

Love (and Loss) in the Time of COVID-19: Translating Trauma into an Archives of Embodied Immediacy

Ferrin Evans

ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the emerging body of literature on grief and trauma in archival and records management work through the lens of COVID-19. The pandemic has put into stark relief the fragility of our individual and collective lives and livelihoods. Now, more than ever, we must take seriously the mental health and well-being of archivists. Inspired by the loss of a lover due to coronavirus-related symptoms, which brought on a deep grief that had profound professional, academic, and personal affects, this article—in a nod to Michelle Caswell’s writing on feminist standpoint epistemology—represents the author’s effort to “[value] the view from the margins.” More acutely, it speaks from the vantage point of a queer, Filipino, precariously employed archival student and practitioner grasping for meaning during a global pandemic. Engaging with affect theory, queer studies, and work on grief in archives, the author develops the concept of affective porosity, a means through which archival practitioners might seek a richer sense of relationality. Grounding theoretical expansiveness within contemporary practice, this article concludes by using field reports on archival trauma and case studies on BIPOC student labor to productively interrogate the state of archival labor today. As a profession, it is critical that archivists strive toward a path of embodied immediacy, caring for fellow archivists as much as we do archives.

© Ferrin Evans.



KEY WORDS

Archival labor, Archival trauma, BIPOC archivists,
Queer studies, Relationality, Student labor

I miss you more than I remember you.

—Ocean Vuong¹

In recent archival studies literature, prominent scholars and practitioners examine the impact of grief and trauma on archives and records management work. From examining records as conduits through which we might process grief² to grappling with trauma as an occupational hazard,³ these authors make it abundantly clear that there is an underaddressed (or even unaddressed) emotional toll inherent to much of the work of archivists. Reflecting upon a recent period of intense grief in my own life and engaging with Marika Cifor's introduction of affect theory to archival discourse,⁴ I argue that affect is an effective entry point through which we might approach secondary trauma in the archival workplace. While acknowledging the neoliberal economic paradigm in which most archives are squarely placed—forcing archives to chase funding and resources just to keep their doors open—the field must nonetheless take the mental health of archivists seriously. To sustain ourselves and our profession, we as archivists must work more proactively to create support structures for each other: in our classrooms, in our workplaces, and in our professional associations.

Love (and Loss) in the Time of COVID-19

On April 7, 2020, the amorphous dread of a building pandemic became painfully clear as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) took someone I loved.⁵ Having lived most of my adult life in New York City, I spent the month before this tragic day looking south of the border with worry; rates of the infectious disease exponentially increased every day, sending my friends into increasing levels of panic. As the degrees of separation between me and those contracting COVID-19 lessened, I still held on to some semblance of optimism that I might weather this period with (qualified) relief. Instead, “degrees” became “degree” when an estranged lover's face appeared on my Facebook feed courtesy of a mutual friend; in the post, our friend—a photographer—shared portraits and an expression of disbelief about the death. Writing him, I asked what happened, and I learned that coronavirus was the culprit. Even in articulating this story, I still find it hard to move past a stage of denial; at a time when I am called to work shifts at my job, as well as class projects centered around archival ideals, I ironically find myself stalled in some liminal space, unable to reconcile past and present.

Perhaps this overwhelming feeling comes from the fact that, as I try to grapple with more conventional notions of archival appraisal, I am unable to

stop judging the value of the objects connecting me to the one I have lost. Letters and sweaters, trinkets and texts: my personal archives brings me to tears. With new shades of mournful wisdom, I resonate with Sue McKemmish's assertion that, "Record keeping is a 'kind of witnessing.' On a personal level it is a way of evidencing and memorializing our lives—our existence, our activities and experiences, our relationships with others, our identity, our 'place' in the world."⁶ Quite literally, these mementos—these personal records—now serve as memorial to a lost life and to my relationship with it. They remind me of the love and the anger, the disappointment and the reconciliation. They burden me with guilt as I illogically try to imagine what I could have done differently to prevent the estrangement marking the end of our story. Unlike the histories we as archivists often preserve, this one has no resolution.

McKemmish frames personal archives in terms of utilitarian value, allowing that "it is not so easy to identify a role for archivists in personal recordkeeping that parallels the role they are taking on in developing and implementing post custodial strategies for corporate recordkeeping."⁷ Instead, she proposes that "what is much more likely to occur is that individual recordkeeping behaviour will be influenced by developments in the corporate and networked world."⁸ The disjunctive nature between the intimate items (e.g., letters, journals, diaries) around which McKemmish builds her article and the recordkeeping strategies with which she ends it are somewhat jarring, leading one to wonder if the parallel role of the individual and the corporate must always be so sketched out and overdetermined.

I find some solace in the fact that this impulse to decouple the two paradigms has precedent. In response to McKemmish, Catherine Hobbs asks: "Must 'evidence of me' always be interpreted as 'evidence of me interacting with persons and institutions in the conduct of affairs?'"⁹ My friend, my lover, was multifaceted: he was an artist; he was HIV-positive; he was a fixture of Manhattan's Lower East Side. He died of complications from COVID-19 . . . but, before that, he lived more vibrantly and creatively than almost anyone I knew. As an idiosyncratic figure, he embodied a life that would be mappable onto so many different archival mandates were I to donate our correspondences in the future, but these records are about more than mandates and functions. This is not to say that idiosyncratic records do not belong in a traditional archives; rather, anyone appraising personal collections should take care to pay attention to what Hobbs discusses as "the psychology of archives more than their transactionality."¹⁰ Names, dates, and times are significant—but so are the psychological elements: the tone and tenor of our arguments; the hopefulness of reunion after reunion; the disappointment, the acceptance, the love. These things comprise "the flotsam of the individual life."¹¹

Though this personal story fits into a longer lineage of archival scholars speaking powerfully to their own lives in their writing,¹² the question remains: how does this idea of my “personal archives” fit into the archiving world as it traditionally stands? Asking myself this on a daily basis for the past month, I have found the ultimate—though imperfect—answer to be: How does it not? Does this grief I feel not align in some way with the grief I regularly approach as a queer archivist? Does this story not speak to a historical moment—a global pandemic—and enrich the greater narrative with its individual textures? With the remainder of this article, I expand outward from my personal archives in a dual manner. First, I argue that the affective containers of archivists’ own lives are porous, seeping into our work in a way that might productively create an archives of embodied immediacy.¹³ Second, I argue that archivists’ lives are just as worthy of consideration as the records upon which we focus: if we are to take seriously the diversification of the field and the sustenance of its current practitioners, we need to proactively and continuously seek ballast via support networks.

Epidemics, Emotions, and the Queer Affective Archives

Before tying affect to the archives, it is helpful to set parameters on the former term. In her article “Affecting Relationships: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse,” Marika Cifor frames affect as such:

Affect is a force that creates a relation between a body and the world. It is at the core of how we form, sustain and break social relations, differences and individual and collective identities. Archives are in large part about creating, documenting, maintaining, reconciling and (re)producing such relations—between records and people, ideologies, institutions, systems and worlds—across bounds of time and space.¹⁴

Familiar to many with a humanities background, affect theory exists in the sort of ineffable realm that might make it a topic of resistance to some archival practitioners. What does relational energy have to do with materiality? Is this just more overly complex language from the academy, a world that often exists in contradistinction to actual archival working conditions?

On the contrary, affect theory gives us a way to think through the emotion we feel when our work seizes us. When we cry, laugh, and fall in love with the complex people and communities for which we are accounting, it almost never exists in an object-oriented vacuum. Queer scholars who grew up in the VHS era, for instance, probably don’t cry at ACT UP New York archival footage merely because of the tape noise.¹⁵ We weep because of relationships: the relationship of queer Americans to the Reagan administration, which waited until 13,000

citizens had died of AIDS-related complications before it would mention the word; the relationships we could have had with a lost generation of mentors; the relationship we have with the past, haunted by a pandemic that largely precedes us.

While affect often overlaps with emotion, the former is “a category that both encompasses and reaches beyond feelings and emotions.”¹⁶ Referencing and building upon the work of Sianne Ngai and Michalinos Zembylas, Cifor further sketches out a delineation between the two terms:

Emotion is used to name that feeling that is given function and meaning and is closely tied to action. In contrast, affect is a less formed, structured, and fixed force that nonetheless shares many of the qualities of emotion. Affect is deeply implicated in how people form social relationships, differences, identities, and subjectivities, as well as how people share or deny resources (knowledge, power, agency).¹⁷

While I may feel *angry* or *sad* thinking about the AIDS epidemic in North America—those signifiers mark my emotions—it is *relationships* with government, homophobic society, or even self (i.e., Why was I so lucky to have missed this?) that give my emotions their affective containers. Affect theory requires looking outside of the self to understand what systems might be at play in shaping the way we feel.

As a doubly marginalized intersectional subject—queer and Filipino—affect theory holds such resonance with me due to the systemic injustices I have spent my life navigating; so often, these inequalities dictate the emotions I feel. Growing up in the conservative suburbs of North Carolina, hearing hateful language like “ching chong” or “faggot” directed at me on a daily basis, I came to view the world in a way that was colored by that rhetoric and the oppressive structures it represents. Prominent queer theorist Didier Eribon writes that homophobic slurs “are not merely words shouted in passing. . . . They are traumatic events experienced more or less violently at the moment they happen, but that stay in memory and in the body. . . . One of the consequences of insult is to shape the relation one has to others and to the world and thereby to shape the personality, the subjectivity, the very being of the individual in question.”¹⁸ These traumatic acts of homophobic interpellation¹⁹ are individualizing at their root, but they linger and accumulate into something more. This interpellation might be affectively framed as *hatred*; as Cifor writes, “Even if hatred is felt and experienced within particular bodies and psyches, it is generated through social, political, and cultural encounters that are defined by larger power structures.”²⁰ The queer subject muddies the waters between emotion and affect, the former often so intrinsically bound within the latter.

To queer people—as well to as members of BIPOC, disabled, and other marginalized communities—archives allow us to respond to trauma and hatred

through the cultivation of relationships to both the past and to the present. Reaching backward, they decenter ourselves and our oppressors by contextualizing them against a longer sociohistorical lineage. As Jamie A. Lee writes in “Belonging in the Archival Body: Eros and the ‘Endearing’ Value of Material Lives,” “The affective nature of archival productions follows the maneuvering and shifting temporalities of (un)becoming. Thinking about archives as affective bodies in turn moves me to focus on communicating across generations—the past, present and future. The archival body exists in the liminal and porous space and time between past and future.”²¹ Becoming and unbecoming and becoming anew, one utilizes the past to quite literally change who they are in the present. They might hold their heads higher and their backs straighter in the face of adversity, imagining the faces of those who fought and died for them. New historiographies lead to new futurities; as Lee offers, “the archival body as a collection of stories so far might create spaces for possible futures to emerge, something that is key to queer world-making efforts.”²²

It is these “world-making efforts” to which I reach when I speak of the cultivation of present relationships. Archives do not just offer us reflections via communion with specters of the past; fostering friendship and mentorship with those who feel the same and have similar stories allows us to hold each other’s burdens, even if just for short periods of time. In her pivotal book, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Ann Cvetkovich writes, “Thinking about trauma from the same depathologizing perspective that has animated queer understandings of sexuality opens up possibilities for understanding traumatic feelings not as a medical problem in search of a cure but as felt experiences that can be mobilized in a range of directions, including the construction of cultures and publics.”²³ By constructing these new publics, historically marginalized people lessen their impetus to live in opposition to dominant hegemonies.

What is the affect embodied by these new publics? One option might be found in the article “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing’: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives” by Michelle Caswell, Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez. This analysis of community archives offers the term “representational belonging” to “describe the ways in which community archives empower people marginalized by mainstream media outlets and memory institutions with the autonomy and authority to establish, enact, and reflect on their presence in ways that are complex, meaningful, substantive, and positive to them in a variety of symbolic contexts.”²⁴ I feel this way when I complete work at queer archives. Looking around at others toiling away at records in common cause, I feel that we are inserting ourselves into past, present, and future. Per Caswell et al., we are rejecting our “symbolic annihilation,” “a term media studies scholars use to describe the ways in which mainstream media ignore, misrepresent, or

malign minoritized groups.”²⁵ We do not need the mainstream media, nor the validation of those who would reject us. We are enough.

Affective Porosity and Unlikely Resonances

Sometimes—perhaps, say, during a global pandemic that disallows any sort of mobilization, much less toward new publics—the brakes must be put on the important work of community archives. In my case, my lover’s death happened at a time when I was called to attend to myself, to sit with my negative and self-defeating thoughts regarding my skills, my choice of profession . . . my place in this world. Every time I sat down to write papers, including this one, I found no joy or meaning in my process. While my professors have been beyond patient, I have offered myself little of that kindness. As an extra layer of tough love, all of the internships to which I applied were “postponed indefinitely” after I received fantastic feedback during the application period. All four of the conferences that accepted my presentation proposals were cancelled. Blurred temporalities: what purpose is there to any talk of preserving the past when I find it so hard to access the future?

After wallowing for nearly a month—throwing away everything I wrote, withdrawing from social commitments—I finally hit my wall. I would like to say I had an epiphany about the value of my work; in reality, I simply could not spend another morning waking and feeling miserable. Pulling myself together, I decided to revisit some of the archival literature I found most resonant in the first year of my master’s degree. Much of it has already been cited in this article, but I was especially struck by a specific journal article: “‘Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists’: Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work,” a piece Jennifer Douglas coauthored with Alexandra Alisaukas and Devon Mordell. Appearing in the fall 2019 issue of *Archivaria*, this article begins with a powerfully personal prologue from Douglas, led by the statement that “Grief—my personal grief—transformed me. It changed how I see the world, how I relate to other people, how I understand and envision my work. In 2012, I experienced a profound personal loss when my daughter died just before she was born.”²⁶ Building out from this story, the three authors construct “a conceptual framework in which to explore the relationships between archives and grief.”²⁷ From nowhere, an article I had read half a dozen times over the past months hit me like a ton of bricks. I felt seen.

Let me preface this next segment with a delimitation: this is not an attempt to compare my grief to either Douglas’s, nor to the other bereaving parents of whom the authors write. As a queer man, I probably will never know the joy of expectation as it relates to parenthood, nor the pain of miscarriage or death.

Still, as the article unfolded, I felt a continuous wave of unlikely resonances. Their grief, so different than mine, spoke to me in ineffable ways.

One of the utterances was that it is time for me to do some *grief work*. Referring back to some of Douglas's earlier studies, the authors state that "In the online communities studied by Douglas, bereaved parents often use the term grief work to connote the different types of activities they perform to help themselves process their grief, remember their children, and especially, connect with their children—parenting them."²⁸ From visiting cemeteries to sorting through clothing, parents do the "difficult but necessary" work of "retain[ing] a connection to the deceased child."²⁹ Reflecting upon this, I realized that my feedback loop of negativity was not only preventing me from grieving, it was keeping me from honoring the memory of someone I loved—love—so much.

From parents' grief work often comes the creation of *imagined identities*. The authors reference the writing of Dorthe Refslund Christensen and Kjetil Sandvik, who suggest that parents in online bereavement communities "actually perfor[m] the child into being as a subject," providing them with "a continued existence after death."³⁰ Looking to past grief work I have completed before I knew to name it as such, I realize that I have always placed these imagined identities on those that have passed. My estranged father died of a heart attack a few years ago, and I left unread his Facebook message apologizing for the damage he caused me in my youth; always showing up in bold, this note promises a future where we can leave the baggage behind and be father and son. Another deceased lover drove off a cliff in the midst of depression. I look at the ring he gave me, the turquoise reminding me of his blue eyes; in stories I continue to create, I can make those sad eyes twinkle with joy for eternity. At the risk of sounding dramatic, loss has colored my entire life; the authors give me permission to step back from the immediacy of my pain, decouple it from my work, and allow my latest loss the space to live on.

By using the term "affective porosity" in this section's title, I do not mean to add another piece of jargon to the academic lexicon. Rather, it is the best way I can figure to articulate the ways in which Douglas et al. make me rethink the nature of my own affective containers; previously thought to be so rigid and calcified, I find them permeated by others' ostensibly unrelated pain. We seep into each other. In turn, these porous containers allow my archival practice an opening outward, seeking richness and humanity in those stories I might otherwise have dismissed as "other people's problems."

This is not to say our containers will ever undergo full osmosis, completely blending into each other: positionality is still key. Discussing an alienating experience within the Ivy League, her working-class background clashing with her peers' privileged upbringings, Caswell writes, "[W]ho you are largely determines *what* you know. My classmates could not have known what I knew and I

could not have known what they knew. We came from different epistemological standpoints. We inhabited different positionalities. We read the same texts in . . . class, but we read them *differently*.”³¹ I do not imagine, nor do I desire, that we all hold the full knowledge of each other’s pain. My life experience as a queer Filipino is precisely what makes me such an important addition to the archival voice. After all, “[M]embers of marginalized communities see things differently than those who occupy dominant positions, and those differences in perspective strengthen and enrich the creation of knowledge, leading to better questions, better ways of doing research, and better scholarship.”³² This sojourn into the affective array must not, in fact, cannot, come at the expense of my minoritized subjectivity. As with so much of life, the value is derived from heterogeneity.

There must be a way to honor our histories at the same time as we cultivate empathy toward others, though. In a profession that is so often lonely—sorting through dusty materials, entering data into spreadsheets, uploading databases—it would serve us well to look to each other more often. How can my focus on AIDS epidemic records be enriched by Douglas’s focus on bereavement archives and vice versa? By allowing conversation between archival subjects that would never naturally interact, our positionality becomes generative instead of entrenched.

We approach porosity.

When Trauma Comes to Work

Realistically, this theoretical excursion is not one in which all archival practitioners are willing to participate. Affect theory is not for everyone. Nonetheless, it is abundantly clear that the feelings we feel as archivists are *heavy* and that we so often are not given the tool kits to process them or to hold space for others who are processing. In “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle’: Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists,” Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Douglas articulate “the desire of the Canadian archival community for a more open and inclusive conversation about the emotional and psychological impacts of doing archival work.”³³ Centering their article around a 2016 survey circulated among archives and records managers in Canada, the authors position trauma as a “significant occupational hazard.”³⁴ More specifically, they introduce the concept of *secondary trauma*, which is induced by working directly with subjects who have experienced a traumatic event. Usually discussed in the context of fields like social work and psychiatry, secondary trauma is both highly relevant and deeply underexplored within the archival field.

Sloan et al. note that there is “no agreed upon definition of ‘traumatic records,’ or of records that might induce secondary trauma in those who work with them.”³⁵ Indeed, I believe reaching for an “agreed upon” definition would be a

fruitless exercise. In many ways, this is the wrong question: there are minoritized materials and identity-based collections, but naming records themselves as “traumatic” to people who do not resonate with that trauma just marginalizes those records while passing the buck on mental health. What is much more productive is the way in which the authors map out the degree and scope of trauma: “These types of records and collections tend to document large-scale events such as war or genocide. However, a traumatic record might also be one that documents experience on a smaller scale or that affects only one or a few people, such as records documenting the murder of a family member or a workplace safety report documenting a serious injury occurring at a worksite.”³⁶ This acknowledgment is essential: it allows us to understand that trauma has the ability to cannily manifest itself within a wide breadth of circumstances.

Looking at the survey results, it becomes abundantly clear that these manifestations are frequent: 72 percent of respondents said they had worked with traumatic records.³⁷ As a result, the authors summarize, “Symptoms noted by respondents included sleeplessness, helplessness, excessive sleeping, irritability, shock, anxiety, loneliness, sadness, headaches, guilt, shame, burnout, empathy, curiosity, and hopelessness.”³⁸ Whether discussed in affective or symptomatic terms, trauma is omnipresent in our practice. Given that fact, what might we in the archiving community—especially those with structural power—do about it? Sloan et al. sketch out an extensive set of emergent themes in their article, and I would like to speak to some of them as a nascent archivist, halfway through my master’s degree. More specifically, I frame actionable items within three realms: the classroom, the workplace, and the professional association.

Perhaps I am more fortunate than the survey respondent who suggested, “Archival education and professional development has rewarded a cold logic approach that we laud as objectivity, but it has not rewarded empathy, considering multiple perspectives, or seeing records creators or records workers as whole people.”³⁹ Speaking to my experience at work, I feel that archival principles of “cold logic” have always been complicated by my professors, most of whom have taken good care to bounce these logics off of their real-world ramifications. Many of the brilliant scholars with whom I have engaged through this article came to my attention through my classes in [removed for anonymity]. To this new archival student, it seems the academy has reached a tipping point wherein ostensible objectivity and disembodied value are not the untroubled norm.

Still, it is clear that work is still to be done when looking at initiatives like Diversity Working Group, a University of Toronto Master of Information Student Council (MISC) working group that states as its mission “to create an intellectual, professional and social safe space and network for like-minded BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) and ally students and alumni

of the Faculty of Information.”⁴⁰ Among its initiatives are a push to ensure the Faculty of Information fulfills its commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as well as an extensive review of Faculty of Information syllabi to make sure they adequately represent nonwhite and/or nonmale scholars.⁴¹ Through this working group, BIPOC students are tackling trauma doubly: they are creating support systems in a still largely white institution, and they are making sure systemic traumas of the past are not being replicated through outdated teaching materials and derelict TRC commitments. Their work should be studied and replicated at similar university programs.

The hotbed of intellectual ideas and ideals means nothing if it hits a wall when students transition into workplaces. Many of us, especially those of us dealing with identity-based collections and community archives, are fortunate enough to have “more supportive work environments, more readily available support services, and more explicit recognition of the potential for secondary trauma or emotional responses to records.”⁴² Looking back to that 72 percent of survey respondents who have dealt with traumatic records, though, it is clear that at least a large portion of them are situated in other contexts. Often deprioritized amid endless backlogs and tight tax receipt deadlines, support services for and an active investment in the mental health of archives should, in fact, be the number-one goal of organizational culture. Survey respondents note being “discouraged [from] talking about emotional matters [during] work hours” and the fact that “the connection between emotional or mental well-being and the nature of the work [is] not acknowledged.”⁴³ How does this disconnect serve us and our process? It is as though, referencing Michelle Caswell, we are “stuck on disembodied notions of value.”⁴⁴ If the archiving profession cannot move forward into an organizational culture that is connected and inspired, we can forget about diversifying the field. In fact, we risk irrelevancy.

To the point of diversification, how does the minority archivist envision their own subjectivity when—as stated in the oft-referenced 2012 Society of American Archivists (SAA) member survey—89 percent of respondents self-identify as white/Caucasian?⁴⁵ How might we imagine the space to be held for our trauma when the space cannot be made for us ourselves? As Ramirez writes, “Notwithstanding efforts to the contrary, the archival profession in turn continues to suffer from the ongoing marginalization of change and difference due to its inability to recognize the normative whiteness that continues to be at the heart of its motivations.”⁴⁶ Perhaps answers come in small steps, like the news I received recently congratulating me on being selected as part of the AMIA Diversity and Inclusion Fellowship Program (ADIFP). Coming together with five other minority Fellows, I am excited to connect with other BIPOC people in the field, holding space for each other and serving as mentors for future generations.

This is all just a drop in the bucket, though. To discuss fixing professional associations such as SAA and AMIA is a fitting end point to this section because it necessarily encompasses fixing the classroom and fixing the workplace. Change must be holistic. It means coming to grips with the fact that a profession that is starkly unrepresentative of its publics is replicating trauma itself: the trauma of invisibility. It means getting real about why minorities are not interested in the archives and how the profession can speak to us more urgently. I look to the University of Toronto's Diversity Working Group and to the ADIFP as glimmers of hope, but the vast majority of the work is yet to be done.

Conclusion

I transitioned from the humanities to archival studies because of my deeply ingrained urge toward more just and diverse historiographies. Did I make the right choice? Is this the best way for me to achieve the goals I have set? More often than I would like to admit, I wonder if Jarrett Drake is correct when he writes that the professional nature of archives is the field's intractable problem: "Professionalism emphasizes 'the work'—its completion, its evaluation, its perpetuity, etc.—without a meaningful critique of how 'the work' mandates a replication of the patriarchy, oppression, and violence many in our world experience."⁴⁷ In this tender emotional state, what I do know for sure is that "the work" is meaningless if we cannot access the potential humanity with which it might be imbued. As a profession at a crossroads, it is critical that we take the path of embodied immediacy, not cold logic. This choice must extend beyond the records themselves and toward our relationships with each other. Our archives deserve it and so do we.

Postscript February 2022

Reflecting upon this article nearly a year later, a temporal logic with which any peer-reviewed author might commiserate, I picked apart every section of my writing in preparation for its publication. As a graduate student, as a first-time journal author, as a multiple minoritized subject trying not to let his communities down, I felt a lot of (mostly self-induced) pressure to better till the soil of personal trauma for some larger epistemic fruit. With every structural shift, though, I grew increasingly protective of my original text; it is an acute window into the mindset of a new archival student and practitioner at the height of a deadly pandemic.

In their article "R-Words: Refusing Research," Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write that within the academy, "The subaltern can speak, but is only invited to speak her/our pain."⁴⁸ I hope that being awarded a prize for candidly expressing

my grief does not reify this paradigm. To expand upon Eira Tansey's assertion that "no one owes their trauma to archivists," archivists do not owe their trauma to the profession.⁴⁹ In that spirit, I offer a provocation for the field: find ways to collect, protect, and exhibit examples of Black joy, disabled desire, and queer healing. This transformative work begins with Tansey's suggestion of "[hiring] more permanent and well-compensated archivists to do the work we need for the future we deserve." As often as possible, organizations with the means and/or mandate should hire employees from within these communities—and then take seriously their invaluable input.

To the minority reader who gains some semblance of resonance with my article, I would offer a similar exhortation, based on my own experience: find something more sustaining than trauma and oppositional energy with which you might build your foundation. Try not to carry the burden of representation on your shoulders, and, if you are the only minority member of an inclusion, diversity, and equity committee, demand to know why. When you reach breaking points of frustration, which will happen, it will soften the impact immeasurably to have friends of similar life experience—both within and without the profession—to serve as your sounding boards. We are more than our trauma.

NOTES

- ¹ Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York: Penguin, 2019), 179.
- ² Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisaukas, and Devon Mordell, "Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists': Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives," *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/740194>.
- ³ Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Jennifer Douglas, "Not 'Just My Problem to Handle': Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 6, no. 20 (2019), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol6/iss1/20>.
- ⁴ Marika Cifor, "Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9261-5>.
- ⁵ For personal reasons, I am purposely choosing to withhold my late lover's name.
- ⁶ Sue McKemmish, "Evidence of Me," *The Australian Library Journal* 45, no. 3 (1996): 175, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049670.1996.10755757>.
- ⁷ McKemmish, "Evidence of Me," 183.
- ⁸ McKemmish, "Evidence of Me," 183.
- ⁹ Catherine Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals," *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 130, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12817>. This question hinges upon the title of McKemmish's article, "Evidence of Me."
- ¹⁰ Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives," 127.
- ¹¹ Hobbs, "The Character of Personal Archives," 131.
- ¹² A list even close to exhaustive is outside of this article's purview, but examples might be found in bibliographic entries for Douglas et al., "Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists'"; Jarrett Drake, "I'm Leaving the Archival Profession: It's Better This Way," *Medium: On Archivy* (blog) (June 26, 2017), <https://medium.com/on-archivy/im-leaving-the-archival-profession-it-s-better-this-way-ed631c6d72fe>, captured at <https://perma.cc/3WX6-T3LH>; and Michelle Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal," *Journal of Critical Library*

- and *Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019): 5, <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/113/67>.
- ¹³ I borrow the term “embodied immediacy” from Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).
- ¹⁴ Cifor, “Affecting Relations,” 8.
- ¹⁵ ACT UP New York is a direct-action, grassroots political group formed with the goal of ending the AIDS pandemic. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it utilized a number of methods, including camcorder recordings of rallies, actions, and police violence, to achieve its goals.
- ¹⁶ Marika Cifor, “Aligning Bodies: Collecting, Arranging, and Describing Hatred for a Critical Queer Archives,” *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 758, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2016.0010>.
- ¹⁷ Cifor, “Aligning Bodies,” 758.
- ¹⁸ Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 15.
- ¹⁹ Eribon does a fantastic job of distilling the idea of interpellation in the chapter “Heterosexual Interpellation,” which builds on the work of Judith Butler and Louis Althusser.
- ²⁰ Cifor, “Aligning Bodies,” 760.
- ²¹ Jamie A. Lee, “Be/longing in the Archival Body: Eros and the ‘Endearing’ Value of Material Lives,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 38, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-016-9264-x>.
- ²² Lee, “Be/longing in the Archival Body,” 41.
- ²³ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003): 47.
- ²⁴ Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing’: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives,” *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 57, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26356700>.
- ²⁵ Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing,’” 57.
- ²⁶ Douglas, Alisauskas, and Mordell, “‘Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists,’” 86.
- ²⁷ Douglas, Alisauskas, and Mordell, “‘Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists,’” 87.
- ²⁸ Douglas, Alisauskas, and Mordell, “‘Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists,’” 98.
- ²⁹ Douglas, Alisauskas, and Mordell, “‘Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists,’” 98–99.
- ³⁰ Via Douglas, Alisauskas, and Mordell, “‘Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists,’” 103.
- ³¹ Caswell, “Dusting for Fingerprints,” 5.
- ³² Caswell, “Dusting for Fingerprints,” 9.
- ³³ Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 2.
- ³⁴ Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 1.
- ³⁵ Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 3.
- ³⁶ Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 3.
- ³⁷ Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 7.
- ³⁸ Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 8.
- ³⁹ Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 17.
- ⁴⁰ Master of Information Student Council, “MISC Working Groups,” <http://misc.ischool.utoronto.ca/working-groups>.
- ⁴¹ I intentionally use the phrasing “nonmale” in respect of and solidarity with trans and gender-nonconforming scholars.
- ⁴² Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 14.
- ⁴³ Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 14.
- ⁴⁴ Caswell, “Dusting for Fingerprints,” 14.
- ⁴⁵ Statistic cited in Ramirez, “Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative,” *American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.78.2.339>.
- ⁴⁶ Ramirez, “Being Assumed Not to Be,” 348.
- ⁴⁷ Jarrett Drake, “I’m Leaving the Archival Profession.”

- ⁴⁸ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "R-Words: Refusing Research," *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, ed. Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014), <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781544329611>.
- ⁴⁹ In her blog post, Tansey critiques the speed and intensity with which archival institutions attempted to collect COVID-19 records during the onset of the pandemic, often without regard for the potential trauma inflicted upon those holding the records and at the expense of more effective organizing efforts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ferrin Evans received a master's degree of information from the University of Toronto in 2022. He is currently attending McGill University (Faculty of Law). Evans is the recipient of the 2021 Theodore Calvin Pease Award from the Society of American Archivists (SAA). The award, presented during SAA's virtual Annual Meeting, August 2–6, 2021, recognizes superior writing achievements by students of archival studies. Evans's paper was nominated by Karen Suurtamm, assistant professor of information, at the University of Toronto. Evans would like to thank Suurtamm for her endless patience and support during the creation of the final course paper that would become this article.