

Trust by Association: A Case of Borrowed Confidence to Grow New Relationships

Kim Gerald
University of Calgary

Abstract

Archival collections shape our collective memory but have historically privileged the records of governments, institutions, and powerful individuals. This practice leads to archival silences that excludes communities outside the mainstream. Building more representative collections requires not only intentional collecting but also rebuilding trust with communities that have been historically underserved by archival institutions. This paper presents a case study from the University of Calgary Archives and Special Collections, examining how a significant queer archival collection was acquired through a process of "borrowed trust". In this case an established relationship between a community historian and a university faculty member created the foundation for a new relationship with the archives, and ultimately led to the donation of an important collection and the development of broader community partnerships. Drawing on scholarship on archival silences and reparative archives, this paper argues that when used carefully trust can be a transferable resource that facilitates ethical collecting, strengthen community relationships, and expand archival representation.

Keywords: Archives, Trust, Collective Memory

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

Archives play a critical role in shaping collective memory, yet they are not neutral institutions. Traditional archival practices have historically privileged records created by governments, institutions, and individuals with social and political power, resulting in significant gaps in the archival record. These omissions, often described as archival silences, disproportionately affect marginalized communities and contribute to the erosion of diverse historical narratives. Contemporary archival scholarship increasingly emphasizes reparative archival practices that seek to address these silences through

community engagement, relationship building, and trust.

This paper examines the role of trust in expanding archival representation through a case study from the University of Calgary, Archives and Special Collections. It explores how a significant queer archival collection was acquired through a process of inherited or "borrowed" trust, whereby an established relationship between a community historian and a university faculty member facilitated a new relationship with the archives. The resulting donation not only helped to begin filling a major gap in the institution's holdings but also created opportunities for broader community

engagement, research, and future collecting initiatives.

Drawing on archival theory and literature on archival silences, collective memory, and reparative archives, this paper argues that trust is a foundational component of ethical collecting practices. The case demonstrates how trust can be transferred through existing relationships and leveraged to foster new partnerships between archives and historically marginalized communities. Ultimately, the paper highlights the importance of transparency, community collaboration, and public engagement in rebuilding trust and strengthening the archival record for future generations.

Background

Archives are not neutral (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). They are spaces of power that hold and shape our collective memory (Carter, 2006). Not all stories will make it into the archives, and the ones that do are often perceived as being more valuable or of holding more historical significance. These narratives will continue to be perpetuated and will inform how society understands and remembers the past.

This is a significant problem, especially in Western archives, where there is a tradition of preserving and promoting the voices of powerful institutions, governments, and people of great wealth or privilege. This tendency tends to result in a single-story narrative that valorizes the accomplishments of individuals over collective movements, and that prioritizes stories of those with political or social capital over those on the margins of society. This method excludes the voices of competing narratives, often omitting the voices of those outside of the mainstream, and in doing so shapes our understanding of the past (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a).

While this tradition of preserving the records of the “great men of history” dates to the Ancient Greeks, 20th century archivists frequently took their queues from Sir Hilary Jenkinson.

Jenkinson (1892-1961) had a renowned career as an archivist in the United Kingdom that

spanned over 50 years, ending with his term as the chief administrative officer at the Public Records Office from 1947 to 1954 (Stapleton, 1983). He is often viewed as the father of archival science, and in 1922 Jenkinson first published his *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922), which is still taught as foundational archival theory.

Working primarily with surviving medieval documents or government records, Jenkinson’s perspective of what types of material has enduring value is already skewed. He tries to sell the archivist as a “neutral custodian” and “devotee of the truth”, whose role is more passive, and whose responsibility is placed on the acceptance and preservation of records from established institutions or people of power (Schwartz & Cook, 2002b). Jenkinson’s view leaves little room for archival appraisal, believing the records from these sources best support the accountability of history (Jenkinson, 1922).

However, even within his lifetime, some of Jenkinson’s theories were already seen as outdated. American contemporary Theodore Schellenberg (1903-1970) even once referred to Jenkinson as an “old fossil” (Smith, 1981). As another foundational theorist for archival practice, Schellenberg believed that the archives must be more selective in the material that they are preserving and strongly advocated for more appraisal within archival practice (Stapleton, 1983). Like Jenkinson, Schellenberg was also working with government records, and he was doing so at a time where new offices, departments, and records were being created in the United States at an unprecedented pace (Stapleton, 1983). Schellenberg understood that there are limitations to the space and capacity within the archives, and that a more robust selection process was needed in order to maintain the archives. However, even while advocating for better selection of archival materials, Schellenberg still prioritized records from places of privilege and power in the same Jenkinsonian tradition.

With these two men as the pillars of archival theory, it is unsurprising that contemporary

archives contain gaps within their collections. Berry (2020) identifies these gaps as “archival silences ... the voices you know should be in collections that simply aren't there”. These silences do not mean that these histories are unimportant or that they have no direct implications for the present day. On the contrary, these stories are incredibly important in order to have an accurate and honest account of the past. However, these gaps indicate that society is at risk of forgetting and that our collective memory is being compromised (Carter, 2006). As memory institutions, archives hold an immense responsibility to keep accurate accounts and must understand that failure to do so can result in the erasure of some narratives altogether. This power to eliminate certain histories from our collective memory has rightfully led to increased criticism for the archives when they privilege, preserve and perpetuate certain histories over others (Sutherland, 2017).

In *Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory*, Schwartz and Cook (2002a) expand on the role archives play in the production of history. They explain that archives are not neutral, and that they are reflective of the values of those who created them (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). Institutions are beholden to stakeholders, investors, and policy, which all shape archival collecting practices. As well, every person who works inside the institution are themselves not neutral and come with their own inherent biases. In many ways the archive itself is a record of society's values at any given time, demonstrating who has worth through shifting collecting policies and archival processing priorities. Fredrikzon and Haffenden remind us that archival erasure is not passive or innocent, but is an intentional choice made everyday and often through mundane activities (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). These circumstances contribute to the power archives have over collective memory, and reinforce the idea that history is both what happened and what is said to have happened (Trouillot, 2015).

The casualties of archival erasure are usually women, BIPOC, queer, disabled, or poor

(Sehgal, 2016). While these groups have always existed, traditional archival records are often lacking in representation in these areas (Carter 2006). Although many archives are making efforts to rectify these gaps, this historic and systemic exclusion has led to a mistrust in institutions to properly care for the records by the members of these communities.

To overcome this mistrust and to fill in archival silences, archives must first recognize the harm they have committed through past practices (Hughes-Watkins, 2018). They must also understand that just because they want to fill in these gaps, these groups are under no obligation to share their histories with the archives. These groups should be cautious when working with institutions that have historically undervalued and underserved them. In her book, *Urgent Archives* (2023), Caswell identifies that there can be value in seeing oneself in the archives, however she also identifies the need for more than just representational or token inclusion (Caswell 2023). Caswell calls for an active shift in conscious recognition of historic harms, followed by meaningful and consistent change (Caswell 2023).

Hughes-Watkins (2018) identifies this work as reparative archives. This is done through mindful engagement and community advocacy (Hughes-Watkins, 2018). It is done with the intention to uplift the community for community's sake and not for the benefit of the archive's reputation. While the end goal is diversification and inclusion of these stories in the collective memory, it is important to remember that it might look different depending on the community. While it could be the inclusion of these records within a traditional archive, it could also be helping to preserve and amplify these records where they are. Reparative archives take a lot of time, as the rebuilding of trust is not always easy, but is vital for creating and protecting a robust collective memory.

Case Study

As a student, I was taught the theories of Jenkinson and Schellenberg. The first records I

worked with were governmental or institutional, but the first people I worked with were from the community. By working with people, it was hard not to notice gaps in the records. Many people were not represented, were underrepresented, or were represented with harmful terminology. As an emerging professional, I felt like this should be an easy fix – I saw the problem, so why couldn't we fix it? Mentors and senior professionals in my field would shake their heads "didn't she know this would take time?".

While I understood that relationships develop over time, I also understood that our perception in the community mattered, and that while we were making some efforts, many initiatives were not visible outside the institutions. If we were not seen as being open to change or growth – how would people know that we were?

In 2022, I became the archivist for Southern Alberta History at the University of Calgary. This role, while still embedded in classical archival tradition, also came with the space and academic freedom to make incremental changes. I was able to present and discuss ideas with colleagues, and I was able to explore the ideas of community trust at conferences across Canada. When looking to create a tangible way to record the diversity in our collections, to identify our gaps and inform our collecting practices, I was immediately joined by colleagues eager to pick up the cause. While all these things were great, one of the most meaningful changes occurred through the borrowed trust of a professor from a different department at the University of Calgary.

The archives were contacted by this professor with a vague request to meet about a possible donation of records. Unsure what these records were, but always happy to chat about the archives, I joined a fellow archivist to meet with this professor, sure that between our subject expertise, one of us could help.

At this meeting, it was revealed that the professor was here on behalf of a friend. This friend was a local historian and had amassed the largest collection of queer archives in Calgary

through years of meticulous research and his own relationship building. With major projects under his belt and limited space to continue his collection, he was now seeking a long-term home for his archives. The professor knew that meetings could be difficult and he chose to act as an intermediary, protected by his place in the institution, to ask us what was possible. It was thanks to this professor's trust in us after this initial meeting that we were then able to meet with the donor about this material.

The archives were very excited about stewarding this material, and personally I was honoured that we were asked. Accepting this material into the archives would allow so many more people to see themselves within the archives, while also helping to fill a known silence. We spent almost a year working with the donor and having him connect with the people who helped build his collection to make sure we were all on board with the records moving to a research institution. These records were about to become a lot more visible than they were in private hands, and we knew that some of this material was sensitive.

After all the work to secure permissions, to arrange and describe, and ingest this material into the University of Calgary collections, I knew our next step was to celebrate. This was good work, and it deserved to be seen. The people who had spent years protecting and preserving these histories on their own deserved to celebrate; as many of them never thought their materials could end up in a space like this.

Through the help of allies on campus, we were able to host a launch party to celebrate the acquisitions of these materials. This event would include a hands-on tour through the new collection, light catering, and space for connection. All the original donors were invited, as well as members of the public. I was able to collect more stories about the records now under our stewardship, as well as meet with people who would be interested in growing the collection down the line in new and meaningful ways. This was all made possible through the continued properties of borrowed trust. By doing this public event with us, the collector signalled his trust in

us, and now those who had trusted him would also view us as trustworthy – at least to some extent. This single event created an entirely new network of people who might be interested in working with us, where they might not have considered it before.

Aside from the potential new donors, professors from across campus also reached out to see how they could incorporate these materials into the classroom. Graduate students reached out about how they could use these materials for their theses. Our perception was shifting; we were gaining a reputation for being open for queer research, after previously having almost no queer collections under our stewardship.

Since the acquisition of this major collection, we have been offered numerous other collections, for which I continue to be grateful. There are so many queer stories we are not yet able to share or support, but I am hopeful that we might be able to one day. I am indebted to our first major donor, and the professor who introduced us, both for their trust in us and for allowing us to borrow that trust to grow these vital collections. Their generosity in trust helped us to fill the void of an almost deafening archival silence.

Lessons Learned

Bruns (2024) writes that “trust is a central component in a partnership to fill archival silences, especially partnerships with historically silenced communities”. My experience growing queer collections at the University of Calgary could not be more accurately captured by a better quote.

By being open and receptive at the first meeting, we set off a chain of events that completely shifted our perception in the community and helped fill an archival gap. While the borrowed trust allowed us to start this process, it was equally as important that we advertised what we were doing through the celebratory event. Quietly taking in that first collection would not have helped us fill this gap in nearly the same capacity. By sharing what we were doing, the community came together in support and made it

the success that it was. It has framed us as being open to change and has brought in new donors, and it is through their continued interest that this project keeps going.

Conclusion

There are silences in every archive, but understanding where they are, and owning up to the policies that created them are fundamental to closing the gaps. It’s important to know how we got here, be conscious of our biases, and be aware of who’s voices we are uplifting, and who’s voices we are excluding, and why we are making these choices.

Traditional archives often excluded those on the margins of society, but their stories deserve to be remembered. At this time, the work of archivists must be focused on reparative archives, and rebuilding trust with all members of our communities. Archives are responsible for preserving the evidence of what came before. They validate our histories and our perspectives, and they hold our collective memories (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). Without these records memories can falter, and these narratives will be lost, and society will be the poorer for it (Schwartz & Cook, 2002a). It is through our collective action these gaps can be filled, all histories can be preserved, and our collective memory can remain sharp.

References

- Berry, D. (2020). *Finding your way through finding aids: The hows and whys of finding aids*. Archives 101. <https://scalar.fas.harvard.edu/finding-your-way-through-finding-aids/index>
- Bruns, E. (2024). Archival silences and avenues to address them: A literature review. *The Serials Librarian*, 85(1–4), 15–26.
- Carter, R. G. S. (2006). Of things said and unsaid: Power, archival silences, and power in silence. *Archivaria*, 61, 215–233.

- Caswell, M. (2023). *Urgent archives: Enacting liberatory memory work*. Routledge.
- Hughes-Watkins, L. (2018). Moving toward a reparative archive: A roadmap for a holistic approach to disrupting homogenous histories in academic repositories and creating inclusive spaces for marginalized voices. *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, 5, Article 6.
- Jenkinson, H. (1922). *A manual of archive administration*. Clarendon Press.
- Schwartz, J. M., & Cook, T. (2002a). Archives, records, and power: The making of modern memory. *Archival Science*, 2(1–2), 1–19.
- Schwartz, J. M., & Cook, T. (2002b). Archives, records, and power: From (postmodern) theory to (archival) performance. *Archival Science*, 2(3–4), 171–185.
- Sehgal, P. (2016, February 2). Fighting “erasure.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/magazine/the-painful-consequences-of-erasure.html>
- Smith, J. F. (1981). T. R. Schellenberg: Americanizer and popularizer. *The American Archivist*, 44(4), 315–322.
- Stapleton, R. (1983). Jenkinson and Schellenberg: A comparison. *Archivaria*, 17, 75–85.
- Sutherland, T. (2017). Archival amnesty: In search of Black American transitional and restorative justice. *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, 2, 1–24.
- Trouillot, M.-R. (2015). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*. Beacon Press.