

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Archival Activism: Independent and Community-led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9pt2490x>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 7(2)

ISSN

1548-3320

Author

Flinn, Andrew

Publication Date

2011-05-31

DOI

10.5070/D472000699

Peer reviewed

So, I realized that actually to decide to gather information, organize information, and preserve information to disseminate it was a political act. (interview with Alda Terracciano, 2009)

Introduction¹

In recent years those working with archives have become used to thinking about archival practice as political, loaded with meaning, pressures, and consequences (Schwartz & Cook, 2002). This understanding is as true for independent and community-led archival endeavors as it is for more formal and established archives. In fact, in these cases such activity is often explicitly identified with a political agenda and purpose. In recognition of this, the theme of this article is archival activism, which will be explored from the perspectives of both those working in independent and community-led archives and those operating in more formal, often publicly funded institutions. Specifically, the article will examine first the approach to archiving and history-making which is an activist practice, frequently associated with a political agenda aiming at social transformation and challenging discrimination, and then second, an active and activist approach to the archival mission which encourages professional archivists and other heritage workers to engage more fully with a range of external activities and all sections of society whilst seeking better to reflect diversity in the archive.

My research has thus far been focused on the UK, and this will be where the majority of my examples will be drawn, but where possible, this article will also make reference to instances from the United States and elsewhere. It is always important to take into account the context in which these activities take place because, like all cultural and heritage institutions, independent and community-led archives are strongly influenced in the form they take and their outlook by a complex range of local and national factors. However, having noted the importance of context and the specific, there are some points that this article will make which will offer some tentative generalizations and more widely applicable findings: first, in linking this type of active engagement in the production of history to political campaigns and agendas (frequently but not necessarily) progressive in nature; and second, in terms of the implications of these activities for archive and heritage bodies.

Much of this article will refer to research carried out at the University College London (UCL) by myself and others (notably Drs. Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Shepherd) in partnership with a number of independent archives in London and sponsored by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). Although the first stage was completed in 2010 as an area of concentration, the research is ongoing. This two-year research project was titled “Community Archives and Identities: Documenting and Sustaining Community

Heritage” and it sought to examine the motivation, form, challenges, and impacts of independent community-led archive activity in the UK, largely, but not exclusively, by groups studying aspects of African, Asian, and other minority heritages within Britain. To investigate these questions we adopted an ethnographic participatory observation approach, working with and closely observing four different organizations over several months. We further supplemented these studies with interviews with another 30 individuals working in or with other independent archives.²

It is absolutely the case that we would not have been able to do the research without the support, sacrifice, and access provided by our partners in this work and their support must always be acknowledged and recognized. Opening yourself up as organizations and individuals to observation and accommodating the research represents a significant burden on the part of organizations that are often already stretched in terms of resources. The independent archives which were partners in the research were:

Future Histories is a well-established archive of African, Asian, and Caribbean performing arts in the UK committed to “promoting the inclusion of African and Asian British history and culture” in mainstream institutions. It seeks to utilize and disseminate the collections it manages in a range of public programming events and exhibitions, including their most recent joint venture, the *Trading Faces: Recollecting Slavery* online exhibition and resource. As an organization, Future Histories is not just involved in preserving and promoting the history of African, Asian, and Caribbean performing arts in the UK; they also make their skills and expertise in independent archival work available to other, newer, and similar independent archival projects.³

rukus! the Black LGBT Archive project, established in 2005, is an artistically informed endeavor which seeks to document and ensure greater visibility for the Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender experience in the UK. rukus! seeks to collect and preserve materials and then use them in a series of public events and interventions at which these histories are made more visible.⁴

Moroccan Memories began as a UK Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) funded project to collect oral histories and other materials of people of Moroccan heritage in the UK, a community with very little visibility in mainstream British culture. With the ending of public funding, the project transformed itself into a foundation in order to continue this work. Those involved in Moroccan Memories seek at all times to ensure active interaction with the materials collected through public programming and aim to make sure that these resources are deposited in various locations around the country to ensure a place for UK-based Moroccans in local and national narratives.⁵

And finally, **Eastside Community Heritage** is a longstanding community heritage initiative which incorporates notions of locality, class, as well as culturally diverse populations into its ambitions to document the cultures and hidden histories of East London's diverse working-class communities, notably by the collection of digital oral histories and photographs. Over the years, Eastside has consistently built public engagement with its collections into its work, seeing these activities as equally important as the collection of the archival materials. Eastside has had varying fortunes in terms of the availability of financial and physical resources, but in recent years, notably with the Working Lives project—which examines the occupations of those living and working in the Thames Gateway area of East London—the organization has become a significant heritage body in East London, delivering major community heritage and public history projects.⁶

Radical History-Making & Challenging Heritage

First it might be helpful to place this research, and indeed this author's interest, in radical, progressive history-making generally within a broad intellectual framework. The emergence in the post-Second World War era of a historical practice linked to “a politics of large scale social and cultural change” (Eley, 2005) is one of the defining historiographical trends of the period encompassing both scholarly practice in the universities and (often no less scholarly) history work outside the academy in myriad locations. A focus, for instance, on stories of those traditionally ignored or cast to the periphery of most mainstream histories rather than grander, larger narratives necessitated reflection on how such “new” histories were to be written, of the sources for such histories and where those sources might be located, and the potential power of such stories in terms of a radically transformed public history. Such concerns were embedded in the emergence of new social histories, identity histories, and oral history as disciplines in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. In the emergent and recovery stages of these “hidden histories” many historians and archivists were necessarily engaged in identifying the new sources which would make this possible (including both new types of sources [e.g. oral history and autobiography] and archives from “new” or traditionally under-collected sources). For Paul Thompson (1978/2000, pp. 8-9) in the influential *Voice of the Past*, originally published in 1978, the expanded focus and approaches of these new histories offered the possibility of a transformed, democratized history in which the traditional barriers between the “chroniclers and their audiences” might be dissolved.

A key figure in theorizing the significance and contestation of such terrain, in particular with regard to the place of those discriminated against or misrepresented within society and the historical narratives which underpin that

discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, faith, gender, sexual orientation, or class, is Stuart Hall. Over the past 30 years and more, Hall has written extensively on the interplay between the individual, the past and the present, and the impact of the exclusions from and the challenges to those dominant narratives of national heritage (2000, 2005). In supporting this radical questioning of the foundational assumptions of British heritage, Hall has always been a strong advocate of going beyond “mere recovery,” viewing the archive and heritage as always contested, critical territories which have a significant role to play in contributing to transformed histories for multi-ethnic and multi-cultured societies like the UK. A key text in this regard is an influential lecture Hall gave in 1999 (and reprinted in several places, Hall, 2005) titled “Whose Heritage? Un-Settling ‘The Heritage,’ Re-imagining the Post-Nation” in which he outlines the alienating and distancing effect of being told that you do not belong by being excluded from public histories and heritage and the active challenge mounted against the authority of archives and other heritage bodies to tell the stories of those discriminated against and misrepresented. Referencing Fanon and Cabral, Hall (2005) describes this “demand to re-appropriate control over the ‘writing of one’s own story’” as a struggle for cultural liberation and a “decolonization of the mind.”

Along with Paul Gilroy (2004), Hall argues that modern post-national, post-identity societies will be more at ease when they have developed new democratized and inclusive historical narratives which seek to include all rather than exclude or ignore sections of those societies. Following Benedict Anderson’s (1983) description of the imagined community underpinned by myths, foundational narratives, and historical performances, archives and the histories that are made from them play an important role in the forming and supporting of collective memory and community identification. Hall (2000) and others (Flinn, 2008; Gilroy, 2004) look forward to post-identity, post-national societies, stressing notions of identification that are multiple, fluid, and ever-changing (always becoming) in relation to both the past and the present and that leave behind more fixed and reified identity formations. However, there is also a recognition of the requirement to confront the present absences in national histories and the importance of the “imaginative rediscovery” of hidden histories and essentialized identity histories which, while necessarily mythic in the sense of “being,” also have great power as a pragmatic tool for challenging these partial narratives, unifying social groups, and mobilizing social movements to bring about desired political and social transformations.

In the context of the role that history can play in supporting these struggles and movements, the writings of another new left historian, Raphael Samuel, are also very instructive. Samuel (1994, p. 8) sought to promote non-professional, community, and collaborative history-making, making the famous observation that history was a social form of knowledge, the work not of one individual but of

a thousand hands. Following both Hall and Samuel, it seems clear that independent community-led archives may have significant roles to play in the production of these democratized and more inclusive histories. The very existence of these independent archives, operating outside the framework of mainstream, publicly funded, professionally staffed institutions is both a reproach and a challenge to that mainstream. As Hall (2001) wrote when marking the establishment of the African and Asian Visual Artists Archive, that in the context of those archives and histories that have been consistently ignored or underrepresented within mainstream collections then the “activity of ‘archiving’ is thus always a critical one, always a historically located one, always a contestatory one” (p. 92).

Ultimately, in this context, although we are not disinterested in whether such histories might be said to be wholly “accurate” or not, we are really more interested in how such histories are put to use (for good or for ill), what impact they have on those who engage with them, and how they intersect and revise individual and collective community memory. A further final element to this work is that at the same time Hall was giving his 1999 lecture (and noted by him), the makers of public policy had begun to insist on a social and economic role for heritage bodies, and specifically sought to suggest possible positive impacts of independent community-led archive activity in terms of individual identity formation and perhaps even “community cohesion.” In part, the AHRC research sought to examine such claims in the context of the more radical agenda advocated by Hall and others.

Independent Community-Led Archives

Before proceeding further it is important to be reasonably clear about what is meant when the term independent community-led archives is employed. The accuracy or appropriateness of the term “community archives,” the label frequently used in the UK, is disputed. A more detailed exploration of the controversies which surround the application of the term can be found in Flinn and Stevens (2009) and Flinn (2010), but here is a brief outline. First, the term *community* is itself a fluid and ambiguous one, lacking in clear definition and employed in many different contexts. Recent useful discussions of the definitional slipperiness of “community” and its use within a heritage context has been provided by Crooke (2007) and Waterton and Smith (2010). It can be employed to refer to a local neighborhood or it can be used, particularly in government and public policy-speak, as a euphemism for a group considered different (or as “Other”) in terms of their ethnicity, faith, or sexual orientation. The dismissive and reductive aspects of the term can make its use suspect and problematic, particularly when it is employed in official government-speak, although this is

further complicated by the fact that others may use the term strategically in their own discourse (Alleyne, 2002). One way of thinking through the use of the term is the extent to which the designation of “community” is an external one as opposed to something that comes from within, and to what extent membership of the community is conceived of as being fluid, inclusive, and through choice as opposed to something more tightly defined and essentialized. Recognizing these concerns and difficulties, this research recommends the use of independent archives or independent community-led archives as preferred terms; however, it is also true that “community archives” as a term has acquired a great deal of recognition within the UK archival context (for instance in the advocacy work of the Community Archives and Heritage Group [CAHG]).

The archive part of community archives is also a source of some debate. Some more traditional archivists question whether the term *archive* is appropriate to describe personal and community collections. They often characterize such materials (like oral histories) as not properly archival in their creation, ephemeral, and without any lasting value (Maher, 1998), when in fact the rarity of these ephemeral traces of a hidden history may give them a significant emotional resonance and historical value. Certainly most community archives collect traditional archival documents, such as individual and organizational records, but also a wide variety of other things including artifacts, artworks, clothing, oral histories, photographs and film, leaflets, badges, newspapers, books, grey literature—all items which individually, and more importantly when viewed as a collection, are perceived as reflecting significant aspects of the community’s life. Even among archivists generally sympathetic to community archives there is a sense that much professional ambivalence might have been avoided had only another term been chosen. Another view, also questioning the appropriateness of the use of the term *archive*, suggests that the profession’s interest in promoting the usage of this term reflects an attempt to establish a significant stake and responsibility for this area of activity which would not be so clear if known as “community history” or “community heritage.” The absence of the perfect term to encompass all this activity and all these materials should not blind us to the symbolic significance and explicit value judgements being made when such collections are designated (“constituted”) by their custodians as archives (Flinn, 2010; Hall, 2001).

A further problem with the term is that it has not only been employed to define a potentially disparate range of activities going under many different names (community archive, independent archive, autonomous archive, ethnic archive, oral history archive, local history project) as something resembling a coherent community archive movement, this naming has also often been done without recourse to those involved to see if they recognized the term. It is also worth noting that the term itself can have different meanings internationally. For

instance, in Canada and New Zealand, it is generally taken to mean a local archive which may be run by volunteers but may also be considered part of the public archival provision. Elsewhere the usage is closer to the UK approach, encompassing everything from local history archives to archival and history-making activities reflecting a shared identification such as ethnicity or faith.

For the purposes of the work with “community archives” described here, the term is used in ways which are as broad, non-prescriptive, and as inclusive as possible. It is stressed that the definition of the community is one which is based upon self-identification by the participants and that in terms of the motivation behind and ownership of the archival activity, the community should play a significant, even dominant, role. Rather than seeking to define what can and what cannot be properly considered as part of a community archive collection, it is more important to set as a minimum that there must at least be a collection for it to be considered an archive rather than a history project.

These broad and inclusive understandings hopefully provide a framework for general, if not absolute, agreement. For instance, they reflect much of what was mentioned in an early attempt at explaining what a community archive was at a conference held in South Africa in the late 1990s organized by the South Africa Gay and Lesbian Archive. A report of the meeting noted that:

A key premise of community archiving is to give substance to a community’s right to own its own memories...

...a community archive is more overt in its mission to include those fragments and perspectives that ordinarily would not be recognised as valid or worth preserving by a more conventional repository...

Community participation is a core principle of community archives. (Eales, 1998)

In the UK, CAHG (previously the Community Archives Development Group) has offered its own definitions, scope, and vision for community archives⁷ and since 2007 there have been a number of articles in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists* which have begun to explore the history, range, and significance of independent and community-led archives (Flinn, 2007; Gray, 2008; Hopkins, 2008; Slater, 2008). Elsewhere, notably with regard to community museums, Elizabeth Crooke’s (2007) work (particularly in Northern Ireland and South Africa) is another important reference point. All these accounts stress the variety of activity in this field but also emphasize the characteristics of community collecting and ownership, and a shared motivation to preserve and tell their own hidden histories. In the past, concern with archival ownership was frequently related to the physical ownership and custody of historical resources within the “community,” thus enabling the maintenance of control over access to and the exploitation of the archive. While such concerns remain valid for many

independent community archives, for others, particularly with consideration of digital resources and online environments, the focus may not be about the physical custody of the archive so much as retaining the intellectual ownership of the collections while partnering with a formal heritage organization over their physical custody.

However broad-based and flexible these definitions are, the research carried out at UCL differentiated between types of independent community archives, between those which might best be characterized as largely inspired by interest, or leisure, or even antiquarianism, and those which are driven more by a political agenda in which the preservation and use of historical materials might play a role in serving a set of political aims (be they educational, commemorative, empowering, or transformative). As previously discussed, the UCL research largely focused on those projects and endeavors which sought to address questions (wholly or in combination with other identifications) regarding the history of those of African, Asian, and other minority heritage within the UK, and in London in particular. Why was this? Partly because this is a particularly significant and energetic sector of independent archival activity at present, but also because, as outlined earlier, these types of activities were best placed to examine the motivations and desired outcomes of such projects within the context of debates around radical and oppositional history-making and identities, as well as mapping them onto the prevalent public policy agendas of community cohesion and promotion of identity and belonging.

Independent Archives, Community Histories

As previously noted, one of the findings of the UCL research was to stress the importance of distinguishing those more political independent archive and history organizations from other local community history projects, which perhaps did not have the same level of political engagement and motivation. However, this distinction itself needs qualification and refinement. Certainly there are differences between locally focused hidden histories and those endeavors informed by anti-discriminatory, oppositionist perspectives, and it is important not to ignore or dismiss these distinctions. However, reviewing and thinking again about the oral and community history projects of the 1970s and 1980s inevitably re-opens the debates about whether “resurrectionary” amateur community histories were just nostalgic dead-ends (Selbourne, 1980) or whether the act of telling one’s own history as a social and collective process rather than having that history told (or not told) by someone—be it an academic historian or heritage professional—was, as Thompson (2000) and Samuel (1980, 1994) argued, in and of itself potentially empowering and transformative.⁸ Perhaps the potential for empowerment does not apply to all community history and archive projects, just

as it does not apply to all independent politically motivated archives, but the evidence suggests that the best of these, the most thoughtful, the most rigorous and critically reflexive, both local and class-based and those more obviously tied to an agenda of political transformation and anti-discrimination are capable of profoundly influencing and changing the lives of those who are involved with them. In the case of the independent archival act, when informed by a radical public history agenda of not just reclamation and celebration, but also of reflection and explanation, then the community archive can represent not only the establishment of a place where the past is documented and passively collected but, crucially, also a space in which the archive can become a significant tool for discovery, education, and empowerment.

Of course there are local history initiatives that are not really inspired by an overtly articulated political agenda other than an understanding that “every story counts” and that capturing previously untold histories can result in a more popular, democratized local history. However, the real distinction lies not with whether the project is locally focused or otherwise, but whether it is primarily motivated by the desire to celebrate and recover every voice or whether the project, in a critical sense, wishes to go further by exploring areas of difficulty and complexity in the group’s or community’s history, histories that might challenge the community as well as reinforce any preconceptions about identity. Celebratory histories of achievement and recovery are important, even valuable when such stories have been previously ignored or misrepresented, but ultimately they are rather limited, taking independent archives and radical history-making only so far. Those archives and history-making activities which go beyond this and build upon the acts of recovery, offer something more compelling, discursive, and ultimately more impactful, perhaps representing the shift identified by Hall from the expressive relations of representation to more formative and subjective politics of representation (Hall, 2003).

Finding the balance between recovery and celebration in the face of dominant narratives which otherwise ignore and misrepresent on one hand, and an approach which offers a more reflective and complex version of a community’s multi-faceted identities on the other is no easy task and one that can result in tensions within an organization or a variety of approaches at different times and in different contexts. For example, a key activist in the Black Cultural Archives (BCA) in London expressed the hope that the Archive would go beyond what she called “the Guinness Book of Records of Black History, this sort of first and best” approach into something that better reflected the realities and diversities of the black British experience, but she also recognized that this was not a view that was shared by all within the organization (interview, Black Cultural Archives, 2009). In some cases, exclusions and silences may be found not just in mainstream histories but also in community narratives and, in this case, independent archivists

may present an explicit challenge to representations in both mainstream and “community” heritage. Thus for the activists responsible for the Black LGBT archive rukus!, the black gay experience was rarely acknowledged in either the black community’s or the gay community’s public histories and so archiving was “a way of achieving some sort of visibility.” More fundamentally it was also about “throwing down this cultural gauntlet; any cultural history on the black or gay experience in the UK which excludes us is not the full story” (interviews and field notes, rukus!, 2008-2009).

In the case of Eastside Community Heritage, the desire to refute tired clichés of East End life and reflect the full and ever-shifting diversity of working-class communities in the area led them to actively ensure that the archive was capturing the oral histories of all different voices. But at the same time they are also debating whether rather than recording the same stories over again in order to capture those not interviewed before, there might be a way of doing something different, something more critical and reflexive but without compromising their original philosophy (interviews, ECH, 2009). Moroccan Memories is perhaps the endeavor studied here which was most obviously attempting recovery history (aiming to recover and present a hidden history both to their own community and also to broader society), and there were tensions about to what extent the project should challenge some essentialized and celebratory notions of what the Moroccan community was like (particularly around gender and faith). However, any tendencies toward less nuanced approaches were discussed and debated within the team and, as with the emphasis on Jewish culture as part of Moroccan life and experience demonstrates, on occasion the project actively challenged such expectations (interviews and field notes, Moroccan Memories, 2008-2009).

When informed by a clear political agenda and perspective, the capturing of oral histories and community memories can be used to empower the community in challenging the narratives that are falsely representing them and may be used against them. In the case of both the Isle of Dogs Island History Trust in London and the Cardiff Butetown Community History and Arts project, the histories of two threatened and misrepresented dockland communities were captured and utilized by academic activists (or activists with an academic background) steeped in radical politics and history practice as part of an effort to challenge the threats to those communities. In London, Eve Hostettler had been an editor and contributor to the *History Workshop* journal and had been a student of Paul Thompson before she began working on the Isle of Dogs as an oral historian in the early 1980s. In Cardiff, Glenn Jordan, an African American who had been active in radical political and academic movements in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s, gave expression to those influences and understandings in the formation of the Butetown history project. Jordan views the work of the Butetown project as “critically engaging with dominant representations of their area” in

order to deconstruct them and in providing a space in which the otherwise excluded voices of the people of Butetown “can be heard” as “an exercise in *cultural democracy*” (emphasis in original), something Jordan regards as being “absolutely fundamental” (Jordan & Weedon, 1995, p. 138).

Similarly, at Eastside Community History Geoff Bell, a historian of British and Irish labor history, brought a similar set of skills and priorities to recording the stories of East London’s working classes. In all three cases, these endeavors were working with communities threatened by change and dislocation, and all saw their work not just as preserving the memories of communities that were being broken up by redevelopment but also as part of collective and collaborative strategies that might help a community resist or mitigate some of those changes. In this context, such acts of historical recovery are not just an academic or even a leisure activity; they are also informed by a political understanding of how this material and doing this type of activity might help people and communities in their contemporary lives and struggles.

The desire to collect and preserve the historical materials which underpin a narrative which seeks to overcome exclusions and silences in other dominant accounts, and then to create a space to allow people to explore and better understand the past in ways which might encourage a greater sense of belonging and identification is a very common motivation behind the decision to constitute an independent or community heritage initiative in both the UK and the US (Loukaitou-Sideris & Grodach, 2004). This motivation is often expressed as an educational mission, the independent archives standing as resources to correct the imbalances and absences in mainstream educational provision. Len Garrison, the main collector and driving force behind the foundation of the BCA in London in the early 1980s believed that young black people in Britain were being denied their history and he campaigned tirelessly to counteract this damage. He believed that the BCA and its collections would “provide the environment and structure within which the Afro-Caribbean child can extend and built positive frames of reference” (Garrison, 1994, p. 239). Similarly, the Swadhinata Trust, a project dedicated to the promotion of Bengali history and heritage amongst young people in East London, sought to combat alienation and lack of a sense of pride or self-worth by giving “people something, something more positive to think about themselves, to show that they were part of a story or a history that links them to better things” (interviews, Swadhinata Trust, 2009).

Recognizing independent archives and heritage activities as a resource for education, employing a “usable past” as a tool in contemporary struggles or in challenging some of the harmful effects of the absence of (for instance) black history in the school curriculum and national heritage narratives locates these independent and community-led archives as sites of resistance against injustices in society. As noted in earlier discussions about “community histories,” it is

important not to dismiss the significance of rigorous, critical historical methods and to be wary of the celebratory and romantic nature of some recovery or oppositional histories (Jordan & Weedon, 1995). However, it is also worth acknowledging the important role that histories can play in inspiring and mobilizing individuals and communities. Some of these archives producing oppositional histories and acting as sites or spaces of resistance seek to create what might be referred to as “useful” history. That is, not history produced by and for disinterested academic research but rather archives and history that are explicitly intended to be used to support the achievement of political objectives and mobilization, as a means of inspiring action and cementing solidarity. As Howard Zinn wrote in the introduction to *Voices of a People’s History of the United States* “to omit or to minimize these voices of resistance is to create the idea that power only rests with those who have guns, who possess the wealth, who own the newspapers and the television stations” and conversely radical, popular, politically-engaged histories demonstrate that “people who seem to have no power, whether working people, people of color, or women—once they organize and protest and create movements—have a voice no government can suppress” (Zinn & Arnove, 2004, p. 28).

In this way, at the Institute of Race Relations, Sivanandan (2008) argues that their historical publications were intended to provide “community organizations with ammunition they needed to mount their own fights and win their own battles ... a service station for oppressed peoples on their way to liberation. We’d put gas in their tanks” (p. 28). The activists behind the Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York aimed “to connect the present struggles ... to the past, to show the legacy of resistance and to give the keys needed to unlock the sometimes coded liberation battles of another time” (Nestle, 1990, p. 91). This is not to suggest that such independent historical and archival activities cannot or should not be rigorous and critical (“Myth-making about the past, however desirable the end it may serve, is incompatible with learning from the past” [John Tosh, quoted in Jordan & Weedon, 1995, p. 121]) but to recognize that such activities should be seen as a heritage activism which is part of a wider political or social movement activism.

History-making and archiving are therefore never neutral or disinterested activities, but in the case of long-established projects and archives, such as the Working-Class Movement Library in Salford, the Black Cultural Archives in London, the Butetown History and Arts Centre in Cardiff, or the Lesbian Herstory Archive in New York, it is the continuity, not ruptures or a shift away from political activism, that best explains the energy and physical resources pledged over a sustained period by successive groups of activists. In reflecting on her commitment to archival work in terms of the continuities with her anti-racist and

anti-imperialist activism, one of the founding members of Future Histories (interviews, 2009) described the political power embedded in the archival act:

I realized that actually to decide to gather information, organize information, and preserve information to disseminate it, was a political act. And so, Future Histories for me was my political intervention in the social and cultural arena of the arts in the UK.

To work to ensure the past is remembered, that individual lives are not forgotten or misrepresented, that the independent archive is constituted and made available is to make a political intervention in which the past, personal, and collective can be celebrated and commemorated but at the same time can also be used for education and debate. For Topher Campbell, one of the founders of the rukus! Archive, a significant part of his motivation lay in:

A political relation to AIDS and HIV because a lot of people had died in the nineties. A lot of histories were being lost or forgotten. But I think within the Black experience, to which slavery was so integral for so long, there is a level on which pain and memory are very interlinked. This pain, the pain of the lived experience is not recognized and so there's a need to hold it, and store it and keep it as precious ... So there's going to be some kind of mourning, or trauma, or pain involved in the public examination of all this ... and I think the archive goes some way to publicly acknowledging the pain and helping people come to terms with it. (Ajamu X, Campbell, Stevens, 2009, pp. 283-284)

An awareness of the power of the archive and history in political struggle and education is common among those whose politics were formed in new left, feminist, anti-racist struggles of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, but a similar recognition can also be found amongst younger activists today. As an example, recently a group of young feminist activists in London (the Remembering Olive Collective) sought to recover the apparently hidden history of the 1970s Black Power activist Olive Morris as part of their ongoing political work, resulting in the creation of an archive and a history achieved through the "social production of collective knowledge."

Challenges and Partnerships

Such initiatives and strategies which seek to scaffold the "social production of collective knowledge," often do so in extremely unpromising circumstances. It is hardly surprising, given the work that independent archives are doing and the grassroots, community-based nature of many of their activities, that most archives face a number of challenges relating to both their current activities and perhaps more gravely to sustaining these activities into the future. At the heart of these challenges lies the question of access to resources (financial,

human, physical, skills, and expertise) and how a lack of resources hinders the archive's growth and ability to develop in the future. This is not just about numbers of full-time staff (many of these organizations are volunteer-run) or retaining adequate premises for collections, though these are critical issues faced by many independent archives; it is also about being in the position to achieve the ambitions of the organization. It is about being able to look beyond the current project and source of funding and being able to plan realistically for the medium- and the long-term. It means addressing the life-cycle transitions for independent community archives (moving from project-based funding to something more long-term and sustainable, or seeking to hand on from the foundational generation to the next generation of activists) which represent points of danger to the long-term viability for these archives. And like the rest of the archives and heritage sector, having access to adequate resources means being able to address pressing concerns about digital sustainability and preservation.

In part the solution to some of these issues is to be found in a different approach to the funding of independent archives. Where public funding is available (and in saying this we must recognize that funding across the archives and heritage sector is likely to be reduced for the foreseeable future and also that some independent organizations may not wish to receive state money), it is not always the amount that is in question here. Rather, it is a call for diverting some of that funding from individual and short-term project funding (with its product-driven focus and resource intensive evaluation processes) to, if not long-term revenue funding, then at least to funds which allow independent organizations to focus on sustainability and organizational issues which would allow them to better prepare for the future challenges and transitions.⁹

Another significant contribution to addressing resource and sustainability concerns is through partnerships and collaborations between independent, community-led archives and mainstream archive and heritage professionals and organizations. Such partnerships are not without their challenges. In some cases, past experience of unhappy collaborations mean that there may be suspicions and ambivalences to overcome on both sides. For some community-led bodies, self-organization and autonomy are key components of their ethos and so they may be unwilling to work closely with public bodies. In these cases they may look to build capacity internally through training or the input of volunteers with relevant professional training. However, experience would suggest that in addition to internal capacity-building activities, many independent, community-led organizations are keen to explore partnerships and collaborations as long as those partnerships are equitable, proceed from a position of mutual respect and recognition of the skills and expertise on both sides, and allow the organizations to retain their independence so that partnership and collaboration is recognized as a two-way process, with knowledge and benefits flowing both ways and so that it

does not amount to a takeover of the community-based body by the mainstream heritage organization.

The possibilities and dimensions of such partnerships are dealt with at greater length in Stevens, Flinn, and Shepherd (2010), but each collaboration will vary according to the needs, objectives, and situation of the individual partners involved. However, possible areas of collaboration and sharing might include, from the professional side, expertise and guidance with regard to preservation (digital and analogue), storage, cataloguing, sharing space, and skills around exhibitions and public engagement activities and, from the independent archivists, subject-based knowledge, access to new collections and materials for exhibitions, and the possibility of new audiences. Crucially, these relationships should be seen not as short-term one-off exercises but as sustained ones in which trust and mutual respect are fostered not just between individuals (who will eventually move on) but also between institutions. This requires a commitment from the heritage institution to make this kind of external focus not just an optional activity (and thus susceptible to cuts) but part of the core aims and objectives of the organization. It also requires professional archivists and heritage workers to make this active engagement a part of their professional ethos and to shift their focus from a solely custodial and institutional approach to something which is equally concerned with significant archival and heritage collections inside and outside the walls of their archive (Flinn, 2010). This professional responsibility to see beyond their own collections and the walls of their own repository in seeking to work with independent bodies, communities, and individuals to care for their collections in the context in which they were created and collected is the other archival activism which this article identified at the start.

Active Archiving, Participatory Archiving

Archivists and heritage professionals have a choice in the future direction they take. If not to be fatally wounded by a combination of digital imperatives, disintermediation, and challenges to their authority to tell the stories of others, then archivists and other heritage professionals need to change and adapt. Rather than re-asserting narrow professional values, archivists and other heritage workers should seek to open up their services to a more participatory approach where different methods of custody and management, and different views of archival practice, and of collection and value are considered and embraced. In order to retain and enhance their status as trusted sites of information and memory, archives must justify their existence by working with others and offering their expertise in support of independent activity, helping to sustain different archival initiatives in the home or in communities. If archives and other memory sites are to offer important spaces for engaging with potentially positive and empowering

conversations about personal and collective identifications and promote notions of belonging, then these conversations need to be inclusive rather than exclusive and sometimes uncomfortable and disrupting rather than safe and superficial.

But what might this participatory approach mean in practice? The lessons from independent and community-led archives are that fundamentally it must be about enabling the user to have greater involvement in managing and processing the archive by supporting the greater permeability and maybe even dissolving the barriers between the professional and the amateur. It may be that in an era of cuts and reduced resources there will be an ever-increasing role for volunteers in preserving and disseminating archives and heritage at a local grassroots level, but these volunteers and the collections they care for will benefit from frameworks of support and guidance from skilled heritage professionals.

The benefits of these collaborations will be not just the added value and understanding to the archive that different groups of users might bring, but it would also offer a way for archives and memory sites to engage with and begin a dialogue on the basis of equitable partnership with groups that might otherwise be suspicious of state-sponsored institutions and thus difficult to reach. This recognition further reflects the reality that far from being a mysterious and solely professional activity, in the digital age (and probably before) recordkeeping and the archival act are common, everyday activities right across society. A part of the archival role in the future will be in supporting these activities by institutions, communities, and in some cases individuals. This does not mean a denial of a role for the archive profession, but rather a partial re-focussing and a re-articulation of the archival mission. It represents a recognition that some collections will, for some part of their life at least, be best understood if kept within the context of the community which created them but also that professionally trained archivists and heritage workers have much to offer by way of skills and expertise in terms of preservation, processing, and managing access to ensure that these collections can be used and sustained into the future in these non-formal locations.

These associations may begin as a guiding and advisory post-custodial role, supporting personal and community groups to look after their archives, advising on the challenges of digital archiving and preservation, but as these relationships become more trusting and sustained, then further collections and knowledge may be exchanged. Ultimately, taking a more participatory approach and opening the archive up to the possibilities of collaboration with different partners makes possible a wider sense of ownership and responsibility toward the archive and the archive service. Only by looking outward, embracing the fullest and most inclusive definitions of society, will archives and other heritage services become centers of their communities.

Although it is important in contributing to the possibility of a more inclusive and democratized national and local heritage that archives and other

memory sites should seek to represent those who have been traditionally excluded, they should only do so if those groups wish to be included. The right to be silent, to be not included, to operate outside the formal systems of recording must remain. A participatory approach to archiving should allow groups to speak for themselves and decide whether they wish to be included rather than have the archive claim the authority to speak for them in the name of rebalancing the archival heritage.

To quote Verne Harris, the struggle for archival justice involves seeking to include and welcome the “other” into the archive. He uses Derrida’s notion of hospitality to suggest that justice dictates that the “other” should not be merely tolerated as a guest in the archive but rather should be welcomed in with the power and status of the host—hence the participatory archive:

This fundamental opening is a value, an energy, which gives the experience of belonging to every stranger. It reaches out to every stranger. And it demands that the stranger not simply be tolerated as a guest but rather that the stranger be given the power of the host. It forestalls any determination of who is the host and who is the guest. (Harris, 2011, p. 121)

This participatory approach will not necessarily be appropriate to all archives and all practitioners, as there will be different priorities depending on the service (public or private, national or local, specialist or regional). But if we take a holistic view of a national archival heritage (a whole which might include all that is lost, all that is not formally captured, as well as those parts formally cared for and managed by archivists) we may find that the contents of our repositories and institutions are partial and flawed, that they do not represent the lives and experiences of all who live within our societies and who wish to have a space to speak within this notional “national” archive. If capturing and preserving the documentary record as inclusively as possible is not the prime challenge for archivists, then (to paraphrase the words of the American archival scholar Gerald Ham [1975] nearly 40 years ago) I do not know what the archive profession is really for.

Notes

¹ This article is an edited version of the first lecture in the Diversity and the Archives lecture series given by the author at the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, UCLA on February 3, 2011.

² Further information about this UK AHRC-funded project, including reflections on the methodology adopted in the research, can be found in Flinn and Stevens (2009); Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd (2009); Ajamu X, Campbell, and Stevens (2009); and Stevens, Flinn, and Shepherd (2010).

³ For more details about Future Histories and their work see: <http://www.futurehistories.org.uk/>.

⁴ For more details about the rukus! Black LGBT Archive project see: <http://www.rukus.co.uk>.

⁵ For more details about Moroccan Memories and Moroccan Memories Foundation see: <http://www.moroccanmemories.org.uk/>.

⁶ For more details about Eastside Community Heritage see: <http://www.hidden-histories.org.uk>.

⁷ See www.communityarchives.org.uk for more about the work of the Community Archives and Heritage Group.

⁸ Some contemporary reflections on those debates from the perspective of those active in the community history movements of the time are to be found in Green (2000) and Thomson (2008).

⁹ The demand for this kind of shift in terms of the funds available and purposes that it could be used for was a clear outcome of the UCL HRC-funded research. A summary of the research findings and a set of recommendations are available at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/icarus/community-archives/report/>.

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Author

Dr. Andrew Flinn is the Director of the Archives and Records Management MA programme in the Department of Information Studies at University College London, the chair (2008-2011) of the UK and Ireland Forum for Archives and Records Management Education and Research (FARMER), and in the spring term 2011 was the Allen Smith Visiting Scholar at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College, Boston. Recent publications include “Independent Community Archives and Community-Generated Content: Writing and Saving our Histories” (2010, *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 16) and “The Impact of Independent and Community Archives on Professional Archival Thinking and Practice” (2010, *The Future of Archives and Recordkeeping*, J. Hill, ed., London: Facet Publishing).