressive Librarian* (36) (Fall): 52,110. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/another-world-possible-radical-archiving-21st/docview/923419742/se-2>.

<sup>12</sup> Schwartz, J.M., Cook, T. “Archives, records, and power: The making of modern memory,” 2.

memory.”<sup>13</sup> The archivist is not a neutral figure just as the archive is not a neutral space. Radical archiving, as a framework, generates space for reimagining the archive beyond the traditional school of thought, and instead highlights the importance of community-based archiving as a practice of archiving geared towards justice and equity

## **An Introduction to Community-Based Archiving**

The particular origins of community archiving as a practice are somewhat unknown. Yet, scholars Jeannette A. Bastian and Andrew Flinn point out that in one way or another, “community archives have existed ever since groups of people have felt the need to affirm themselves and their own identities within or apart from the wider society.”<sup>14</sup> Even if the language for these practices hasn’t always existed as we know it, communities have long been archiving their experiences as a means of creating a collective identity and memory. Modern practices of community archives, along with community-based archiving as a specific designation, became popular in archival spaces in the 20th century. Yet, it was the development of technology and accessibility of the Internet that really placed community archiving on the map. Living in a digital age, community-based archiving now takes on a different form. We can look to the *Documenting Ferguson* archive to understand how community-based archives exist in a digital age.<sup>15</sup> *Documenting Ferguson* is a digital multimedia repository that seeks to document and preserve “community- and media-generated, original context that was captured and created following the killing of 18- year-old, Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014.”<sup>16</sup> What sets *Documenting Ferguson* apart from traditional institutional archives is its inherent accessibility—anyone can upload and contribute to the *Documenting Ferguson* archival repository, in turn, creating a large body of media created by and for the community. While this sort of archival collection is not the focus of this particular paper, I find it

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<sup>13</sup> Schwartz, J.M., Cook, T. “Archives, records, and power: The making of modern memory,” 3.

<sup>14</sup> Bastian, Jeannette A., and Andrew Flinn. "Introduction." In *Community Archives, Community Spaces: Heritage, Memory and Identity*, by Jeannette A. Bastian and Andrew Flinn, Xx. Facet, 2018. doi:10.29085/9781783303526.001.

<sup>15</sup> “Documenting Ferguson,” Omeka RSS, 2023, <http://documentingferguson.wustl.edu/omeka/collections/show/62>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



necessary to make clear the ways in which the digitization of archives and community archival work are deeply intertwined.

Fluid in nature, community-based archiving is difficult to concretely define. Doing so requires a cohesive understanding of what community is, which comes with challenges. Archivist Andrew Flinn embraces this difficult task, generating a working definition of community-based archiving, as “the grassroots activities of documenting, recording and exploring community heritage in which community participation, control and ownership of the project is essential.”<sup>17</sup> Simply put, community archives are archives that, in some form, exist within the community they are looking to document, whether that be in the form of leadership or specific community norms.<sup>18</sup> Understanding community archives as “grassroots” places them within a radical vision of archiving. Demonstrating a departure from the structure of a traditional institutional archive, community archives become radical when they exist *by* and *for* the community. Community-based archiving is all about moving beyond the power hoarding present in traditional archives. It is about putting the stories and more specifically the agency to tell the stories back into the hands of the community the history documents. For the sake of this paper, I use community-based archiving as the action of what radical archiving, as a framework, is suggesting. Despite community-based archiving resting upon a broad and arguably vague definition, in this paper, I argue that there are specific principles and practices present in community-based archival spaces. Using case study review as a methodology, I draw conclusions as to what community-based archiving looks like as a practice. I analyze the archival practices of three different archives, those being, The Lesbian Herstory Archive, Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre Community Archive, and Queer Newark Oral History Project. While this work is in no means a comprehensive study of community-based archival work, together, these three archives work to paint a picture of the identifiable principles and practices happening in community archives.

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<sup>17</sup> Flinn, Andrew “Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges” , *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 28:2, 157, DOI: 10.1080/00379810701611936

<sup>18</sup> Flinn, A., Stevens, M. & Shepherd, E. “Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream.” *Arch Sci* 9, 73 (2009).  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-009-9105-2>

## **A Case Study: Lesbian Herstory Archive**

In terms of its implementation of community archival practices, the Lesbian Herstory Archive (LHA) has become an interesting site through which to examine radical archiving practices. In this section, I will approach LHA as a means of radical archiving, revealing the ways in which the archive's structuring and principles are aligned with community-based archival practices. With close examination, we are envisioned to the ways in which this archive and the social and political contexts it emerges from are rooted in radical thinking. A look at LHA's complete ownership over the archival space it is housed in asks us to consider what autonomy of space looks like in archiving and the ways in which community archives give way to a reimagining of autonomy of space. Grassroots in nature, LHA serves as a prime example as to what community archiving looks like in both theory and practice.

From its origins, LHA emerged from and continues to be a space of radicalism. In 1972, a group of gay men and women, the Gay Academic Union, held meetings dedicated to representing the concerns of lesbian and gay voices in an academic setting.<sup>19</sup> The women of this space, including future founder of the LHA, Joan Nestle, were disheartened by the silencing and sexism they felt in what was supposedly a "safe space." Instead, they decided to create their own space where they discussed their experiences of lesbianism and "how so much of the past culture [ of lesbianism] was seen through only patriarchal eyes."<sup>20</sup> With these concerns at the forefront, these women formed LHA with the understanding that if lesbians didn't take agency to document their own history, it would continue to remain misrepresented or completely missing from the archive.

From its conception in 1974, LHA, as a grassroots organization has been and continues to be governed by a transparent and radical set of community principles and values. Written by founder Joan Nestle, "Notes on Radical Archiving from a Lesbian Feminist Perspective" outlines the radical principles that stand at the center of LHA, emphasizing values such as autonomy, accessibility, inherent politicalness, and

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<sup>19</sup> "Our Herstory," Lesbian Herstory Archives, September 6, 2023, <https://lesbianherstoryarchives.org/about/a-brief-history/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

community.<sup>21</sup> Beyond emphasizing the radical archival school of thought from which LHA emerges, Nestle also makes a deliberate choice to make clear her distaste for the elitism present in institutional archives. She writes: “The archives should be staffed by Lesbians so the collection will always have a living cultural context. Archival skills shall be taught, one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking elitism of traditional archives.”<sup>22</sup> For Nestle, her vision of LHA includes an organic sharing of skills and practices, in turn, disposing of the traditional role of the archivist. Through her rejection of the role of the archivist, Nestle establishes herself in direct opposition of the traditional archivist framework, and instead, closely aligns herself and LHA with radical archival practices.

Within the context of radical archiving and beyond solely resting on a radical set of principles, the LHA demonstrates a commitment to community-based archiving when considering the physical means of housing this archive. LHA is and has always been housed in a private residence owned solely by the archive. When the archive opened in 1974, the space it occupied was in Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel’s apartment on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. For the first 15 years, this space was home for the archival collections, but also for volunteers, visitors, and community members, engaging in both formal LHA meetings and casual hang-outs. Nestle’s cozy West Side apartment was central to bringing LHA’s radical principles into practice. Her choice, to place the archive in her home, rather than receive support from an institution was deliberate.

Nestle believed:

The archives should be housed within the community, not on an academic campus that is by definition closed to many women. The archives should share the political and cultural world of its people and not be located in an isolated building that continues to exist while the community dies. If necessary the archives will go underground with its people to be cherished in hidden places until the community is safe.<sup>23</sup>

Nestle was aware of the ways in which the LHA would not exist in alignment with her vision for the archive if it was housed within or receiving support from an institution, especially an institution that does not support the rights of women, let alone lesbians

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<sup>21</sup> Nestle, Joan , “Notes on Radical Archiving from a Lesbian Feminist Perspective,” *Gay Insurgent* 4/5 Spring 1979, 11. 4.

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

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

and women of color. Thus, she made the choice to sacrifice the increase in funding that would come with partnering with an institution and prepare the archive for times of trouble in order to stay aligned with LHA's identity as a community archive. Today, the archive remains aligned with these principles, still existing in a privately owned building and operating on an open call system. Though, it has since outgrown Nestle's apartment and moved into a brownstone home in Park Slope Brooklyn. Looking closely at LHA illustrates us to ways in which since its beginning, the archive has remained true to its identity as a radical.

### **A Case Study: Queer Newark Oral History Project**

Not every archive is allotted the space and resources to exist and flourish entirely independent from institutional support. While LHA was able to rely solely on volunteer power and owned the building in which the archive was housed, this is not the reality for many, if not most, community-based archive projects. An analysis of Queer Newark Oral History Project (QNOH) reveals the complexities that come with establishing and maintaining community-based archival projects, simultaneously asking us to consider if there is a middle ground when it comes to community-based archival work that extracts resources from the institution while also staying true to the values that stand at the center of community-based archival work.

The Queer Newark Oral History Project (QNOHP) was started in the summer of 2011 by activist and writer Darnell Moore with the goal of "developing an initiative to collect and preserve the history of LGBTQ and gender non-conforming communities in Newark."<sup>24</sup> QNOHP was started in collaboration with Beryl Satter and Christina Strasburger, professors at Rutgers University-Newark, placing the archive in collaboration with an institution from its beginning. QNOHP identifies itself as "a community-based and community-directed initiative supported by Rutgers University-Newark."<sup>25</sup> Through their use of language, despite receiving institutional support, QNOHP recognizes the importance of community-based archiving practices by placing Rutgers as the support and making clear the initiative is still

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<sup>24</sup> "Queer Newark," Queer Newark - Oral History Project, 2023, <https://queer.newark.rutgers.edu/about>.

<sup>25</sup> "Queer Newark," Queer Newark - Oral History Project, 2023, <https://queer.newark.rutgers.edu/>.

“community-directed” and “community based.”<sup>26</sup> With this mission statement, the archive is asking us to consider the ways in which institutional support and community-based archival practices can coexist.

Looking closely at QNOHP sheds light on the complexities that arise when considering the concrete steps required to establish a community archive. There is a reason most archives are, in some way or another, housed within institutions. Historical and academic institutions hold power, whether that be monetary resources or the social power of legitimacy. Additionally, it is important to consider the specific needs of the QNOHP. In contrast to LHA’s identity as an “open call” archive that accepted any sort material, QNOHP works specifically with the archival methodology of oral history, which comes with its own set of complications and challenges:

Challenges run the gamut from the technological (the mechanics of preserving digital material), to the legal (how to protect the rights of interviewees while allowing the greatest possible access to their words and insights), from the fiscal (what browser service hosts the material, who pays for transcriptions and the proper “tagging” of interviews so that they become searchable), to the bureaucratic (how to tap university resources without becoming entangled in unwieldy university processes such as the dreaded “IRB” [institutional review board], which has the power to crush oral history research by treating narrators as “human research subjects”)<sup>27 28</sup>

As it becomes apparent, participating in oral history work takes resources made readily available to academic institutions, but not made available to community members trying to engage in community archiving. With this understanding, QNOHP couldn’t exist in the way it does without its partnership with Rutgers University, a well resourced large research institution.

## **A Case Study: Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre Community Archive**

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Moore, Darnell L., Beryl Satter, Timothy Stewart-Winter, and Whitney Strub. “A Community’s Response to the Problem of Invisibility: The Queer Newark Oral History Project.” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (2014): 5. <https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.1.2.0001>.

<sup>28</sup> I find it important to note that, in some ways, Moorem Satter, Stewart-Winter and Strub’s article was a catalyst for this paper. If I had not read it in Dr. Myrl Beam’s course “ Queer and Trans Oral Histories” I don’t think I would have been exposed to community-based archiving let alone pursued it as a topic for my American Studies capstone paper.

As I previously asserted, a tension exists between those housing the archive and what the archive seeks to document. Traditional academic institutions are often the one housing the histories of Indigenous communities, yet, they would not exist if it weren't for the continuous structures of settler-colonialism. There exists a blatant contradiction between archiving Indigenous existence in the very institutions that, not only are founded upon the genocide of Indigenous people, but systemically reinforce colonial ideology. Traditional archives continuously silence and misrepresent the voices of Indigenous communities and have even "actively taken Indigenous culture and heritage away from communities and made it inaccessible to those who the records are about."<sup>29</sup> This process of silencing and co-opting Indigenous culture and heritage in the form of archives continually reinforces colonial harm within the institution. This section of my paper looks at the alternative to housing Indigenous existence within institutions resting on principles of sustained coloniality, exploring community-based archival practices in the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre community archive.

Located in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada, the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (SRSC) community archive is a collaboration between Algoma University and the Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association. Similarly to Queer Newark Oral History Project, SRSC asks us to consider what the relationship between an institution and a community-based archive looks like. This aspect of the archive is made even more complex when you consider Algoma University's specific positionality. Algoma University opened in one of the former buildings of the Shingwauk Residential School as part of the Canadian governments 1960s and 1970s decision to begin closing Residential Schools.<sup>30</sup> Situated in the very space years of ongoing trauma and violence against Indigenous communities, Algoma has a specific responsibility. "Algoma is called upon to do better, respect the heritage of the land upon which it sits, and reflect on what it means to inhabit a space directly connected to the intergenerational trauma of Residential Schools."<sup>31</sup> The SRSC therefore serves as both a space for Algoma to

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<sup>29</sup> McCracken, Krista, Skylee-Storm Hogan. "Residential School Community Archives: Spaces of Trauma and Community Healing." *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, Vol. 3 No. 2 (2021): Radical Empathy in Archival Practice: 11. <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.115>

<sup>30</sup> McCracken, Krista, Skylee-Storm Hogan. "Residential School Community Archives: Spaces of Trauma and Community Healing." 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

interrogate its positionality as an institution and for the community members spearheading the initiative to engage in a reclamation of their history as situated on the land.

Beyond being a space for the reclamation of Indigenous existence, SRSC simultaneously exists as a space for practices of collective grief as it leads to collective healing. The structuring of community-based archiving and emphasis of community-led leadership within community archival spaces, lends itself well to processes of community grief and healing. Within the rigidity of institutional archives, there isn't the same potential for such spaces. As an example of community-based archiving, community members and Survivors of Residential Schooling<sup>32</sup>, involved in the decision making for SRSC, have complete agency over what the archive works towards. For example, each year, SRSC hosts a reunion in which they create a designated space for Survivors to view the archival materials held by the collection.<sup>33</sup> In viewing these archival images, SRSC is allowing Survivors space to reflect upon the trauma present in these photos and the experiences they hold. SRSC additionally encourages Survivors to engage with a process of naming these photographs as a means of community healing. These photos give space for Survivors to recognize the trauma of the past collectively and as connected to a physical object.

By asking Survivors and their families to describe Residential School photographs and provide information about the individuals pictured, the SRSC is creating space for community authority and allowing the Indigenous communities impacted by Residential School to shape the stories told by archival images.<sup>34</sup> As is evident, this sort of work is deeply emotional and personal, bringing up generational trauma as connected to the very land this archive is housed upon. Yet, it is also a necessary step in reconciling with the past. SRSC, as a case study and demonstration of community-based archiving, reveals the ways in which archival materials can be used to move forward processes of collective grief and healing.

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<sup>32</sup> McCracken, Krista, Skylee-Storm Hogan. "Residential School Community Archives: Spaces of Trauma and Community Healing." 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have implemented both a critique of traditional archival frameworks and investigated community-based archiving as a means to explore radical archival thought. I have constructed a critique of traditional archival understandings based upon a disillusionment to power within the field, that draws upon Foucault's concept of social power. Through my use of specific archives as case studies I have illustrated what community archiving looks like in practice and how radical archiving, as a framework, provides the necessary tools.

While this paper rests upon a critique of traditional archival thought, I am not aligned with a belief that critiques archives all together. In fact, this paper seeks to do the opposite, instead utilizing a critique of traditional archives to shed light on the *importance* of archives all together. As this paper has demonstrated, archives themselves are powerful tools in the production and preservation of public history and collective memory. Understanding the social and historical significance of archives can be used as a case for recognizing why the field itself needs to be reimagined. As stated multiple times throughout this paper, I see a radical archival framework in community-based spaces to be central to where this generative and immensely important work is being done.



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