
More than Acid-Free Folders: Extending the Concept of Preservation to Include the Stewardship of Unexplored Histories

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ABSTRACT

Recognized among the American Library Association's "Core Values of Librarianship" (2004), *Preservation* is traditionally used to describe the passive protection of cultural property to ensure that it survives in its original form for as long as possible. A renewed professional imperative to position information centers as locations for social justice work has also turned our attention to the need to preserve materials that support a diverse and pluralistic society. Social justice work underscores the evidential value of materials in our care, as collections are accessed for the purposes of furthering court cases, reparative justice, and redress, and also the importance of building reflexive collections that better represent the diversity of contemporary society. This paper revisits our understanding of preservation and addresses the importance of actively preserving cultural property as part of social justice work. Through a short discussion about the recovery of LGBTQ+ histories, information professionals are pushed to reconsider our concept of preservation as something more than placing records into acid-free folders or migrating data to stave off obsolescence, but as a duty to steward unexplored histories.

"Today we find ourselves awakening further to the need for preserving and improving on the historical record of individuals and cultures that have been either consciously or unconsciously underserved in the archives."

—Mary Caldera and Kathryn Neal (2014, p. ix)

INTRODUCTION

In 2004 the American Library Association (ALA) Council affirmed *Preservation* as a Core Value, stating that the "preservation of information re-

sources is central to libraries and librarianship” (n.p.). While recognized as a Core Value of librarianship, preservation is a discipline most often associated with the work of archivists, who are responsible for ensuring the reliability and authenticity of records with enduring value. Collections managers, museum workers, and other heritage professionals also preserve cultural property to ensure that it survives in its original form for as long as possible. This work can involve the removal of materials from hostile environments, the provision of preventative care, and the maintenance of adequate environmental controls for the safe storage of materials. With the notable exception of rare-book librarians, preservation has not been considered a core duty of librarians nor is it a central part of college or graduate-level library education. Although the management of information and collection development are central to library work, few job descriptions include any direct mention of preservation, conservation, or protection of materials, but instead focus on the provision of information contained within these materials, regardless of format (Cloonan, 2007). Yet, as more research and leisure collections move online, librarians have had to take a particular interest in the preservation of digital materials and been required to ask difficult questions about the sustainability of digital platforms, long-term access to these materials, and curation of them throughout time and space. Digital technologies also make it more feasible to build collections from materials that would have once remained separated by domain specializations: convergence has highlighted the relationships among archival records, museum and art objects, and library materials in ways not previously feasible. As a result, some professional domains have collapsed, confirming the need to centralize preservation as a core duty for all information professionals.

A renewed professional imperative to position information centers as central locations for social justice work has also turned our attention to the need to preserve materials that support a diverse and pluralistic society. For archivists, social justice work underscores the evidential value of records in our care, as collections are accessed for the purposes of furthering court cases, reparative justice, and redress, and also the importance of building reflexive collections that better represent the diversity of contemporary society. The 2011–2015 ALA strategic plan, which includes diversity as a key action area for the library profession, also includes the preservation of cultural heritage as a strategy to equip librarians to successfully advocate for their continued role in helping citizens to fully participate in democratic societies (ALA, 2010). It is within this imperative to support social justice work that I want to push information professionals to reconsider our concept of *preservation* as something more than placing records into acid-free folders or migrating data to stave off obsolescence, but as a duty to steward unexplored histories. The term *unexplored histories* is used by Rabia Gibbs (2012, p. 196) to describe the histories and knowledges

of groups that have remained underrepresented in the archives, such as those of ethno-racial, religious, and spiritual communities. In this paper I will revisit our understanding of preservation, explore the importance of preserving unexplored histories through a short discussion of LGBTQ+ histories, and offer some guidance on how librarians and other information professionals can steward the preservation of unexplored histories as part of their work.

UNEXPLORED LGBTQ+ HISTORIES

The Stonewall riots are widely considered to be the watershed moment for gay liberation activism, leading to the development of a modern gay rights movement in the United States. In the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, police entered the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village, and announced that they were "taking the place" (Baumsum, 2015, p. 137). Police raids of gay bars were common throughout this period and often resulted in physical and sexual assaults of both men and women found on the premises. According to historian Martin Duberman (1993), the raid on the Stonewall Inn did not go as planned, and as a result, police soon found themselves barricaded inside the bar for protection as angry patrons and bystanders erupted into spontaneous and violent demonstrations of resistance that would last for more than two days. As knowledge of the uprising spread across the country, the rioting at the Stonewall became a call to arms for gay liberation activists. Steven Kates and Russell Belk (2001, p. 395) write that "the aggressiveness and openness that characterize contemporary gay rights activism in North America are generally seen as deriving their initial impetus, anger, and energy from this event." President Barack Obama even made reference to the riots in his 2013 inaugural address as a gesture to the human rights struggles still unfolding for the country's LGBTQ+ citizens (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2013).

Elizabeth Armstrong and Suzanna Crage (2006) note that the Stonewall riots have played a significant role in the development of a collective memory for the LGBTQ+ community—significant because the event was both "commemorable and had the mnemonic capacity to create a commemorative vehicle" (p. 724); that is, the riots resonated both inside and outside of New York City because protesters were the first to publicly declare that they were the first to resist police harassment. Peaceful protests that followed took on symbolic value for gay liberation and were easily replicated in other communities. But as Armstrong and Crage highlight, the Stonewall riots were not the first documented case of queer resistance to police brutality and systemic homophobia, but rather the first to be institutionalized by the emerging gay liberation movement. Not only this, but the mythologizing of the riots by the predominantly white gay liberation movement has often erased the participation of trans* and racialized

people. As Armstrong and Crage point out, the riots were sparked by Sylvia Rivera, a Boricua trans* woman, who threw a bottle at police officers. The following year, Rivera and Marsha Johnson, a Black trans* woman, organized the first Christopher Street Liberation Day March in New York City, beginning the tradition of annual Pride marches that would follow and eventually develop into annual parades and festivals. Today, Stonewall riots are commemorated every year at Pride parades and festivals that occur around the world. New York City Pride regularly attracts over a million people, who take part in rallies, social events, and a large parade that involves over fifty-five floats and 325 unique marching contingents (NYC Pride, 2015).

In their 2010 documentary *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton's Cafeteria*, Victor Silverman and Susan Stryker challenge the singular narrative of the Stonewall riots by situating it as but one uprising in a series of incidents involving disenfranchised homosexuals, drag queens, and gender nonconformists. In May 1959, for example, police entered Cooper's Donuts in Los Angeles and arbitrarily arrested several homosexual patrons. When one of the men objected, the crowd emptied out of the establishment and some threw coffee and donuts at the officers, inciting a riot that would close down the street for the rest of the day. In 1965 more than 150 people dressed in nonconformist clothing turned up at Philadelphia's Dewey's Diner to protest the establishment's denial of service to young African American gay teenagers (Stein, 2004). A year later, a riot at San Francisco's Compton's Cafeteria also pitted trans* people and other sexual renegades against police. Although triggered by acts of violence—patrons threw hot coffee at arresting officers and smashed windows—the organized protests that followed over the next two days led to the establishment of a system of support services for the city's queer and trans* communities.

The evidence of pre-Stonewall LGBTQ+ histories is nevertheless scant and has been preserved mainly through the efforts of activist community archivists. The excavation of pre-Stonewall histories has at times also been serendipitous, and much of this work challenges our understanding of gay history. It is only by chance that Stryker stumbled upon a reference to the riot at Compton's Cafeteria through the course of conducting her own research in the archives at the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society (Silverman & Stryker, 2010). Historian Marc Stein (2004) reported a similar serendipitous experience when he began interviewing participants for his book *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–1972*. After a handful of men and women made passing reference to a sit-in by “gender nonconformists” at a local diner, Stein decided to explore the history further. He combed through older periodicals and gay newspapers in the archives and discovered that an incident between three teenagers and staff members at Dewey's Diner had occurred on the evening of April 25, 1965. Police were called to the scene, as well as Clark Polak, who was then

head of a local homophile organization. The teenagers and Polak were arrested, which led to an organized picket outside the diner and a second sit-in the following week. What the stories of Cooper's Donuts, Compton's Cafeteria, and Dewey's Diner tell us is that resistance to police harassment and social injustices began long before the uprising at the Stonewall Inn, and that these incidents almost always included the most marginalized members of queer communities. This suggests that the history of gay rights is not only more nuanced and richer than the singular narrative of the Stonewall Riots but that the rights and privileges that gay Americans now experience has been hard-earned by those that continue to be marginalized by liberal society—gender nonconformists, street-involved youth, and working-class and racialized queer people. Unexplored LGBTQ+ history is therefore essential to both acknowledging the persistent marginalization that occurs in the modern gay rights movement and in building coalitions between and among LGBTQ+ folk from a variety of ethno-cultural backgrounds. As information professionals, we can embed social justice within our core values by extending the definition of preservation to include a duty to steward these kinds of unexplored or marginalized histories, and to support those who are already undertaking this work.

REVISITING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PRESERVATION

The term *preservation* is traditionally used to describe the passive protection of materials by minimizing any loss of information through chemical or physical deterioration (Cloonan, 2007; Millar, 2010; Murtagh, 2006). Before the mid-twentieth century, preservation was understood simply as the noninvasive task of keeping from harm, injury, decay, or destruction (Conway, 2000). In law the term continues to be understood as the obligation to protect records and other materials potentially relevant to litigation or subject to discovery or to protect them from spoliation (Pearce-Moses, 2005). As Michèle Cloonan (2007) explains, recent archival scholarship has broadened the concept of preservation to include active interventions to prolong the life of materials, including conservation tasks such as the chemical treatment of paper and repair of bookbindings. She also distinguishes between object-oriented preservation—concerned with the protection of single artifacts—and collections-oriented preservation, which is a more holistic approach concerned with maintaining relationships between and among aggregates of artifacts. Margaret Hedstrom (1997) has encouraged us to consider preservation as a continuing process and not a single intervention or act to extend the life of records, both analog and digital. Laura Millar (2010) includes the management of intellectual and custodial rights, the development of preservation policies, periodic inspections, and access restrictions under the umbrella of preservation. Thus preservation is described as the “total sum of processes and tasks performed in order to protect records and archives against damage or

deterioration . . . to ensure they are protected from harm” (p. 74). Her description of preservation encapsulates the increasing attention that information professionals must pay to preservation, particularly in the wake of rapidly changing digital technologies, and suggests an opening for further extending our concept of preservation to include active interventions in the record-keeping process.

According to Paul Conway (2000), librarians, archivists, conservators, and scientists have developed a disciplined approach to preservation over the past century, resulting in a common set of practices to ensure the physical and intellectual integrity of records. Practitioners, he argues, must now accelerate their learning curve to develop practices that ensure the safeguarding of materials both created by and mediated through digital technologies. For years, Conway explains, the “sheer act of pulling a collection of manuscripts from a barn, a basement, or a parking garage and placing it intact in a dry building with locks on the door fulfilled the fundamental preservation mandate of the institution” (p. 27). Digital technologies, however, are fragile and require considerably more sophisticated management to ensure that the records housed within these systems are accessible and reliable. Conway encourages information professionals to become leaders in developing definitions and standards for digital preservation, which includes a directive to work more closely with records-creators to exercise some control in choosing technologies and developing practices that extend the life expectancy of digital materials, and to ensure the integrity of these materials over time.

Although Conway is clear that the social value of preservation in the digital world is driven by academic and scholarly service and less so by the need to develop historical consciousness or collective identity, his work provides several avenues for considering how information professionals should engage with their research communities to develop shared and executable goals for the preservation of digital materials. This collaborative approach requires that practitioners work in a participatory manner to gauge research priorities and cultural sensitivities around access to information. Notably, Conway identifies partnerships and collaborations across information centers as an appropriate response to the challenge of digital preservation. Libraries and archives, he argues, must address the complexities of preservation by accepting the shared responsibility and financial burden related to the preservation of digital material, even if collections are unique to one particular institution. Below, I will return to this notion of emphasizing the need for a professional commitment to supporting the preservation of collections outside of our custody.

PRESERVATION OF UNEXPLORED HISTORY AS A CORE VALUE

Expanding the definition of preservation to include a duty to steward unexplored history not only underscores the work of information profes-

sionals to ensure access to underrepresented cultural heritage, but it also enlivens the profession and enriches the services we provide. In 2004 the ALA identified *Diversity* as one of its Core Values, followed in 2014 by the establishment of its task force on equity, diversity, and inclusion, which is intended to develop a strategic plan to support its members undertaking social justice work, and to embed this work throughout the Association (ALA, 2015). Library scholarship has acknowledged this turn in professional attention; notably, John Pateman and John Vincent's *Public Libraries and Social Justice* (2010) has aptly encapsulated the work of librarians in the UK to resist market-driven library management, aimed at producing "excellence" in service, and return to socially responsible librarianship that is more engaged with the needs of marginalized members of society. In a subsequent article, Vincent (2012) describes social justice in libraries as an approach that involves

embracing equality and diversity; focusing on a needs-based service and targeting resources towards those who need them most; knowing and understanding the components of the local community; having an active, collaborative role in empathising and working in partnership with the local community; and fully engaging the community, moving as far as possible towards co-production of service provision. (p. 350)

For academic libraries the emergence of a discourse around social justice has maintained a dual imperative to produce a more diverse and inclusive practice by supporting efforts to bring members of underrepresented groups into the profession and to develop services and collections that better serve research into unexplored histories. As Myrna Morales, Em Claire Knowles, and Chris Bourg (2014) write, "Librarianship remains a painfully homogenous profession" (p. 439). A more racially and ethnically diverse workforce, they argue, creates a richer professional environment with a greater capacity to serve local and global communities. The underlying principle is that libraries will best serve increasingly diverse communities if they are staffed by a diverse workforce that can build collections reflecting this diversity.¹

Archival scholarship has experienced a similar research front, broadening a dialogue on social justice and its relationship to the archives. In his 1970 address to members of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), radical historian Howard Zinn declared 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" (1977, pp. 20–21). Archival collections, he added, are "biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure" (p. 20). In association with F. Gerald Ham's (1975) blistering critique of his profession's impassive approach to diversity efforts, Zinn's address was a seismic event, triggering a veritable tsunami of work to address diversity concerns within the archival profession. Randall Jimerson

(2009), who revisits Zinn's speech more than thirty years later, laments the persistence of archival bias and calls on archivists to confront their own complicity in the privileging of certain voices over others, whether intentional or not. He encourages archivists to not only recognize their own agency as information professionals but also to use this power to consider the sociopolitical and economic contexts of the materials in their care. Mary Caldera and Kathryn Neal (2014) go a step further and urge archivists to expand the dialogue on diversity and inclusion in archives to incorporate the difficult work of recruiting and retaining women and racial and ethnic minorities in the archival profession, developing strategies to document the underdocumented, and revising archival methodologies to acknowledge and resist practices that assume neutrality and objectivity. If, as Elisabeth Kaplan (2000) has argued, "we are what we collect," then archives must be proactive in developing strategic actions that make space for underrepresented groups in archival work, and as a corollary to develop collaborative approaches to preserving unexplored history.

STEWARDSHIP NOT REPRESENTATION

At first glance any proposal to extend the concept of preservation to include the stewardship of unexplored history harkens back to the outdated understanding of preservation as simply any effort made to keep materials from harm. As I have discovered in the course of my own research on lesbian and gay community archives, some of the materials in these collections were in fact pulled out of garbage bins or liberated from estate sales. My home institution, the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), was founded in 1973 because of a real or perceived failure on the part of mainstream archives to collect materials that adequately or accurately document the experiences of lesbian and gay Canadians (Barriault, 2010). Most public archives, for example, are not in the habit of collecting ephemera such as pin buttons, matchbook covers, or bar coasters, which are often the only remaining evidence of early queer and trans* cultures. Community archivists, on the other hand, often take in collections of ephemera and other nontraditional records precisely because they understand the long-term informational and evidential value of these materials, even if information professionals do not. Lesbian and gay archives have also resisted systemic discrimination against sexual and gender minorities by initiating efforts to rescue important documentation from homophobic heirs or other family members who either did not see the value in preserving materials that once belonged to their queer or trans* loved ones or remained fearful that disclosure of certain records would produce unwanted shame or invite violence. For more than forty years, the CLGA has preserved unexplored history by removing it from harm and placing it in a relatively safe space.

Information professionals can certainly improve the diversity of their

collections by simply taking in more kinds of records from a plurality of records creators. Only a few blocks from the CLGA's main offices, the University of Toronto supports a system of forty-four libraries, archives, and special collections, offering more than 12 million print volumes in more than 340 languages (University of Toronto Libraries, 2015). Sociocultural and ethnic special collections such as the Canada Hong Kong Library and the Petro Jacyk Central and Eastern European Resource Centre ensure that researchers have access to materials that support increasingly more interdisciplinary study in the humanities and social sciences. The number of sociocultural and ethnic collections across all North American universities have undoubtedly increased over the past few decades, their population driven up by a growth in area-specific disciplines (for example, women's, African American, and labor studies). Some of these collections have been built up through donations from community members or by individual faculty, while others have come under the custody of a university system through acquisitions of small, community-based collections. The Canadian Women's Movement Archives (CWMA), for example, existed as an independent collecting body from 1977 to 1992, when its collections were wholly assumed by the University of Ottawa (Loyer, 2006). The CWMA is now one of the largest collections of material related to feminist activism and the women's movement in the country—a significant draw for researchers who want to pursue study in this area. Institutional archivists have also started to think about participatory approaches to appraising and describing collections, so that the knowledge and sensibilities of the records creators are preserved within the intellectual structure of these collections (Shilton & Srinivasan, 2007).

Creating the kind of space for social justice work that librarians and archivists hope to achieve is nevertheless much more complicated than simply broadening the collecting scope to integrate as much material as possible from previously underrepresented groups. As cultural theorist Roderick Ferguson (2012) explains, absorbing minority archives into the university creates a representational politic that might prove its progressive credentials, but this integration does not challenge any real power structures within the institution. In other words, just because a university preserves unexplored history does not mean that it is ready to acknowledge or confront any of the structural inequalities that exist in order to create the conditions in which that history remains unexplored to begin with. Preservation of unexplored history cannot take place if systems of power are also preserved.

The duty to steward unexplored history is therefore much more than a return to the simple task of ensuring that records are kept from harm; stewardship does not in fact necessarily mean pulling records out of the barn, but rather working with the community to ensure that the barn is

a safe place for these materials. It may also mean offering professional expertise and institutional resources to a community when the barn is not a safe place, even if there are no expectations that the records should come under institutional custody. As a Core Value *and* a core duty for information professionals, this extended concept of Preservation as a *duty to steward* requires deeper thinking about the power relationships that exist among and between underrepresented or underserved groups and the librarians and archivists who serve them. That is, information professionals must begin to think more critically about how to work with communities to ensure that documentary evidence is preserved, and to think less about how to add it to their collections. There must also be some recognition that community archivists and librarians are under considerable pressure to hand over their collections to satisfy an institutional mandate to build more representative collections, and many will resist this practice of “swallowing up.”² The duty to steward must therefore include a commitment to develop a sympathetic understanding of the reasons why particular record creators remain autonomous, and a respect for this political principle even if their records remain in peril. Keeping records from harm may in fact mean keeping them out of the hands of those never meant to explore them. This contradictory aspect of stewardship will take some adjustment for those practitioners unwilling to challenge the assumption that “all information wants to be free.” It does not; some history is unexplored because its creators want it to remain that way. Information professions must also respect this condition of preservation.

CONCLUSION

Although Compton’s Cafeteria riot, Dewey’s Diner sit-in, and other pre-Stonewall uprisings took place before the advent of digital technologies, the ways in which we approach the preservation of these stories and other multiperspectival LGBTQ+ histories can be improved by the kind of collaborative and participatory approaches that digital preservation requires. Knowledge of this unexplored history is not only essential for understanding how the Stonewall riots have been used to further the particular goals of the gay liberation and later gay rights movements. It could also help contemporary LGBTQ+ activists to build coalitions across communities that integrate issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender expression to confront complicated systems of power. We might look more closely, for example, at the history of racial integration in Chicago’s South Side and discover that spaces like the Cabin Inn and Club DeLisa once presented jazz bands and drag shows that attracted both white and African American homosexuals as early as the 1930s (Cabello, 2008). This knowledge challenges any assumption that queer cultures are historically white. As a corollary, accessing unexplored LGBTQ+ histories can also reveal patterns of

racial segregation that contextualize present-day tensions between white gay men and African American communities. As Tristan Cabello (2008) points out, increasing racial segregation led many white homosexuals to North Chicago after World War II, where bars often excluded African American patrons. A richer understanding of this history can provide insight into why, for example, African American activists have reason to distrust the support of white men, especially those that promote a national narrative of queerness that does not always include racialized, differently abled, working-class, or trans* experiences. This knowledge should also be a catalyst to information professionals, who can begin to think about how to incorporate the preservation of these unexplored histories into our Core Values as an important aspect of preserving cultural heritage for the benefit of a pluralistic and democratic society.

Here, I want to return to the work that Conway (2000) has done on digital preservation. As he notes, the proliferation of digital technologies has changed the nature of record keeping and motivated archivists to develop a more interventionist approach to supporting the preservation of digital material. The complexity of digital technologies has also underscored the need for practitioners to share responsibilities for developing and implementing preservation definitions and standards. No single institution can rely upon homegrown solutions for the challenge of digital preservation. Conway anticipated open-source preservation platforms, such as Islandora and Archivematica, which have been developed in the spirit of extra-institutional commitment to developing solutions to profession-wide problems. The technologies are developed in such a manner that practitioners must work together and across institutions to maintain and improve on the technologies necessary to preserve digital material. By extending the ALA's Core Value of Preservation to include a duty to steward unexplored history, information professionals can leverage the collaborative *zeitgeist* surrounding digital preservation. We can begin to think about how to support other Core Values, including Social Responsibility and Diversity, with our collections and through the stewardship of unexplored history that remains outside of our custody.

NOTES

1. Some professional-development organizations have implemented diversity recruitment initiatives. See, for example, the Mosaic Program (Society of American Archivists, n.d.), a collaborative initiative of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) to provide financial support and paid internships to fifteen master's students in archival science or special collections librarianship. The program is funded by a three-year grant from IMLS (Institute of Museum and Library Services) and accepted its first cohort in 2013.
2. The Community Archives UK project, led by Andrew Flinn and Elizabeth Shepherd, found that community-based archives overwhelmingly felt the pressure to hand over their collections. Some of these institutions resisted being "swallowed up" by a mainstream information center as a political principle (Stevens, Flinn, & Shepherd, 2010). Shaunna Moore and Susan Pell (2010) have also discussed the importance of "autonomous archives" as places

where underrepresented populations can exert some agency over their own identities and histories.

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