Making histories, sharing histories:
Community-based Archives &
Digging Where We Stand

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• Defining community-based archives in different contexts & identifying some characteristics

• What motivates community-based archivists & how do they differ from other archival and heritage activities?

• How has technology driven the aims and objectives of community-based archives?
International examples of community archive

- Amana Community archive (The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 1959)
- Budapest Jewish Community Archive (1987)
- ‘Introducing the Community Archive: The South African History Archive ... Keeping Our History Alive’ (SAHA, 1993)
- Germeindearchiv = community archive (German / English Genealogical Dictionary 1992)
- Nanaimo Community Archives / Alhemi Community Archive (British Columbia, 1991)
- Falls Road Community Council, Community Archive (Feasibility Study 1997)
- Totnes Community Archive (UK) – Manpower Service’s Community programme 1980s
- North Otago Museum Archive (NZ) - evolution of a ‘community archive’ 1997
- Leather Archives and Museum, Chicago, BDSM / fetish community archive (Journal of Sex Research, 1998)
- Commanet launched 1999, digitally linking existing community archives
Extent & growth of community archives in England and Wales
The American Jewish Historical Society

Responsible for the Future of the American Jewish Past

The American Jewish Historical Society provides access to more than 20 million documents and 50,000 books, photographs, art and artifacts that reflect the history of the Jewish presence in the United States from 1654 to the present. Among the treasures of this heritage are the first American book published in Hebrew, the handwritten original of Emma Lazarus' “The New Colossus,” which graces the Statue of Liberty; records of the nation’s leading Jewish communal organizations and important collections in the fields of education, philanthropy, science, sports, business and the arts. Founded in 1892, AJHS is the oldest national ethnic historical organization in the nation. AJHS is one of five partner organizations at The Center for Jewish History in Manhattan and has a branch in Boston.

The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

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The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture is a research unit of The New York Public Library, generally recognized as one of the leading institutions of its kind in the world. For over 80 years the Center has collected, preserved, and provided access to materials documenting black life, and promoted the study and interpretation of the history and culture of peoples of African descent.

Upcoming Events

Today
7 p.m.
Women’s Jazz Festival: Black Rock Coalition presents “They Say She’s Different: A Betty Davis Retrospective”
Independent radical archives and / or local community-based archives?

‘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’ (Kathy Eales, *South African Archives Journal*, 1998)

‘The subject-matter of the collection is a community of people. The classic example is a group of people who live in the same location, but there are 'communities of interest' as well, such as people who worked in a certain profession.’ (Jack Latimer, *What is a community archive?*, www.communityarchives.org.uk)
Some common characteristics of community-based archives

• Archive & history **for and by** a community
• Broad inclusive definitions of what is collected within archive
• Autonomy and partnership
• Community-based and community-led – mechanisms for reporting and establishing authority
• Individual or collective activity (blurring of personal and community collecting as opposed to institutional collecting)
• Blurring of boundaries between creator, curator and user – often invested in one or two committed individuals
• Physical, digital and hybrid archive
• Reliance on limited community resources or external project funding
Further characteristics of community-based archives - approach & objectives

• Active collection and use of historical sources to document and correct histories perceived to be ignored or misrepresented
• History-making as a participative practice – embodiment of a DIY cultural and political engagement
• Heritage activism & the ‘useful’ past - community-based archiving as social movement activism & mobilisation
• Community-based history-making and archiving for education and identity formation (places of aspiration and possibility)
• Community-based archives as community-owned space (place of safety, place of resistance, monuments to presence in past & present)
Re-appropriating control over representation and contesting historical narratives

‘a decline in the acceptance of the traditional authorities in authenticating the interpretative and analytic frameworks which classify, place, compare and evaluate culture; and the concomitant rise in the demand to re-appropriate control over the “writing of one’s own story” as part of a wider process of cultural liberation – as Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral once put it “the decolonisation of the mind”’ (Hall, ‘Whose Heritage...’ 1999)

‘The activity of ‘archiving’ is thus always a critical one, always a historically located one, always a contestatory one, since archives are in part constituted within the lines of force of cultural power and authority...always an engagement, an interruption in a settled field, which is to enter critically into existing configurations to re-open the closed structures into which they have ossified’ (Hall, ‘Constituting an archive’, 2001)
"We decided we were going to document something that was profoundly important to us, and that is our scene; the punk scene in Washington, D.C. And that's how it really began, in terms of ‘The Collection.' The idea that something important was happening that we were a part of — not important necessarily to the world, but important to us.”

(Ian MacKaye of Fugazi / Minor Threat, speaking at personal digital archiving event, Library of Congress, May 2013)
Heritage Activism & Dig Where You Stand: ‘History is dangerous. History is important because the results of history are still with us’

• Sven Lindqvist, *Gräv där du står* (1978) and article in *Oral History* journal 1979

• ‘Factory History could and should be written from a fresh point of view – by workers investigating their own workplaces’

• ‘...a handbook which would help others, especially the workers to write these factory histories in their own neighbourhoods and their own places of work’

• ‘...Hoping that these [works of historical recovery] would provide community organisations with ammunition they needed to mount their own fights and win their own battles. We were aware that we were neither grassroots nor establishment – merely a service station for oppressed peoples on their way to liberation. We’d put gas in their tanks’ (Sivanandandan, 2008, 28)
Building A National Monument To Britain's Black Heritage.

http://bcaheritage.org.uk/
'We run a book exchange, a free bike workshop, host a regular practical squatters meeting, offer meeting space and have a massive open-access archive. We also hold useful information – useful for thought, research/publishing and activity to change things. With all of these things in operation we still primarily happily continue the tradition of radical spaces where people can meet each other. That seems the most radical thing possible. For people to meet and talk and to argue and to agree or not. After the talking, activity might happen. That’s what we want, That’s we encourage here.'

How do community-based archives differ?

- Blurring of boundaries (between curators and users, between activists and archivists, between types of institutions)
- Significance of personal, emotional, political and often financial sacrifice of core individuals - often a network of volunteers
- Articulate different ‘values’ of significance and importance
- Very existence points to critique and dissatisfaction with mainstream heritage provisions
- Make explicit active involvement in heritage interventions and history-making, especially regarding ‘useful past’
- Significantly reduced access to resources (financial, human, equipment, technology, institutional)
Impact of technology on community-based archives?

• Development of cheap ‘scan and upload’ software supported easy sharing and engagement with heritage materials in collective online context

• Transformational impact on community-based archiving? Ability to create and share with community complex, artistic individual and collective heritage narratives

• Disrupts geo-spatial barriers to engagement with community and with heritage

• Supports the building of communities, the mobilisation of solidarities and engendering a sense of belonging by engaging with shared heritage - including amongst otherwise disadvantaged, marginalised, diasporic, disintegrated or distributed communities

• But also concerns – digital divides, long-term sustainability, proprietary platforms & ownership of digital community heritage
Online archiving and history-making
Challenging narratives, empowering communities

• ‘Telling their own stories, counter-narratives in a sense. Challenging the dominant. And also making sure it was preserved, because I also knew of the redevelopment starting. So people were fearing the redevelopment would simply engulf them’ (Butetown)

• ‘...it became apparent that physically the environment was going to be like concreted over, as it were ... And the docks were going to be completely altered. So more and more of the physical representation of life as it had been, had been lived was going to disappear. So the recording of it and so was very important (Isle of Dogs)
Mojisola Ojeikere

"We have been harassed and intimidated out of our homes in a scheme that was supposed to make our lives better."

Read Moji's Story