08. CHALLENGING OPPRESSIVE LEGACIES THROUGH ARCHIVAL PRAXIS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Introduction: Activism in digital archival praxis

Archivy, the discipline of archives, combines two interconnected forms of archival work: the theoretical and scholarly work of academic archival studies and the practical work of archives management.[1] The two branches of the discipline are interdependent and mutually informative: most archival scholars are also archives practitioners while many practitioners also continue to develop their practice through professional networks and academic engagement. Across this spectrum of archival work, personal professional responsibility is taken very seriously. Most archival workers – who may well bear sole responsibility for archives – are highly conscious of the influence their individual decisions will have on the preservation of and access to the records in their care. Unsurprisingly, therefore, much archival scholarship reflects a keen self-awareness about the impact of conscious and unconscious bias both in archival work and in archival collections. The practice of stating personal positionality is a common one in archival studies publications.

This acknowledgment of personal positionality has developed largely as a challenge to traditional ideas of the archivist as a neutral custodian of records and the information they carry: a notion that underpinned much of the foundational archival theory that emerged predominantly in western Europe around the turn of the twentieth century. As Randall C. Jimerson, an established US-based archival scholar, stated in 2007: 'Archivists cannot escape by hiding behind a veil of innocence, neutrality, and impartiality'.[2] Archival praxis affects how records are encountered, accessed, understood and activated, and many in the profession actively work to turn this influence to a wider social good. The turn from custody to access as archivists' key work, of which decolonial archival scholar Jeanette A. Bastian was an early and influential advocate, is an important aspect of this development.[3] Individual archivists may differ, however, in whether they perceive their engagement with and pursuance of these developments as a form of activism within their profession or simply as conscientious professionalism.

In the introduction to their 2015 special issue of *Archival Science* on 'archiving activism and activist archiving', Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander describe two forms of archival praxis that '[reject] professional advocacy of neutrality and passivity'. They call these approaches 'active archiving' and 'archival activism' and define them as follows:

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1 On the term 'archivy', see the Society of American Archivists', *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archivy.html.

2 Randall C. Jimerson, 'Archives for All: Professional Responsibility and Social Justice', *The American Archivist* 70.2 (2007): 270.

3 See Jeanette A. Bastian, 'Taking Custody, Giving Access: A Postcustodial Role for a New Century', *Archivaria* 53 (2002): 76–93.

> an active archivist or active archiving describes an approach to archival practice which [. . .] acknowledges the role of the recordkeeper in 'actively' participating in the creation, management and pluralization of archives and seeks to understand and guide the impact of that active role. [. . .] Archival activism describes activities in which archivists, frequently professionally trained and employed but not exclusively so, seek to campaign on issues such as access rights or participatory rights within records' control systems or act to deploy their archival collections to support activist groups and social justice aims.[4]

These definitions highlight the intersection between theoretical, practical and activist approaches to archival work. At each of these levels, archives workers and users seek solutions to questions around equity and social justice and learn from one another.

As I will highlight in this chapter, this includes challenges and reforms to established archival praxis and principles, particularly where these were founded on assumptions that reflect and often support the interests of dominant cultural and social groups. The reconsideration of established praxis is especially relevant as archivists adapt their work to digital technologies and explore possibilities for digital innovation in different areas of their profession. I argue that in this area, Flinn and Alexander's definition of active archiving must meet activist archiving in order to avoid reproducing in accessible, digital form the oppressive hierarchies that have marked archival traditions.

I begin this chapter by providing more background and context to the myth of archival neutrality, and in particular, will focus on the oppressive structures it perpetuates and the risks it poses to digital projects with a progressive, social justice-oriented aim. I then consider some examples of how digital projects, including both digital repositories for existing archival records and new digital archives, have been challenging injustices embedded in archival records and structures. Through these examples, I make the case that archivists have a responsibility to acknowledge the potential risks of replicating accepted archival norms and practices in digital innovation.

My own professional positionality in these debates is that of a qualified archivist as well as that of a user of archives for academic research with a particular interest in marginalized voices and experiences and how these can be recovered from archival records. Digital innovation can provide wonderful opportunities for increasing the visibility, accessibility and recognition of such marginalized experiences, but unless it is approached with care, conscientiousness and, wherever possible, collaboration with affected subjects and communities, archivists risk perpetuating the very violence, exclusion and oppression we seek to challenge.

The myth of archival neutrality

Few archivists would embrace the role famously challenged by the late Terry Cook, an influential Canadian archival theorist, as 'neutral, invisible, silent handmaidens of historical research'. [5]

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4 Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander, '''Humanizing an Inevitability Political Craft'': Introduction to the Special Issue on Archiving Activism and Activist Archiving', *Archival Science* 15 (2015): 331.

5 Terry Cook, 'Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing

Nevertheless, the idea of the archivist as a neutral custodian has a long history and remains current; in defining how it is rejected by some archivists, Flinn and Alexander acknowledge that 'professional advocacy of neutrality and passivity' still exists. Rooted in the work of foundational archival theorist Hilary Jenkinson, it is based on the perception that archivists' paramount responsibility is to preserve records as carriers of information. In this understanding, archivists' role is perceived as an almost passive one, focusing on storage and care of documents.[6] Activities like accessioning and cataloging are viewed as neutral and impartial. Whether they are acknowledged or not, however, it is evident that the perspective and priorities of the archivist are likely to emerge, for instance, in decisions about the acquisition of material and in word choice in record descriptions, even when these are circumscribed by institutional policies on collection and description.

In addition, the records that make up archives can never be neutral and the majority are likely to be representative of dominant cultures and identities, structures and hierarchies. Michelle Caswell, an archival scholar with a strong interest in social justice, argues that '[c]ontrary to positivist conceptions, records aren't neutral by-products of activity; they are discursive agents through which power is made manifest. Records both produce and are produced by violent acts'.[7] In addition, the structures and institutions within which the records are collected, preserved and made accessible (or not) are far from neutral either. Of course, many institutional archives do not expect to be so as they have specific remits and policies reflecting their organization's priorities and aims; non-institutional archives too may be aimed at collecting the history and experience of specific communities. Many institutional archives, however, still largely represent dominant cultures and social norms and also serve their interest, whether intentionally or not. For an archivist to embrace the role of 'neutral custodian' thus constitutes an acceptance of the status-quo and the hierarchies and exclusions this entails.

Over the last twenty years, Jimerson has been one of a number of prominent voices arguing for social justice to be an acknowledged component of archival work. In a 2007 article entitled 'Archives for all: Professional responsibility and social justice', he stated:

> Archivists have only recently begun to re-examine their assumptions about the neutrality and objectivity of archives. In the 'information age', knowledge is power. This power gives those who determine what records will be preserved for future generations a significant degree of influence. Archivists must embrace this power, rather than continuing to deny its existence.[8]

Social Memory' in Francis X. Blouin and William G. Rosenberg (eds), *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007, 170.

6 The strong emphasis on custody of archives is central to Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922.

7 Michelle Caswell, 'Not Just Between Us: A Riposte to Mark Greene', *The American Archivist* 76.2 (2013): 605.

8 Jimerson, 'Archives for All': 254.

In 2013, the late Mark A. Greene, a Fellow and past president of the Society of American Archivists (SAA), used the society's annual conference and a special issue of its journal *The American Archivist* to enter into a debate with Jimerson around what he called 'social justice as an archival imperative'. Greene argued for a neutral, impartial approach to collecting so as to enable archivists to gain the confidence of donors across the social and political spectrum and thus to collect a wide range of records to represent a broad cross-section of society.[9] Greene's article was justly criticized by others in the archives studies community, notably Caswell and scholar of archives and human rights violations Mario H. Ramírez. They challenged both Greene's argument and his approach of addressing Jimerson directly in an SAA-centered debate, arguing that this situated the question in the homosocial context of white professional men to the implicit exclusion of scholars, subjects and users of archives belonging to marginalized groups disadvantaged by existing hierarchies.[10]

The responses to Greene are representative of a strong tendency in archival scholarship towards the rethinking of archival principles and the reform of archival praxis informed by social justice aims, as Flinn and Alexander's special issue also demonstrates. Attitudes to these issues vary among archival practitioners less involved in scholarly debates and/or activist movements, however. Some may still feel strongly attached to their training in traditional methods which emphasized their 'neutral custodian' role, considering their first priority to be the preservation and safekeeping of the archives in their care; the remit and priorities of their institution may well see this as their role too. Many others, however, are actively seeking to use their influence to make their archives more accessible, equitable and just.[11] For instance, where institutional constraints and collection policies allow this, many archives are consciously broadening their acquisitions so their archives can begin to represent communities that have historically been marginalized. In 2022, the Utrechts Archief, Utrecht's local authority archive, participated in the celebration of the city's 900th anniversary with a high-profile exhibition entitled 'Gekomen om te blijven' [Come to stay], showcasing the stories of past and present inhabitants of the city through portraits, oral history, performance and interactive initiatives such as a walking tour.[12] A significant proportion of these stories reflected migrant experiences from the (very) recent and more distant past, publicly recognizing the influence of migration on local history through the ages.

Many projects intended to make archival holdings more inclusive incorporate participatory practices, where members of the relevant community are invited to contribute to the construction of the collection. This often happens at the level of record descriptions to ensure

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9 Mark A. Greene, 'A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We're Doing That's All That Important?', *The American Archivist* 76.2 (2013): 302–334.

10 See Caswell, 'Not Just Between Us'; and Mario H. Ramírez, 'Being Assumed not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative', *The American Archivist* 78.2 (2015): 339–356.

11 I discovered examples of both attitudes during my dissertation research for my MA in Archives and Records Management (UCL, 2021). Some of the results of this project have been published in my article Flore Janssen, 'Engagement with Decolonizing Archival Practices in the UK Archives Sector: A Survey of Archives Workers' Attitudes', *Archives and Records* 44.1 (2023): 95–119.

12 'Gekomen om te blijven', *Utrechts Archief*, hetutrechtsarchief.nl/ontdekken/tentoonstellingen/tentoonstellingen-uit-het-verleden/724-gekomen-om-te-blijven

that these are free from the errors and insensitivities that can be written in when the archivist does not know the community and its customs. This is far from the only way that affected communities may be invited to participate in archives, however: methods for participatory recordkeeping, curation, appraisal, cataloging and description have been set out by a range of archives scholars and professionals. Edward Benoit III and Alexandra Eveleigh published their edited collection *Participatory Archives: Theory and Practice* in 2019. Other key practical contributors in this field include Lauren Haberstock, Isto Huvila and Michelle Caswell.[13] Increasingly, participatory approaches are now also gaining support from professional associations such as the Erfgoed Academie in the Netherlands and the Archives and Records Association in the UK.

Digital advances clearly offer new opportunities to implement participatory archival practices. They facilitate the recruitment of community participants and create new spaces for collaboration, for instance through digital catalogues. Digital access also contributes significantly to making collections available to the relevant community and beyond. This potential for growth does, however, also increase responsibility to ensure that these projects are carried out in a way that appropriately recognizes the labour of community participants, including through remuneration. One project that takes very seriously both the potential of the digital to facilitate community participation and the responsibilities this brings, is the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). Community participation is a founding and essential principle of this digital, open access project conceived by Samip Mallick and Caswell. Since its foundation in 2008, SAADA has been actively collecting materials relating to the history and experiences of the South Asian American community. The digital platform aids the visibility both of the archives and the communities it seeks to represent and actively recognizes and honors the contribution made by the community, as this chapter will go on to demonstrate.

Oppressive legacies in archival praxis

While social justice-oriented practices such as the participatory approaches outlined above are gaining ground across the archives sector, a key question for many archives professionals is whether it is enough to incorporate such innovations into their existing praxis, or whether more extensive and fundamental change is required. Jimerson argued that archivists should do more than 'respond to the challenges outside their repositories': they should also be re-examining 'their own professional practices'.[14] Many accepted principles of archival praxis are themselves rooted in and reflective of social hierarchies and complicit in systems that, at best, may fail to recognize alternative structures and, at worst, oppress them. Jimerson gives the example of the principle of provenance which 'reflects assumptions about organizational structures and hierarchies that privilege those in power and those with a recognized collectivity'.[15] Archival scholar Anna Robinson-Sweet, in an influential 2018 article in which she explicitly called for

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13 See Lauren Haberstock, 'Participatory Description: Decolonizing Descriptive Methodologies in Archives', *Archival Science* 20 (2020): 125–138; and Isto Huvila, 'Participatory Archive: Towards Decentralised Curation, Radical User Orientation, and Broader Contextualisation of Records Management', *Archival Science* 8 (2008): 15–36. Caswell's work engages with a wide range of participatory projects, including the South Asian American Digital Archive which is discussed in this chapter.

14 Jimerson, 'Archives for All': 275–276.

15 Jimerson, 'Archives for All': 276.

archivists to become 'reparations activists', adds that biases are found in 'every archival practice from appraisal to preservation to access'.[16]

Jimerson points out that most of these questions around the structural hierarchies that define archival praxis arise from the fact that '[a]rchival principles and functions developed largely in the context of nineteenth-century bureaucratic states'[17] and much still current and established archival theory and praxis remains rooted directly in such recordkeeping systems. Two texts, in particular, remain foundational to present-day archival praxis. The *Handleiding voor het ordenen en beschrijven van archieven* [*Manual for the arrangement and description of archives*] (1898), known colloquially as the *Dutch Manual*, was produced by Dutch local authority archivists Samuel Muller, Johan Feith and Robert Fruin.[18] The *Manual of Archive Administration* (1922) was the work of Sir Hilary Jenkinson,[19] a long-standing staff member in the British Public Record Office (PRO), the precursor to the present-day UK National Archives (TNA).

It is extremely relevant that both of these works, which set out principles of archival arrangement and administration that are still considered essential, developed from the practices of official and governmental recordkeeping. It explains the organization of archival records into hierarchical structures based on a single, defined creator – a person or a department. Importantly, it also explains why records tend to be preserved in the same system in which they were supplied. Governing bodies would pass on to their archives records that were no longer in active use, but for retrieval and reference it was logical to preserve them within the system in which they were used. The specific hierarchies which informed the creation and use of the records are therefore reflected and preserved in these systems. The preservation of the records was obviously in the interest of the institution as well as in a wider public interest as it documented practices and decisions made by the governing institution.

This system, while it functioned well in its context, produces a number of problems when it is expanded across archives with different aims and priorities. Many of these spring from the fact that access was originally not a primary concern: it was most likely that the records would be consulted by members of the organization or by others already familiar with the organizational structure, such as staff from other government departments or historians, for instance. The key aim, then, was preservation for reference if and when required. This context shows the roots of the conception of the archivist's role as a neutral and even passive one.

Recordkeeping is an important element in enabling transparency and open government. For many archives today, however, the situation has become radically different from that described in the *Dutch Manual* and the *Manual of Archive Administration* as access to records has become much more central to their functioning. Increasing access, moreover, has come

16 Anna Robinson-Sweet, 'Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists', *The American Archivist* 81.1 (2018): 24 and 33.

17 Jimerson, 'Archives for All': 276.

18 Samuel Muller, Johan Feith and Robert Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003 [1898].

19 Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*.

to mean significantly more than simply producing the records in a reading room in response to a request. As it is acknowledged that records are of use to wider communities than have traditionally accessed archives, active steps must be taken to make them available to this larger spectrum of users.

Digitization has provided a broad range of opportunities in this area. It should be acknowledged that digitization of archival collections is a resource-intensive process that is not without physical risk for collection items. The overall advantages generally outweigh these risks, however, as digitization can help with storage and preservation and can increase the scope of collections as digital copies as well as born-digital materials can be collected. It can also significantly increase access. As archivists update their praxis to engage with the potential of the digital, however, their work can also highlight ways in which other aspects of archival praxis may no longer be relevant or suitable in the present day.

Perpetuating oppressive structures in digitization

The *Dutch Manual* and the *Manual of Archive Administration* were produced at a time when both the Netherlands and Great Britain maintained significant colonial interests. The administrative systems on which they rest therefore reflect the systematic hierarchies of colonizing nations. These histories are highly relevant for modern-day archivists seeking to address the ways their collections reflect social injustice, as highlighted by Charles Jeurgens and Michael Karabinos, two archival scholars from the Netherlands whose work examines the persistence of colonial legacies in archives. In their 2020 article 'Paradoxes of curating colonial memory', they highlight the specific impact of these contexts on a digital project.[20]

The article examines the digitization by the Dutch National Archives (Nationaal Archief, NA) of its collection of wills made by employees of the Dutch East India Company (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, VOC). The digitization project was an important development in rendering the canon of Dutch national history more inclusive by representing more diverse stories and making these more widely accessible. The VOC, a key agent in creating the wealth of the Early Modern Netherlands, represents the violent colonial exploitation on which this prosperity was built. The wills reflect an interesting parallel history of the VOC as they are made by ordinary working people embarking on employment in which death was a serious risk. In addition, the documents regularly feature women and people of color as important actors in different roles – sometimes as subordinates or indeed property, but also as legatees and witnesses, for instance.

The design of the project counted on the original nineteenth-century catalog to continue to act as the primary finding aid for the collection in its digital form. However, this catalog named only the white men who were the testators and did not include women or people of color. Because the implications of this had not been adequately considered in the project design, the aim of increasing inclusivity was undermined by the oppressive structural hierarchies

20 Charles Jeurgens and Michael Karabinos, 'Paradoxes of Curating Colonial Memory', *Archival Science* 20 (2020): 199–220.

imposed through the original archival structure. Jeurgens and Karabinos explain: 'The real problem in the context of our discussion is the perpetuation of this nineteenth century [*sic*] archival worldview in a new, revitalized digital archival infrastructure: it renders women and indigenous people invisible and is an example of epistemological inertia'.[21]

I suggest this 'epistemological inertia' may be connected to a continued reliance on a notion of archival neutrality, which meant that a challenge to the existing finding aid was not incorporated into the project plan. The nineteenth-century archivists who cataloged this collection were evidently not neutral: they imposed their own contemporary hierarchical worldview on historical records.[22] Jeurgens and Karabinos acknowledge earlier observations made by Nathan Mudyi Sentence, convener of the Australian Society of Archivists, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Special Interest Group, when they point out that this is a case in which the failure to challenge the work of the earlier archivists worked to support 'the oppressive archival infrastructure from the past'.[23] Students of archival studies at the University of Amsterdam, under the supervision of Jeurgens and Mrinalini Luthra, have since conducted a project using digital tools to highlight the presence of women and non-European people in the collection. This project, which had the support of the Nationaal Archief, offered an alternative to 'epistemological inertia' by directly counteracting the bias of the nineteenth-century catalog and demonstrating how inclusive practices can give a new perspective on existing records.[24]

Challenging exclusion from digital records

It is evident, then, that digitization on its own is not sufficient to increase access to and use of the archival record, including for new users, in the present day. As the case of VOC testaments shows, digitization in itself can in fact perpetuate a historical injustice. As archivists seek to increase access to specific records and collections they must consider the potential impact that these may have on a wider community of users. This is particularly relevant when records are activated for and by a community of users who are marginalized and disadvantaged by the records and the systems they represent.

This question was a crucial one for the staff – historians, archivists and many other professionals – involved in the creation of the online Find & Connect service, designed to help Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants find and access records relating to their experiences in out-of-home 'care'. These records contained important information about their subjects' personal history but when they were created they were generally not intended to be seen by the subjects themselves. It is now accepted that these record subjects have a right to their personal information and Find & Connect was conceived to enable them to access it.

21 Jeurgens and Karabinos, 'Paradoxes of Curating Colonial Memory': 214.

22 It is important here to recognize Ann Laura Stoler's key contribution in challenging the notion of neutrality in colonial archives. See for instance Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

23 Jeurgens and Karabinos, 'Paradoxes of Curating Colonial Memory': 214.

24 'Unsilencing the VOC Testaments', *Create – Creative Amsterdam: an E-Humanities Perspective*, https://www.create.humanities.uva.nl/education/unsilencing-the-archive/

While the intended users of the service were likely to be strongly personally invested in finding their own records and accessing the information they contained, they might also have lower levels of literacy and digital literacy and may well have had no previous experience with historical records. In addition, there was a risk of alienating this audience because these particular records may contain offensive language and because frequent redactions may suggest that personal information is being withheld from the person concerned – when the withholding of information had often already been a traumatic aspect of their time in 'care'. Simply digitizing catalogs and records to make them findable online would not be enough to reach these users. If they discovered their records through online search engines, thus bypassing the Find & Connect service home page and the contextual information it offered, the content of the records alone was likely to have a shocking and hurtful impact. It was important, therefore, that the records were made accessible alongside sufficient explanation and context to enable users to find and interpret the information they were seeking without causing further offense or hurt through careless presentation.

Find & Connect project team members Michael Jones and Cate O'Neill explicitly argued that cases like this demonstrate that 'archivists need to be conscious of the social justice element of their work'. This means that they

> should regularly shift their focus away from the individual collections and repositories with which they work towards the needs of individual people and communities. The sector needs to embrace notions of joint heritage and shared ownership, and change practices so that new users can be included and valued in the community of records.[25]

Centering users in this way requires care, consideration, active work and a willingness to challenge the way things have been done, at the various stages of record creation, recordkeeping, archival preservation and access.

Finding postcustodial alternatives through digital platforms

The Find & Connect service innovates by bringing together existing records and digital opportunities to create a user-focused archives with a social justice aim, without necessarily challenging underlying archival principles. A comparable approach has been used successfully to support the documentation of a range of different marginalized histories and to increase access for affected communities. These initiatives challenge the oppressive and gatekeeping structures of existing systems and institutions through an approach known as 'postcustodialism'.

Postcustodialism offers an alternative to the custodial nature of many traditional archives, meaning the storage of records in physical repositories. Storing and preserving records in specific repositories makes them more difficult to access for users who may have to cross

25 Michael Jones and Cate O'Neill, 'Identity, Records and Archival Evidence: Exploring the Needs of Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants', *Archives & Records* 35.2 (2014): 111.

borders to reach the archives, for instance, as the cost of travel as well as matters such as visa regulations may be prohibitive. The archival buildings themselves and the rules that must be followed within them to preserve and protect the documents can also intimidate users who may feel unwelcome in such an environment. These factors may also deter record donation: a potential donor may think that their contribution will not be valued by an archives that they feel does not represent or serve them or their community.

The South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), already mentioned, and the Early Caribbean Digital Archive (ECDA) are two examples of digital, open access postcustodial projects which are seeking solutions to these questions. The two projects' approaches are adjusted for the kinds of records they collect: in the case of ECDA, these go back centuries, while many records donated to SAADA are more recent and closely related to the donor's own experiences, pertaining to themselves or to close family and other connections. For both, however, it is a key priority to expand the canonical record to include marginalized voices and experiences in a context of ongoing racist exclusion. The digital platforms that make these records findable and accessible take explicit responsibility for engaging with these present-day contexts.

ECDA is focused on offering access to existing collection items from different archives. It comprises materials relating to the pre-twentieth-century history of the Caribbean, often drawn from custodial repositories that can be difficult to access physically – not least because colonial records may well still be held in the colonizing nations. While the materials are frequently authored by Europeans, ECDA 'aims to use digital tools to "remix" the archive and foreground the centrality and creativity of enslaved and free African, Afro-creole, and Indigenous peoples in the Caribbean world'.[26] In this way, without altering the records themselves, ECDA's structures of access and its presentation of records work to challenge the colonial hierarchies within which many of the original records were produced and held beyond the reach of affected communities.

As well as increasing the visibility and wider recognition of the South Asian American community and its history in the United States, SAADA's postcustodial approach was designed to encourage donations. As donors are able to keep the original records while a digital version is stored in the archive, the records can be shared without taking rights away from the donors. Founders Mallick and Caswell explain that this was a conscious decision to redress existing inequalities in the archival record. They state that:

> Traditionally, archivists have neither actively gone out to recruit donors of materials from marginalised groups, nor have they emphasised the importance of such records in their appraisal decisions. The result is a horribly lopsided archival record that amplifies the voices of the powerful and further silences the marginalised.[27]

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26 'The Early Caribbean Digital Archive', *ECDA: Early Caribbean Digital Archive*, Northeastern University, 2022, ecda.northeastern.edu.

27 Michelle Caswell and Samip Mallick, 'Collecting the Easily Missed Stories: Digital Participatory

By contrast, they explain: 'A community member who feels his or her story has a place in the archives is more likely to donate physical materials, tell other community members to use the archives and make a monetary gift'.[28] Such practical considerations also highlight that a project with a social justice aim can be a viable alternative to established archives and their praxis.

Rejecting existing structures in new digital archives

For certain records, histories and movements, however, it may be found that existing systems and institutions are too complicit in oppression to be a suitable platform or repository. The digital cataloging system Mukurtu was developed specifically to contain information about Indigenous heritage, as an alternative to existing cataloging software based on hierarchical principles which replicated structures of colonial theft and oppression and did not respect the requirements and restrictions of cultural and religious practices that may exist around Indigenous artifacts.

The question of institutional and structural complicity is also particularly relevant in the context of systemic racism. In 2015, Ramírez returned to Greene's 2013 argument for archivists' impartiality, focusing his critique on the assumptions of whiteness that continue to characterize much of the archival profession in the global north and not least in the United States. Partly because workers within the profession are still disproportionately white, it is possible for them to make assumptions about neutrality that are informed by their own familiarity with the status-quo. Seeking social justice in archival work, therefore, has to include an examination of how systemic racism informs both existing records and archival praxis and archivists' own positionality and relationship to these. As Ramírez states:

> By questioning whiteness and its semantic markers (such as tradition, neutrality, and objectivity) and having honest dialogues about how we as a profession and individuals perpetuate inequality, we can liberate ourselves to do the real work of documenting history to our fullest capacity — in turn, inaugurating a praxis that listens '... for the voices of those who are marginalised or excluded by prevailing relations of power'.[29]

In other words, it is not Greene's version of impartiality that best allows for the collection of a broad record of society as a whole; rather, acknowledging and challenging inequality and the structures that perpetuate it will enable archivists better to fulfill their role of collecting the records that 'document history'.

Microhistory and the South Asian American Digital Archive', *Archives and Manuscripts* 42.1 (2014): 79.

28 Caswell and Mallick, 'Collecting the Easily Missed Stories': 83.

29 Ramírez, 'Being Assumed not to Be': 352. The quotation in this passage is from 'The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa' by Verne Harris, *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 63–86. The aim of Harris's article as stated in its abstract is to 'appeal to archivists to enchant their work [...] by turning always towards the call of and for justice'.

Robinson-Sweet also addresses how structures of racism are embedded in archival systems. She points to the work of US archivist, ethnographer and anthropologist Jarrett Drake to establish forms of archival praxis that centralize Black communities and their experience of police violence in the United States. Robinson-Sweet notes that Drake's examination of the Danziger Bridge murders in 2005, when New Orleans police fatally shot two unarmed African-American civilians and wounded four others, demonstrates how, 'in a society built on a foundation of systemic racist violence, the context of the archives is racism and white supremacy'.[30]

This understanding informed Drake's 'decision not to partner with an existing archives or library' in the building of the online People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland in 2015.[31] In the context of the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the murder of George Floyd in 2020, the US-wide People's Archive of Police Violence was also created. Both projects invite participants to share their own experiences related to police violence. The website of the US-wide archive argues that statistics relating to deaths from police violence act as 'dehumanization [which] serves a purpose, to distance the viewers/readers from the very real impact of systemic racism. This archive seeks to combat this by sharing intimately the personal experiences of the People'. It promises that 'All stories are added to the archive as they are received; we do not change or edit submissions other than to scrub the identifying data from files'.[32] Both websites have a 'Collections' section, though at the time of writing this is still under development for the US-wide site. Contributions are unedited and no hierarchy is imposed. Users may browse all contributions, choosing to click through to the full contribution based on the title and opening lines, and often a date. Both websites invite users to contribute their own stories. Through the assurance on the US-wide site that the record will not be interfered with, the website/archives positions itself in a role close to that of the 'neutral custodian'. The motivation behind both archives, however, is inherently political: to return power over records to people whose marginalization has made them subject to the violent expression of systemic oppression.

Robinson-Sweet quotes Drake's comment that '[t]he unbearable whiteness and patriarchy of traditional archives demand that new archives for black lives emerge and sustain themselves as spaces for trauma, transcendence, and transformation'.[33] The work of Ramírez, Drake and others demonstrate that one archivist's perceived 'neutrality' is 'unbearable whiteness and patriarchy' to others and, at least as importantly, to large communities of potential archives users. As with the Find & Connect service, to reach and represent such communities requires a radical rethinking of the theories and praxis that have previously excluded them.

30 Robinson-Sweet, 'Truth and Reconciliation': 33
31 Robinson-Sweet, 'Truth and Reconciliation': 35. See also *A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*, archivingpoliceviolence.org.
32 *A People's Archive of Police Violence*, peoplesarchiveofpoliceviolence.com.
33 Robinson-Sweet, 'Truth and Reconciliation': 35.

Conclusions: Rethinking praxis in digital practice

This chapter has given an indication both of how the pervasiveness of oppressive structures and hierarchies in archives can penetrate into projects intended to make progressive and innovative use of digital developments, and how the potential of the digital can be mobilized to challenge these problematic legacies. Examples such as the VOC testaments digitization project and the Find & Connect service highlight how digital archival initiatives make it even more impossible and indeed unethical for archivists to 'hid[e] behind a veil of innocence, neutrality, and impartiality'. While Greene saw the notion that social justice should be an 'archival imperative' as a threat to professional principles, Robinson-Sweet takes a more positive view of archivists' power for good. As she puts it: 'Luckily, archivists have agency and expertise, and so have the ability to activate archives in the service of reparative justice'.[34] For her, archival professionalism includes embracing the possibilities offered by archival work to innovate and progress to help make archives fairer and more just for broader communities of users.

The examples discussed in this chapter demonstrate how the digital can provide valuable opportunities in this area. They also show that such progressive work can only be achieved, however, if digital innovation is carried out thoughtfully and sensitively. The wider access that digital archives facilitate heightens the responsibility to center the needs and experience of record subjects and users, through collaboration and consultation as well as consideration. It is clear that the archives community, in its theoretical and practical work, is actively engaging with such questions, but much remains to be done. In a profession where many struggle with constant resource constraints, these developments must be actively and practically supported by professional archival organizations to ensure that this work of rethinking, innovation and reform can be successfully incorporated as a necessary part of archival praxis.

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34 Robinson-Sweet, 'Truth and Reconciliation': 27.

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