Archivaria
The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists

"I Can't Wait for You to Die"
A Community Archives Critique

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Number 92, Fall–Winter 2021

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1084741ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1084741ar

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Publisher(s)

Association of Canadian Archivists

ISSN

0318-6954 (print)
1923-6409 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Apple, H. (2021). "I Can't Wait for You to Die": A Community Archives Critique. *Archivaria*, (92), 110–137. https://doi.org/10.7202/1084741ar

Article abstract

Stemming from conflicts over the authority of professional archives to arrange and steward community knowledge, this article outlines the limitations of the archival apparatus to produce the conditions for social liberation through acquisition and offers suggestions for how to operate otherwise, as a collaborator in forgetting. It discusses the origins and revised mission of the Pittsburgh Queer History Project (PQHP) as a reflection of the precarious definition of community archives within the discipline and field of archival science. By retracing the steps in the PQHP's mission, as it moved from being a custodial and exhibit-focused collecting project to acting as a decentralized mobile preservation service, I argue that community archival practice is an important standpoint from which to critically reassess the capacity of institutional archives to create a more conscious and complete history through broader collecting. Specifically, I demonstrate how contemporary attention to the value of community records and community archives is frequently accompanied by a demand for such archives, records, and communities to confess precarity and submit to institutional recordkeeping practices.

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ABSTRACT Stemming from conflicts over the authority of professional archives to arrange and steward community knowledge, this article outlines the limitations of the archival apparatus to produce the conditions for social liberation through acquisition and offers suggestions for how to operate otherwise, as a collaborator in forgetting. It discusses the origins and revised mission of the Pittsburgh Queer History Project (PQHP) as a reflection of the precarious definition of community archives within the discipline and field of archival science. By retracing the steps in the PQHP's mission, as it moved from being a custodial and exhibit-focused collecting project to acting as a decentralized mobile preservation service, I argue that community archival practice is an important standpoint from which to critically reassess the capacity of institutional archives to create a more conscious and complete history through broader collecting. Specifically, I demonstrate how contemporary attention to the value of community records and community archives is frequently accompanied by a demand for such archives, records, and communities to confess precarity and submit to institutional recordkeeping practices.

RÉSUMÉ Tirant ses origines des conflits portant sur la compétence des archives professionnelles pour arranger et gérer les savoirs communautaires, cet article souligne les limites des techniques en archivistiques à produire les conditions pour la libération sociale par l'acquisition et offre des suggestions sur des façons d'opérer autrement, en tant que collaborateur de l'oubli. Il aborde les origines et le mandat révisé du *Pittsburgh Queer History Project (PQHP)* comme reflet de la définition précaire des archives communautaires au sein de la discipline et du domaine de l'archivistique. En retraçant les étapes du mandat du *PQHP*, qui est passé d'un projet de collecte axé sur la gestion de la collection et les expositions à un service de préservation mobile décentralisé, j'avance que les pratiques des archives communautaires offrent un point de vue important à partir duquel réévaluer de manière critique la capacité des archives institutionnelles à créer une histoire plus consciente et plus complète grâce à une collecte plus large. Plus précisément, je démontre comment l'attention contemporaine portée à la valeur des documents et des archives communautaires s'accompagne fréquemment d'une demande pour que ces archives, documents et communautés avouent leur précarité et se soumettent aux pratiques institutionnelles de tenue de documents.

Introduction: Someone is Waiting for Me to Die

While so many of us draw assurance and stability from the documentary promise of archives, community archives, in particular, have pushed the field to consider the strategic value of ambivalence and forgetting. I am a public historian and archivist known for my historical analyses of gay and lesbian after-hours social clubs, which posed as fraternal organizations for protective cover during the mid-20th century in Pittsburgh, PA. Through oral histories and community collection development, I demonstrate that club memberships are not merely antecedents to contemporary forms of local LGBTQ community. Rather, these memberships were historically situated technologies of belonging. Preserving a record of these clubs' internal and external activities has provided a unique documentary perspective on the dramatic transformations of 20th-century urban Pittsburgh, through crises punctuated by racist and anti-poor urban redevelopment campaigns that spurred residential and economic overhauls. Due primarily to their close association with organized crime, as well as to their own diligent efforts to cover their tracks, these institutions remain ambivalently remembered. And for that reason, I have been very careful – as an archivist, a scholar, and a community member – to demonstrate respect for what my narrators choose to tell me about the bygone club era and what they would happily take to the grave.

In contrast to my earliest stages of planning to resuscitate queer history in the "steel city," the social clubs and their evasive traces of membership have taught me that we are not entitled to a queer past. However, this provocation requires significant intellectual scaffolding. My attempt to express it otherwise elicited a response that has become the article's title: "I can't wait for you to die." During the 2019 LGBTQ Archives Libraries Museums and Special Collections (ALMS) annual conference in Berlin, I gave a presentation on the topic of how, as oral historians and archivists, we intervene in the lives of people who we expect to help us fill our notebooks with otherwise unavailable information. I relayed stories about how I changed course in response to narrators who pointedly refused or sowed seeds of doubt about my research questions, questioning the benefit of sharing their memories as part of a public history endeavour. During the Q&A about coming to terms with these refusals to participate in memory work, and about what that has to do with "doing" community archiving, I explained that this kind of research relationship had informed my plans to not publicly archive

a set of diaries I had been given by my key narrator, Robert "Lucky" Johns. They were given to me after years of friendship – of cultivating a relationship of trust that could bear the burden of sharing personal items without the insistence on making them an archival deposit. Plenty of materials did become publicly accessible, as part of collections in the online archives at the Pittsburgh Queer History Project, but these did not. Making these diaries available as part of a rapidly growing and digitally networked public information environment would have meant betraying that trust. Shortly after I explained this decision, an audience member expressed their frustration with it by saying, "I can't wait for you to die so that I can get my hands on all the things that you won't show us."

The aim of this article is to revisit my failure to explain why a community archives might become a collaborator in forgetting and my refusal to acquire a more complete archival body at all costs. I had always been cautious when describing the differences between community and institutional archives projects because the reality seemed to be that there were actually more commonalities than differences in our methods of records stewardship. The flexible nature of "community," which can be deployed as part of an archival mission, has meant that I have occasionally found myself on "community archives" panels with archivists for major corporations and universities who describe their own collecting as community archival work. The elasticity of the term *community* seems to index a time-based definition. Rebecka Sheffield's gay and lesbian community archives ethnography *Documenting Rebellions* is one uniquely in-depth investigation of how community archives form, often under the caveat of precarious conditions, and survive either as independent organizations or by becoming absorbed by institutional repositories whose resources long outlast the community archives' networks of comparatively informal support.[1] This ability to lend or maintain the capacity of "community" archiving across institutions reflects some of the critical theory of community studies. In her own study of gay and lesbian community organizing and archives, Miranda Joseph argued that the polyvalence of *community* under capitalism means the term can be deployed by "any and everyone pressing any sort of cause," from "Clintonian communitarianism [to] Republican family values." Each instance invokes an imaginary

1 Rebecka Taves Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives* (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2020).

pre-political relationship to a more real body of people that could harpoon any other group's politics as artificial by comparison.[2]

My own approach to describing the specificity of community, represented in part by the records and would-be records in question from these after-hours clubs, follows biopolitical and assemblage theories of political organization because they account for the inherent instability that the members describe as a condition of membership. Club members' stories about belonging reference a shifting set of techniques to leverage their belonging as part of a sexual minority community opportunistically surviving during the war on poverty, culture wars, and the AIDS epidemic. Their techniques effectively draw an exclusive – albeit temporary – connection between life and political existence.[3] However, at the scale of the club – which is neither individual nor household nor state and neither purely public nor purely private – the biopolitical model of a "population" as a self-contained organism is ill-fitting. The social club more closely resembles what Manuel DeLanda called a mezzo-level political assemblage.[4] Its formation is a precarious association of components that are simultaneously pulled into other greater assemblages and are themselves temporary assemblages of tenuously congregated components. This is to say, the terms of community are temporary constellations defined by external relationships; meanwhile, *membership* refers to both hostile and amicable expressions of belonging simultaneously. The effect of this model of community, as precarious and inconsistent, is that any one component, even one that appears central (for instance, a club or club owner), should be expected to refuse totalizing preservation, even when the discourse of "community" is leveraged against their refusal to participate. Within the field of archival studies, there is little scholarship that investigates the choice to be a collaborator in archival destruction – let alone scholarship that considers refusal as a form of archival care and responsibility.

Lucky's ambivalence toward my project to more completely "capture" the precarious and enigmatic after-hours world informs my attempt to uphold the value of a community archives' collaboration in this active process that results in

2 Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), vii–viii.

3 Roberto Esposito, "The Enigma of Biopolitics," in *Biopolitics: A Reader*, ed. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

4 Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).*

letting materials escape archivization. However, the response I received, when explaining my decision to collaborate, was, I can't wait for *you* to die – because I know that *you will eventually*, and that archival obstacle of trust will die with you. As community archives, our proximity to community knowledge – including information as well as styles and customs of sharing information – is considered highly valuable, but only if the records that emerge out of our extended archival activities can be expected to be absorbed into a greater collection base. The response reminded me that it is extremely uncommon to find established archives that are able or willing to expend resources on community collections that they do not then absorb into their custody.

I begin this case study in becoming a community archivist/accomplice to destruction with reflection on Lucky's own history with destroying personal materials. I do this to differentiate destruction as mournful from destruction as a melancholic relationship to community archiving. Building from this example, I argue that collaborative record destruction could conceivably be brought into the responsibilities of the community archivist, whose occupation is always already at odds with the profession – regardless of our capacity to refuse its authority. I describe this capacity to refuse the authority of eventual institutional collecting as a kind of archival pessimism, drawing on a genealogy of critical pessimism that is non-system-building, which is to say, strategically unproductive. It is my hope that this article, which repeats the response "I can't wait for you to die," will be helpful in resisting the imperative to archive everything I can get my hands on and in better translating the provocation that the expansion of archival representation is not predisposed to democratizing power or sharing authority with the documented. In some instances, sharing that authority means embracing the unknown and investing your archival resources in forms of work that do not promise to pay the field back.

Lucky's Archival Refusal

In 2012, I formed the Pittsburgh Queer History Project in order to conduct a historical analysis of these after-hours clubs with the aim of making the political life of their memberships legible as a historically situated form of queer mutual aid that has undergone significant transformation during recurring urban redevelopment campaigns, the concurrent globalization of the nation's economy, and

a conservative backlash to public sexual culture. This particular vein of the club era ended in 1988, when a violent raid on the Travelers Social Club sparked a federal court case over the protected status of its primarily homosexual membership.[5] Losing his case, Lucky failed to save the club's members from the threat of future police violence and increased hostility from the Bureau of Liquor Control Enforcement – a privilege that his prior 20-year career in underground nightlife had been staked on. Nearly 40 years after the end of this club era, the political life of membership had become illegible to the LGBTQ community, insofar as the club's continuous history spanned multiple charters and locations and its official documentation obfuscated the membership's sexual, racial, and geographic fluidity. The life of the membership was illegible insofar as it had become a relic of the queer past, publicly tried as a corrupt institution from a closeted bygone era. Finally, membership was illegible insofar as the products of its own practices of media making – including photographs, videos, mixtapes, and paper ephemera – had stopped being produced and stopped circulating and were now held in the home collections of the club's aging staff, who were trying to maintain their livelihoods in the context of ongoing gentrification, a spreading wealth gap, and a novel public health emergency.[6] In my varied approaches to telling these stories, I have used the oral history interviews I recorded with the Travelers club's steward, Robert "Lucky" Johns, along with items from his personal collection, which he gave to me before he passed away. Through exhibitions and a doctoral dissertation, I have pulled together a more coherent documentary and archival collection that attests to the memory of the clubs as indicative of queer social organizations, formed and torn apart by Pittsburgh's regional culture and its shifting position in a global manufacturing economy.

The layers of obfuscation and complexity that shroud a continuous narrative of "membership" defined both the experience of membership and its archival afterlife. Membership is a specific and important term because, unlike most bars and nightclubs, these clubs operated on a chartered, non-profit corporation model of voluntary associations (e.g., hobby clubs, political clubs, ethnic clubs, etc.) They recorded details about every member and required them to show their credentials at the door to gain access. Building on a strategy used contemporane-

5 Travelers Social Club v. City of Pittsburgh, 685 F. Supp. 929 (W.D. Pa. 1988).

6 I mean to speak in tandem about the ongoing AIDS epidemic, happening at the time of the club's collapse, and the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which this writing was completed.

ously by prominent members of organized criminal groups in Pittsburgh, Lucky and several other white gay men found narrow opportunities to cross class boundaries by purchasing orphaned charters and liquor licenses and exploited, for considerable profit, an eager audience in the mid-20th-century gay social world.

Because these charters so effectively masked the interior life of membership, it took me years to track down Lucky and his employees. When I did, I found, to my naïve surprise, that they were not living in a cruel time capsule, waiting to resurface as historical figures. The membership had been annihilated, and people had moved on. Playing out the charter recycling process that had enabled these clubs to exist, contemporary clubs sharing the names of the former "gay after-hours" clubs bore no resemblance to those clubs with conditions of membership in their former lives. What was left of physical evidence resembled an opaque and reflective surface. I was tempted to see my own reflection in this as evidence of a queer history to call my own. In my early years of research, I took a forensic approach to the project by constructing an archive of the club. I sought out every scrap of physical evidence of membership I could find. I was operating under the presumption that the club's memory was something I and others were owed as part of our desire for a queer history. It was comparatively easier to find detailed features about bars, coffeehouses, direct action groups, political collectives, and service organizations for LGBTQ Pittsburghers – but the social clubs were intentionally obscure.

The experience of trying to persuade Lucky to unearth his club collections has since fundamentally changed my position regarding the promise of community archives to redistribute political and cultural power by making community records more accessible.[7] Further, the collection Lucky shared with me, and that he shared it at all, was not something I was entitled to as an interested researcher. It may have been my fantasy once – an expression of the archival imaginary where missing records return from the void to their rightful inheritors.[8] But instead, I have come to realize that he gave them to me because we

7 For further discussion of the political value of archival representation for minority communities writ large, see 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): 56–81. For application of this to the setting of Pittsburgh's "gay after-hours," see Harrison Apple, "The $10,000 Woman: Trans Artifacts in the Pittsburgh Queer History Project Archive," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015): 553–64.

8 Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 53–75.

had developed a relationship based on an understanding that the materials alone were not a history of the clubs. I was obligated to listen for the way he and others told a history of their own memories in conflict with one another – for the ways they described the pain of having outlived a community that once defined them and the feeling of irretrievable loss provoked by my insistence that they recount those memories for me. In this sense, Lucky gave these materials to me because he could not bear to look at them anymore. I have since become their reluctant community archivist.

When I first learned that he still had some of the slides from the old clubs, I pestered him over and over to watch them with me. But the few times he looked at them with me, it was under protest. He would say, "Honey, I don't watch it, because sitting down, you ask me: It's, 'Him? Dead,' 'Him? Dead,' 'Him? Dead.'" The AIDS epidemic and the police violence that hastened the closing of his clubs for good are traumatic stories to retell and reaffirm. Contrary to my assumption, the actual processes of arrangement, description, and endless repetition were not empowering for Lucky. In fact, the material's most authoritative caretaker would have rather they were destroyed.

I was surprised to learn that Lucky wanted to destroy the traces of the Travelers club and that he had already tried on several occasions: once, when he wiped the club's computer records and locked the doors on the last New Year's Eve party, and again, when he burned most of his original slides documenting 30 years of underworld membership. On reflection, I think that living without the records protected his belief that the club's ending was unjustified rather than part of some inevitable flow toward the present. But the records just kept coming back to him, ironically, as gifts from his oldest friends. I call them "digital born agains" because their periodic transfer to VHS – popular in the 1980s – made these materials unpredictably reproductive. The last time they came back to him, they were a Christmas package of 40 DVDs, filled to capacity with video files of low-resolution slideshows that had been ripped from hundreds of tapes over the years (as well as a CD of homoerotic Christmas parody songs). Their reproduction was cheap, rapid, available, and they were disturbing for him to watch. Their reproducibility was a repetition of that trauma, and while that was obvious from his reaction, it has taken me time – really, until now – to recognize this as mournful as opposed to melancholic, the distinction being that mourning and melancholia represent two different reactions to the loss of a love object, something we have given so much of our lives to that living without it entails

losing ourselves.[9] Whereas the concept of mourning was developed in Freudian analysis to describe the slow, painful, and importantly *conscious* acceptance that what was lost is gone, melancholia is a neurosis in which one refuses to accept that loss, often sublimating as a kind of hatred for one's self.

Lucky's mournful relationship to the club era and its artifacts reminds me to revisit Jacques Derrida's thesis on the archival unconscious from *Archive Fever*. The process of archivization is a death-driven destruction of memory.[10] The archive, simultaneously the location of records storage and the authority with which it operates, always works against itself. It consigns memory to an external information object that we steward through an archival afterlife. All this is par for the course for archives literature (and is sometimes mistaken for his thesis), but Derrida's intervention is to examine the archive as a technology for producing our own dissatisfaction with the record and our *subsequent appeal* to archival authority to somehow resolve it. He wrote of the archives in his more critical concluding pages, saying that it

> always attempts to return to the live origin of that which the archive loses while keeping it in a multiplicity of places. . . . They will always be close the one to the other, resembling each other, hardly discernible in their co-implication, and yet radically incompatible, heterogenous, that is to say, different with regard to the origin, in divorce with regard to the arkhē.[11]

Archival mediation, the work of us archivists, is not a completely conscious process of ordered documentation. It is also an unconscious desire to efface ourselves, the archives, our subjects, and our work whenever possible. To connect my experience in Berlin to Derrida's reading of Freud's own archaeological metaphor, we often fool ourselves into thinking that the archives promises to "to get our hands on [the past]," in opposition to the present reality, in which we are actively shattering it in the process of archivization.

9 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Touchstone, 2008), 161–78.

10 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2.

11 Derrida, 98.

This is to say, the archives has a melancholic and destructive tendency rather than a rehabilitative one. Contrary to extending the life of its subjects, it infinitely rehearses their last words. Derrida's *mal d'archive*, translated as "archive fever," is likewise a melancholic response to the archive, perhaps better translated as "archives madness." It is an unconscious, neurotic attachment to the trace of the thing that is no longer there – a pleading with its ghost to answer you from beyond the grave, when all it is capable of is repetition. Borrowing from one of Derrida's examples, it is akin to replaying a voicemail and waiting for it to suddenly speak new sentences.[12] I described my early interest in the archives of membership as "forensic" to clarify that I had believed that archives could speak to me from the past; this interest developed into an ironic compulsion to repeatedly view and study the materials. I attempted to stave off the ruin of archives (which can never be) while planning for their revival.[13] Rather than accept the absence of what they represented, I had begun by trying to reanimate them. The images that I ripped from Lucky's DVDs were like cinders that I tried to piece back together into a coherent record. I went so far as to rip stills from the video slideshows and have them reprinted onto film for an exhibition. Meanwhile, in interviews I conducted with Lucky, he unambiguously described his hostility to these records and was not supportive of their transformation into a simulation of his own authority.

Searching for Refusal in North American Community Archives Education

In reference to the pictures and videos Lucky gave to me, my partner once told me, "He gave you a wound." It was a burden on him to have them around. It is a burden to take them on, to care for memories that are not mine and be responsible for a wound that was not mine. Nonetheless, the archives profession upholds a core value that community records be shepherded into an archives as part of our political responsibility to expand representation of society at large. I have found that the choice to *not* archive them is undertheorized as a meaningful response.

12 Derrida, 62.

13 My position on the inevitability of archival decay and how to work in concert with it is informed by Caitlin DeSilvey's *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

It is pertinent to say that there has recently been more published scholarship on grief work as part of the archivists' professional capacity, including that by Jennifer Douglas. In her article "Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists," she gestures to the framework of a feminist ethics of care, by which archivists might "do right" by creators and their extended communities.[14] However, these interventions into archival training, encouraging archivists to "do right," are also particular to post-acquisition case studies, in which the choice to refuse is moot. When I attempted to consider that choice publicly – specifically, in relation to the few diaries – the response from the profession was, "I can't wait for you to die, so I can get my hands on the stuff you won't show us." And this is the banal contradiction of archives; they just said the quiet part out loud. The production of the archives – including the effort to preserve "community" knowledge – is driven by enforcement of information's precarity. I might interpret "I can't wait for you to die" to mean "Your refusal is meaningless if we can count on getting it later."

Though the archives field is fraught with vocational awe and a desire to see our work as socially empowering and inherently good, it seems we are, at best, benevolent eulogizers. Until I was put in this position of defending a decision to withhold something from the networked archival landscape of increasingly digitized community collections, I had not recognized this irresolvable friction between the archives' claim to empower through acquisition and the archival imperative to expand by any means necessary. My hesitation resonates with other contemporary queer archival scholars working in North America, who have either been tasked with or have actively taken on subcultural community collections. Particularly relevant is the scholarship of T.L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault, which carefully argues that "onlining" trans-feminist-queer cabaret performances would throw the negotiated intimacy of the performance spaces that were documented in their archival video collections into crisis.[15] Similar to my own work with Lucky in remaining critical of the "extraction model" of academic careers built on community research, Cowan and Rault's article on digital media migration for the Cabaret Commons reflects on the conflation of

14 Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas, and Devon Mordell, "'Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists': Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives," *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019): 84–120.

15 T.L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault, "Onlining Queer Acts: Digital Research Ethics and Caring for Risky Archives," *Women and Performance* 28, no. 2 (2018): 121–42.

the benefit of accessibility for a global audience with the preservation of the livelihood of the performers themselves. However, our paths necessarily diverge at the question of whether Lucky's materials become archival collections, analog or otherwise. Where Cowan and Rault advocate against "onlining queer acts" to protect a coherent cultural heritage from absorption into academic capitalist objects, Lucky's materials are themselves vestiges of a queer life deeply indebted to capitalist exploitation. It would be disingenuous to follow their example of appropriating strategies for archival decolonization to defend his decision to take his property to the grave. Rather than working from the position of post-acquisition processing, I am pausing at acquisition, deciding if it is possible to understand a refusal to produce a documentary record as a request to aid in destruction rather than gesturing to cultural or ethnic sovereignty as a better future archival institution.

Community archivists are tasked with putting a premium on the "archival closet" – those items that do not normally see the light of day or enter major collection institutions. For that reason, recognizing refusal as an active approach to archives has not historically been part of our professional tool kit. In response to collections being hidden, we instead describe them as "missing," a sort of fidelity insurance placed on the traces of marginal populations that pays out even if they should fail to become co-operative contributors. I am reminded of Franklin Robinson Jr.'s article on the "archival closet," in which he recounts how he was able to convince donors to contribute personal materials that they had been reluctant to give to the Smithsonian's LGBTQ collections.[16] He describes them as self-selecting what they thought he wanted as an archivist, apart from precious personal effects. And while I am not immune to the morbid pleasure that comes from paging through the personal property of the dead, I have been putting my own sense of archival entitlement in perspective. I wonder, at what point are we archivists unable to distinguish between an indirect refusal and willing participation?

Reflecting on this tension, I do not believe that community archiving is a self-evident form of community care. I am well versed in the reparative language of representational democracy and rehabilitation of symbolic annihilation that is popular in celebrations of community archives when they work.[17] I am thinking

16 Franklin Robinson, Jr., "Queering the Archive," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (2014): 195–99.

17 The writing from the Community Archives Lab at UCLA is a clearer representation of this perspective – that

particularly of the work to organize community archival practice and training at UCLA through the Community Archives Lab. I do not refute the argument that expanded archival representation produces pleasure. I refuse to agree that such representations are capable of effecting redress, especially concerning the term *annihilation*. Where symbolic annihilation is being measured in qualitative terms like the emotional impact of underrepresentation, the archives becomes a metonym for the ongoing condition of suffering rather than its very rehearsal. This begs the question of whether we believe that differential historical consciousness is possible without an archival apparatus – specifically, of whether the choice to destroy one's own trace (say, in the form of a diary) rather than become preservable would be a choice of both power and pleasure on the part of the would-be "documented." Were the archives instead to *get it all*, what do we expect to be able to do differently with it? When confronted with someone's desire to refuse the imperative to archive, we are trained to side with the archives and not the person. I know that I share in that archival rescue complex that is so much part of the discourse of community archives. Rebecka Sheffield tells a related story in *Documenting Rebellions*. At a conference, a Black studies scholar, who is skeptical of the project of queer archives, crumpled up his speech notes during his presentation and tossed them on the floor. Sheffield tells us that he did this to say that if the archives wanted them – for what else does an archives do but profess to want? – they had to take them in this form: balled up and never to be opened again.[18] She describes the discomfort of giving in to the desire to put them in an acid-free container marked, "Do not unfold." Unlike a restricted file, the crumpled papers are allowed to be handled up until an ambiguous limit. Whatever authority that archival reading room imposes stands in stark contrast to this facilitation of temptation. In further personal conversation, Rebecka and I agreed that it seems very likely that the paper has since been opened. But this breach was facilitated, first and foremost, by the dare from their creator to the archives staff to not collect them at all. It is absurd to deny that what is balled up will very quickly be smoothed out and, over time, blur the distinction between indirect refusal and willing participation.

Choosing otherwise is a difficult decision but a productive place from which to reassess what I and many others wish from an archives compared to what

community archives act as a reparative technology that counters "symbolic annihilation."

18 Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions*, 237.

it actually produces. In the past, I rushed to rehabilitate, reorganize, and re-exhibit Lucky's "dark archive" for the exhibition *Lucky After Dark*.[19] But the layers of complexity that emerged from the deceptively simple question, "What did it mean to be a club member?" continued to push against the decision to make his collection public. In retrospect, part of my work ever since has been dedicated to creating as comprehensive a finding aid as I could for a collection that was never intended to see the light of day. As I continue to navigate how to carry on the task of stewarding Lucky's materials, I am keeping that provocation – "I can't wait for you to die " – as a reminder of what community archiving might be about, a clearing house for new releases. "I can't wait for you to die" suggests the urge to collect first and ethically revise later; it conveys a desire to release the relationship of obligation that purportedly exists between archivists, scholars, and a community of records. It cedes power to the archives, letting it chart a records trajectory unfettered by the wishes and desires of the subjects whose experiences it strains to represent.

The Pittsburgh Queer History Project has since existed as an experimental community archives formed by this reluctance to first and foremost broaden collections and increase access. It began as an art practice at Carnegie Mellon University's School of Art, where I was excavating and exhibiting the detritus of 6119 Penn Avenue, an after-hours club room in East Liberty leased by Lauren Goshinski of the VIA Music and New Media Festival.[20] That space had hosted 60 years of different memberships. The artifacts became part of the *I'm Feeling Lucky* group exhibit at the Miller Gallery, now the Miller Institute for Contemporary Art. The art practice of exhibiting the refuse pulled up from under the carpets and plywood mutated into an independent oral history project, in which I sought to fill out the sparse archive of information from county records of club charters and newspaper reports of Liquor Control Board raids on neighbourhood speakeasies. The oral history research led me to Lucky and inspired

19 *Lucky After Dark*, Future Tenant Gallery, Pittsburgh, 2014.

20 Between the 1960s and early 2000s, the club at 6119 Penn Avenue was licensed for the charters of the Perry Social Club, the Republican Club, Cabaret's, Upscale Private Nightclub (which also used an American Legion post in its membership materials), and La Familia. Lauren Goshinski, co-founder of the VIA Music and New Media Festival, had leased the space for the 2013 programming year and invited me to help clean the club in exchange for tickets and to see the old club materials she had already found inside. I collected 600 items that were displayed together alongside a tape donated from the father of the House of Ferré, from the Jump Off Ball that took place there on August 10, 2003. Images and descriptions of these materials can be found at "6119 Penn – Excavation," *harrison-apple* (blog), https://harrisonapple.wordpress.com/6119-penn-excavation/.

the eponymous exhibit of his photographs, supported by a broad university and non-profit foundation sector that had few competing projects under the rubric of 20th-century sexual community history. By the end of the exhibit, I had become a self-appointed community archivist. I was convinced that the value of filling out this imagined archive of queer life in the steel city was self-evident. I had staked my interest in the academic tumults in archival science from the 1970s and '80s and the promise of interventions into the narrow field of records acquisition in state and institutional settings.

Reflecting slivers of the contributions from feminist and new social history scholars, archives criticism of that age seemed to promise broader archival collecting as a slow remedy for the historical processes of political disempowerment, social erasure, and existential suffering.[21] Howard Zinn's "inevitably political craft" challenged archivists – especially government archivists – to refuse training that led them to think of themselves as neutral guardians of institutional and government interests.[22] Archives had too long privileged the most powerful members of society with both selective privacy *and* institutional memory to steer collecting and curation toward their legacies. Gerald Ham likewise pushed contemporaries to direct their eyes to the edge of archival collecting schemes and dive in.[23] The mission of the contemporary archivist was, at the time, to take an ethnographic and scholastic approach toward archival acquisition such that their collections would hold up a mirror to society. Finally, credited with the creation of the "documentation strategy," Helen Willa Samuels asked the self-reflexive question of her field that still echoes today, "Who controls the past?"[24] Archival institutions, which thought of themselves as self-contained and monolithic agencies that collected autonomously and authoritatively, needed to embrace a collaborative strategy to link seemingly unrelated records to one another across collecting institutions to create a more robust and complete record of all possible subjects. Importantly, countercultural influence on the archives inspired some professionals to redirect their collecting efforts to serve the general public. However, these calls to re-engage archival work as

21 I am indebted to Elizabeth Kennedy, who has continued to talk with me about this reluctance to treat a greater body of information as a more powerful force against suffering and exploitation.

22 Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 14–26.

23 Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38, no. 1 (1975): 5–13.

24 Helen W. Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (1986): 109–124.

socially conscious and justice oriented were not necessarily party to the crises taking place in public history scholarship over the ability of academic and professional institutions to act in long-term reciprocity with the subjects of their documentation. Simultaneous public and oral history writing from Michael Frisch, Sherna Gluck, and Ronald Grele had also promised a better and more comprehensive history through extended interest in the intimate lives of everyday people and a conscious effort to reshape historical literatures by incorporating their knowledge into higher education.[25] Where their criticism similarly took World War II–era innovations in recordkeeping to task for a skewed historical illustration of national history, they simultaneously debated the possibility of "shared authority" between narrators and historians in the archives-oriented workflow that directed interviews primarily toward concise transcription and archival deposit.

These scholars, whose work continues to be celebrated for undergirding critical approaches to archives as dynamic and selective institutions, were likewise demonstrating a broader investment in archival collecting as the necessary fuel for social and political practice. Having identified the community archives as my own project's future, I had aligned my early conception of a community archives with contemporary ethnographic research that claimed that it is the very act of collecting which ultimately defines the community archives – in effect applying the status of the title of "archives" more broadly rather than attempting to narrowly define a community "species" of the archives.[26] There are still criticisms from archives professionals who are resistant to lending the designation of "archives" too widely. To some, it represents a dilution of profes-

25 Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990); Sherna Gluck, "What's So Special About Women? Women's Oral History," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no. 2 (1997): 3–17; Ronald Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1985).

26 For two examples of community-archives impact studies, see Andrew Flinn, "Archival Activism: Independent and Community-Led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions," *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 7, no. 2 (2011); and Alana Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014). Despite this recognition of community archives as a legitimate form of record stewardship, there is a consistent failure within the field to make a meaningful distinction between community archives and institutional archives, beyond gesturing to the mutability of the term *community*. Even in the anxious criticisms about "lending" the status of archives too liberally, the community archives is imagined to be a temporary solution to exclusivity – an institutional adoption of ever-precarious community knowledge. "Community archives" are perhaps better defined by their methods, which create stumbling blocks to acquisition, than by their subject matter.

sional archival tradition; for others, a failure to understand archival science as its true origin story.[27] But such critiques cannot deny that "community" archives are urged to fulfill something otherwise unavailable in mainstream institutions. Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens have argued that "most, if not all, community archives are motivated . . . by the failure of mainstream heritage organizations to collect, preserve, and make accessible collections and histories that properly reflect and accurately represent the stories of *all* of society."[28] Similar to Flinn and Stevens' work, Sheffield and Alana Kumbier's respective archival ethnographies share descriptions of community archives as "archiving from the ground up," suggesting an alternate orientation and outcome by virtue of beginning from outside the archives proper. This future-situated, "more complete" archival imaginary is a logical outgrowth of the late postmodern turn in archival studies to combat social inequality by representing the lack of archives and professing to want for the whole of society – all while maintaining the profession's proprietary expertise as the authority under which community archives are permitted to operate.

Notwithstanding this celebration of the community archives, the relationship of an institutional archive to a community archive continuously pulls information resources from the margins toward the centre. In my experience as a community archivist, this is represented by the recurring offer to be lent expertise but never financial resources to maintain collections we have taken on.[29] Stemming from the presumption that institutional acquisition is the future of all community archives, this misunderstanding about the relationship between institutional and community archives represents a problem for meaningfully distinguishing between them and is a site of recurring contentious intervention from community members themselves.

An exemplary illustration I am reminded of is the scene in Cheryl Dunye's 1997 film *The Watermelon Woman*, where the lead character, also Cheryl, is in

27 Kumbier, *Ephemeral Material*, 108.

28 Andrew Flinn and Mary Stevens, "'It Is Noh Mistri, Wi Mekin Histri': Telling Our Own Story: Independent and Community Archives in the UK, Challenging and Subverting the Mainstream," in *Community Archives: The Shaping of Memory*, ed. Jeanette Bastian and Ben Alexander (London: Facet Publishing, 2009), 6. (emphasis added).

29 It bears repeating: I can maintain a non-public community archives to share club materials with the members who have since been scattered across the city and country, but when I suddenly die, these collections are momentarily free to be taken up rather than exclusively "passed down."

search of information about a little-known Black lesbian film actress. A friend of Cheryl's suggests she visit CLIT – the Center for Lesbian Information and Technology. CLIT is an unmistakable parody of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, NY – one of the archives also studied by Rebecka Sheffield and noted for its exceptional funding base, which has allowed it to remain autonomous for decades. When she enters the archives, her visit is guided by M.J., a volunteer archivist played by Sarah Schulman, who speaks in repeating taglines: "Welcome, sister. . . . We are an all-volunteer-run collective."[30] The reading-room environment mirrors that of a typical library and archives setting (underfunded but standing), limiting access to materials to one box at a time while monitoring Cheryl's activity from a close distance. Dunye frames the racial drama within CLIT, in which the "Black" materials are kept "very separate" in decaying boxes so that they are more easily identifiable, as a categorical catastrophe for the overarching project of lesbian sisterhood. Finally, M.J. screams at Cheryl for attempting to shoot video footage of photographs. It is made clear to the audience that, at CLIT, no amount of closeness between the archive and the community precludes the use of professional methods for refusing intervention by the community itself. At the close of the scene, Cheryl placates an angry M.J. until she leaves the frame again and continues to hold up photos to the camera, saying to her camerawoman, "Get it Annie. Get it all." I include Dunye's truth-telling caricature to return to the question of whether the "community archives" as we know it is a technology capable of countering the restrictive functions of the archives or if it exclusively allows appointed representatives to temporarily occupy that same position of power.[31]

30 Cheryl Dunye, Barry Swimar, Alexandra Juhasz, Guinevere Turner, Valerie Walker, and Lisa Marie Bronson. *The Watermelon Woman* (New York, NY: First-Run Features, 1997).

31 Consider, also, the example of ironic archival impulses in Carrie Mae Weems' battle, in which Harvard University and the Peabody Museum attempted to sue her over the unauthorized appropriation of 19th-century eugenicist daguerreotypes of enslaved people. Her work *From Here I Saw What Happened, and I Cried* was itself about the colonial legacy of slave-making and image-making that continued to benefit Harvard and its museum.

Archival Shared Authority

I think that community archivists – myself included – often start descriptions of our work with the false premise that we (as individuals) and the archives are one and the same. The amount of labour it takes to create and maintain collections easily fosters a possessive relationship. While composing these questions about the violence of archival practices and my participation in them, I am quick to recall my experiences with those people who have *readily* volunteered to contribute testimony and artifacts. I think of Lucky's home health care aide, Jay, saying to me as we first met, "Thank god. Someone finally came to hear these stories," and of the subsequent years of interviews and object donations from bar owners, employees, performers, and patrons. This primary scene of community archiving that I recall is about gratitude and collaborative acquisition. But since the slip "I can't wait for you to die," I have tried to resist substituting these selected experiences for evidence of what community archives essentially are. Joan Scott's "Evidence of Experience" argues that experience is "not the origin of our explanation" – it is not *evidence* in that sense. Rather, experience is "that which we seek to explain."[32] Building on Scott, I mean to say that my own experiences of amiable collaboration have the potential to crowd out the larger scale of archival labour that takes place elsewhere. Why must I believe that community archiving is an emotionally powerful and politically empowering technology? In the gratitude scenario I have just described, the interaction between the archivist and the willing participant is a metonym for archival practice. This scene of gratitude really stands in for an entirely different scenario. Given the robust criticism about the general lack of awareness of the daily drudgery that is archival labour, this scene, in which I or others take the place of the archives, is a conscious repudiation of something we *also* know to be true: archival work is quite lonely and narcissistic.[33] Looking back again to Derrida, we work in

32 Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 780.

33 Michelle Caswell's "'The Archive' is not an Archives" is a popular piece written to identify the "parallel tracks" of archive(s) scholarship in the information science field and the humanities at large; in it, she also argues that archival science's intellectual labour about how we define "records" and model their stewardship is left out of the humanities discourse. See Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016). See also the Society of American Archivists section, "Lone Arrangers."

isolation, preserving the contents of collections such that we might forget that we are tethering our politics to a mimesis.

Community archives are notoriously underfunded, relying on precarious workers and volunteers who do the work because of an investment in the archive's mission. Working long hours in isolation necessarily fosters a deep personal connection between the archivist and the collections they steward. For a visual, consider for a moment the myth of Narcissus, staring at a reflective representation, as if the polished surface of the pond were its history neatly encapsulated. I think it is easy to treat that possessive relationship to archival material as a closeness to the person the material is meant to represent. We could benefit by heeding the warnings from critical theorists of representation like John Berger, who argued, in *About Looking*, that events and subjects have been made so absolutely marginal in the process of representation, that no amount of concentration can ever re-centre them.[34] Rather than concede the material to the expansive gaze of the archives as an actual resting place for the dead, could we instead focus our concentration on its own history, even as it longs for deconstruction – longs to fall apart and unfold before us as part of its own context of creation? Caitlin DeSilvey's *Curated Decay* is a particularly kindred piece of scholarship that attempts to translate artifact decay as a meaningful choice in heritage preservation. I have tried to understand this as a similar movement toward recognizing and responding accordingly to a community member's refusal to contribute to or participate in the archival endeavour.[35]

While a number of contemporary community archives scholars have advocated for a participatory ethos as a way to preclude alienation and refusal, it is also true that few donors wish to spend their time reminiscing, especially as it concerns heartbreak, loss, and personal violence.[36] To insist otherwise is a disavowal of the archives as a historical technology of depersonalization and centralized subject authority. How else do we relate to those who feel disappointed or even cheated

34 John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 22.

35 Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

36 Iacovino (2010) and Shilton and Srinivasan (2007) both discuss the merits of participatory appraisal and description methods, which are particularly useful for mirroring lived social knowledge in archives organization structure. Livia Iacovino, "Rethinking Archival, Ethical and Legal Frameworks for Records of Indigenous Australian Communities: A Participant Relationship Model of Rights and Responsibilities," *Archival Science* 10, no. 4 (2010); Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections," *Archivaria* 63 (Spring 2007).

by the process of appraisal that deselects materials for acquisition? By definition, archives must create collections by removing them from their living context. This disavowal refuses the archivist (ourselves) as a social being, shaped by that very technology, in favour of a reversed relationship – where a mere change in terms of the objects that we collect stands in for a revolutionary change of outcome, in which the archives becomes the thing it must destroy as a consequence of excavation and preservation. A change of collecting interest does not disrupt the archival technology of documentation in order to give power *away* to the subjects whose representations the archives collects. Rather, the archives becomes the autonomous arbiter of the subjects' mimesis – a figure ever ready to respond to the prodding of archival users. As Anthony Dunbar has argued regarding the obstacles to creating equitable practices between archives and Black communities, the structures of the archival profession maintain a lockstep that holds the power of the documenters and the docility of the documented firmly in place.[37]

Regardless of the institution, we reproduce the asymmetrical power dynamic of the documenters and the documented because it is our professional survival at stake. When the political imperative to expand representation collides with an under-examined refusal to comply, "I can't wait for you to die" is the result. It is a rare moment of clarity that was likely only possible between friends who share an inside view of that particular self-deception but differ in their flexibility and permission to try something new. When I think of the meaning of "I can't wait for you to die," I find myself in ironic alignment with one of my least favourite scholars of oral and public history, Daphne Patai, whose contribution to the follow-up edition of *Women's Words* harshly criticized feminist and queer oral history practice as delusional in its claim to be socially empowering and justice oriented.[38] In an act that she once proclaimed as playing the labourer *and* the capitalist, oral history produces more representations of precarious lives for the archives as part of academic career building.[39] By this, she means that

37 Anthony Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started," *Archival Science* 6, no. 1 (2006): 109–129.

38 Daphne Patai, "When is Enough Enough?" in *Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki, and Franca Iacovetta (London: Routledge, 2018), 48–55, 48.

39 Daphne Patai, "Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or, Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?" *International Journal of Oral History* 8, no. 1 (1987): 5–27. Patai is best known for her current transphobic, racist, and

oral history makes a dubious claim to solidarity. Patai's extreme political bias (evidenced by her recurring ultraconservative editorials about identity politics and higher education) reveals a parallel suspicion against the equation of increased data collection with a redistribution of power through representation. "I can't wait for you to die" expresses a hastening of the process of community documentation exhibited across institutional and community archiving. It is an expression of archives as a historical technology that, first and foremost, seeks to grow to the size of its container and assert an overarching subject authority; it cannot help it, nor can archivists continue to operate without this reality unless we are actually willing to abandon our responsibilities when necessary. My unexpected affinity for Patai's polemic suggests that success in making archival and academic work empowering and redistributive would be unrecognizable within the specific terms of scholastic productivity and archival professionalization.[40]

Conclusion: Turning to Community Archives Pessimism

Since receiving the simultaneously admiring and admonishing notice "I can't wait for you to die," I have tried to describe my position as a part of a pessimist archival practice. Here, I am referencing pessimism as part of the philosophical pessimism described by Joshua Foa Dienstag as a non-system-building philosophy – a way of life that is the twin of modernity's more prominent optimism.[41] Rather than describing a despondent psychological disorder or a theory of immanent social decline, pessimism defends a denial of inevitable progress.[42]

xenophobic editorials. I point to her partly to share in the absurdity, but I should clarify that her conclusion is that academia is incapable of producing social justice outcomes and should stop pretending, whereas I believe that we can choose to produce such outcomes in ways that are ultimately unproductive for the academy if we are willing to accept the potential loss of rewards and professional esteem.

40 My ongoing questions about professional productivity and community oral history work have benefited from the sympathy and solidarity of many people, but I am especially thankful for conversations I have had with Laura Murray of Queen's University, Linda Shopes of Goucher College, Danielle Dulken at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Nikki Yeboah of San Jose State University, Sam Iti Prendergast of New York University, Heather Menefee of Northwestern University, and Jess Reece Holler and Fanny Julissa Garcia of Groundswell. These conversations took place around the Oral History Association and the Personal Digital Archiving annual conferences.

41 Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

42 Dienstag, 18.

In terms of archives as part of a society, I mean to say that, rather than hold out hope or place insurance on a bigger and better archive to redress injustice and erasure, I am interested in understanding how archives may be inherently productive of their own wanting, absences – that is, to say that "ruin" is something archives are capable of producing. They may even be quite good at it. By pessimist archival practice, I mean to suggest an opposing view to the archival optimism that was born of the promise to reproduce democracy through representation in the archives. Dienstag's most recent investigation of a political theory of representation in film and politics, similarly, takes a critical look at the relationship between representation and empowerment. He writes, of optimism, that it "takes many forms, both cinematic and political, but as a shorthand, we can think of the easy equation of representation and empowerment that is often made when considering both Congress and Hollywood"; however, the pleasure received and the feeling of power or freedom provided by the experience of mimesis (the experience of seeing someone like ourselves in positions of authority) does not necessarily produce that condition of empowerment or further democratize power over history.[43] Nor is that failure the fault of an imperfect mimesis in the form of a film, political representative, or in my own exploration, a fonds of records. As they concern claiming histories we feel we are owed but had previously lost, community archives provide the replayable trace, an illusion of interaction with the past.

Mediating our engagement with community history through archives is relatively risk free compared to the actual conditions of being together in community, including with those who would not have you. I *have* to be able to choose not to archive – to choose unproductivity when it is requested. That choice should not terrify us. It is the result of cultivating and being in those relationships that make knowledge-sharing possible in the first place, even if that means, ironically, a relationship with a community "elder" who actively refuses to produce endless records for my cause. Rather than hope to correct someone's refusal to give in – desiring to replace the recalcitrant subject with information objects that we know how to manage – I am asking about my trained impulse to wait around for someone to die so that I can claim the reward of what is left behind.

43 Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Cinema Pessimism: A Political Theory of Representation and Reciprocity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 13.

As an expression, "I can't wait for you to die" is a promise to not intervene in or understand another's present suffering. Reflecting on Nietzsche's "On the Use and Abuse of History for Life," I find that this train of thought refuses to intervene because the record someone leaves behind has been made all the more valuable by their precarity and eventual antiquity.[44] And *precarity* is what seems to bring value to the community records, even to the point of imagining an archivist hastening the decay that will allow access to them.[45] Since Lucky's passing, instead of precarity, I have focused when possible on desire as the basis for my research relationships.[46] Where I had begun my work in a forensic frenzy to reconstruct the past through acquiring scraps of memorabilia, I later learned that what I was more likely to be asked to do was help people maintain the collections they already had going on. I turned away from the acquisition and exhibition format toward what we have been calling "preservation in place": teaching people to use their home computers, access public technology, set up dates to look for themselves in slideshows, make copies of materials for loved ones, even digitize home pornography collections so they can be replayed and enjoyed over and over again. These activities, which introduce new friendships and reconnect long lost ones, are where I frequently and unproductively turn away from the archives. I consider this to be support for collecting that is already taking place and has not asked to be "rescued" by the profession. I put my energy into keeping it ongoing because it has become clear that the effective stewardship of the long lives of records is not always delivered by the tradition of custodianship.

As Joel Wurl argued in "Ethnicity as Provenance," there is plenty of room to be critical of the custodial roots of archives and of their imperative function to

44 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, trans. Ian C. Johnston (Arlington, VA: Richer Resources Publications, 2010), 1–46. Caitlin DeSilvey's *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* offers an important intervention into "not intervening" as it returns to cultural heritage sites, where the author reflects on the process of decay as part of the long lives of records.

45 The history of "looking" has a lot to say about how we attempt to forensically reconstruct a queer genealogy for ourselves through image taking. I think of Susan Sontag's essay "In Plato's Cave," where she wrote "people robbed of their past seem to make the most fervent picture takers, at home and abroad." Susan Sontag, "In Plato's Cave," in *On Photography* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1977), 7. For Sontag, the camera was our consciousness in its acquisitive mood, cutting reality into a flow of atomized events that can be infinitely reframed to meet us where we are. As Sontag argued that we are a society shaped by the photograph, I feel similarly regarding archivists as social beings shaped by the archives.

46 Lucky died in June 2014 during the *Lucky After Dark* exhibit. He entered the Veterans Affairs hospital on the day before the opening and was never able to attend, though I cannot be sure he would necessarily have wanted to.

secure the property rights to records for a repository.[47] I often turn to Wurl's essay as a source of inspiration for thinking through post-custodial archival possibilities.[48] While the contemporary North American archival ethos imagines custodianship as the defining principle of archives, Wurl – now 15 years ago – advocated for a shift toward stewardship characterized by long-haul association between repositories and communities of origin. Departing from the "totalizing" mentality of custodial collecting, "stewardship recognizes the misleading futility of referring to a repository's holdings as anything more than a [limited] selection of potentially useful sources."[49] I am thankful to the queer ethnographers and oral historians whose writing has also helped me to reflect on listening for what people want, especially as their wants have conflicted with my expectations for interview encounters and archival acquisition discussions. Horacio Roque-Ramirez's haunting contribution to *Bodies of Evidence*, in which he grieves for his friend and narrator Alberta Nevarez (a.k.a. Teresita La Campesina), clarified for me that their relationship and those I have developed in my own work *are the method of stewardship*.[50] Stewardship in this sense more closely resembles a risky erotic and ongoing relationship than a sterile conservatorship.[51] Roque-Ramirez' meditation on Teresita flows into a reassessment of Michael Frisch's concept of "authority" and places this squarely within the question of pace. Where Frisch had already acknowledged the rapid degradation of the reciprocal value of scholarship to community narrators down the publishing track, Roque-Ramirez points to Teresita's illiteracy as another clear boundary with which to frame

47 Joel Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles Documenting the Immigrant Experience," *Archival Issues* 29, no. 1 (2005): 72.

48 I am grateful to Michelle Caswell, who recommended this article to me during the October 2017 Arizona Archives Summit, and to Jamie Lee, whose seminar on Information & Power allowed for my seminar-paper-length exploration of this approach to stewardship in relation to the provenance of nightclub drag VHS collections.

49 Wurl, 72.

50 Nan Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramírez, eds., *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

51 Esther Newton also wrote about the research relationship this way. In regard to her informants from Cherry Grove – and especially Kay, in "My Best Informant's Dress" – she says, "Information has always flowed to me in a medium of emotion – ranging from the passionate (although unconsummated) erotic attachment to profound affection to lively interest – that empowers me in my projects and, when it is reciprocated, helps motivate informants to put up with my questions and intrusions." Esther Newton, "My Best Informant's Dress: The Erotic Equation in Fieldwork," *Cultural Anthropology* 8, no. 1 (1993): 3–23.

where authority over her narrative remains co-operative and mutually beneficial even though this may seem slow or unproductive in terms of the profession.

I see Frisch and Roque-Ramirez as sharing a framework with Cowan and Rault and with Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, whose reflections on archival processing come to a similar conclusion about the need to name "slowness" as an ethical response to the rapid consumption model of academic labour that urges academics to make their relationships with narrators convenient to the publish or perish model.[52] While I have been inspired by Wurl's plea to the North American archival profession, and by Roque-Ramirez' grief for the end of the kind of work he could only do *with* Teresita, my point is to land on this shared authority over preservation as a relationship of mutual pleasure that, like any relationship, can and should be able to be revoked.

This is how I understand Lucky's and my relationship as it concerns the archiving of his diaries and the revocation of archival authority that I suggested on stage at ALMS in Berlin. I believe that, while an archives (and an archivist who so closely identifies with an archives) genuinely wishes to preserve that representation for the greater good, "I can't wait for you to die" is the counter-intuitive but logical response to anyone who denies the archivists' imperative to "do right." I do not mean to dismiss the value of acquisition out of hand – an act I often fear or maybe fantasize as the response to this provocation. I, too, take on physical collections, and I relish the opportunity to enhance the breadth of our cultural and memory institutions' holdings. What I am saying is that there is an illusion about archives that this response should help us to disabuse ourselves of: the illusion that archival stewardship is justice itself – and that refusing that archival imperative to expand is a form of corruption. I have seen myself as promoting a form of archival pessimism that responds to the ambivalence of subjects toward the particular kind of institutional memory promised by archivization and supports their decision to strategically withhold themselves from this. In other words, I am trying to continue archiving while remaining aware that neither the profession nor the technology's teleology is actually pointed toward empowerment, and that refusing the imperative to archive does not represent an absence of care. I am leaving room for the possibility to refuse. I would hazard a guess that if there is such a thing as an inherently liberatory archives coming, we would do better to expect the unexpected – that such a

52 Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, "Toward Slow Archives," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 87–116.

liberatory apparatus may bear no resemblance to archives as we know them and may be something we would be forced to say is "not even an archives," which is where I have been accused of going for some time.

Archival stewardship, framed as such, is a long-haul relationship and something we have to invent, perhaps even through actions that may seem counterintuitive. Stewardship arrives to each archival context somewhat undetermined, and it is there that the possibility for refusal and reinvention is most at hand. There is a creative perversity in intergenerational queer relationships. Borrowing from Foucault's thoughts on friendship as the bridge across the age gap, I would say that stewardship is "the sum of everything through which we can give each other pleasure."[53] That last little holdout, between living memory and custodial futures, is where I intend to focus. I intend to move slowly as an archivist. It is a perk that someone is waiting for me to die.

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53 Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Lifestyle: An Interview with Michel Foucault," *Gay Information* 7 (Spring 1981): 4.