

# The Response-ability and Responsibility of Archiving

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we consider our responsibility as archivists or archival researchers and our response-ability to specific kairoic moments. We explore questions on response-ability and responsibility: In documenting the past, or what will be the past, are archives inherently about hope? How are we both subject and researcher in the archives of our current moment? Both archival researcher and archivist? When does an archive become an archive? The archives offer a kairoic space, referring not only to timeliness but also to identities, and opportunities to document and produce counternarratives. Mary's personal experience in researching her own history in her family's garage is in conversation with Andre and Wendy's academic approach. Yet, that conversation reveals that narratives are not split into academic and personal, but using an academic lens on our personal histories and a personal lens on our academic interests.

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In what ways can investigating relics of the past provide us with perspective in the present and hope in the future? How are we both subject and researcher in the archives of our current moment? Both archival researcher and archivist? When does an archive become an archive? These were the questions we wished to tackle when we undertook the project of exploring one's responsibility and response-ability of archiving. We each contributed a different perspective to this project: Wendy, a Professor, mentor to both Andre and Mary, and WPA who does extensive research in archiving; Andre, a former student of Wendy's, a current Ph.D. student, and an adjunct lecturer whose research interests are the pedagogical uses of narrative and communal knowledge production; and Mary, a former student of both Andre and Wendy and a recent graduate of Hunter College working in primary education, who contributed her experience going through

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family history found in the garage of her childhood home. We combined our perspectives in a collaborative way that ignored what could perhaps be perceived as a hierarchical relationship between the three of us by combining the academic interests of both Wendy and Andre and infusing them into the story of Mary's experience doing archival work.

In developing this piece, the authors each brought with them their own set of experiences. We centralized the archival experience of Mary who was able to confront her past through archival work, gain perspective of her family history through the lens of an adult now engaging with the archives of her family's history, and generate hope for building stronger familial connections. We recognized from the beginning of our writing process that the traditionally academic contributions of Andre and Wendy combined with Mary's personal experience was not a barrier, but a strength. Mary's personal experience has an academic lens, just as Andre and Wendy's academic experience has a personal lens.

Taking a narrative approach led by Mary's experience archiving her family's history, the authors of this piece seek to connect the responsibility of knowledge creation through archival research to an archivist's response-ability to the deeply emotional work done in archiving. We felt the best way to accomplish this was to walk the reader through Mary's experience in italicized text while Wendy and Andre make connections to broader pedagogical and methodological questions surrounding archiving and storytelling as pedagogical tools educators can use. All of us took part in developing questions, drawing conclusions, and editing to offer the story you find below. Thus, each of us contributed differently but substantially to this piece.

## **Is Archiving Inherently about Hope?**

*What you're wading into transpired my final semester of college. It's about childhood trauma, mental illness, generational legacies, and so much more. It's about needing to know you exist and needing to learn how to care for yourself. Again, and again.*

### **FEBRUARY**

*The garage contained boxes of hastily consolidated ephemera, keepsakes, and trash, sloughed along from move after move after move over thirty years. Squirreled away was a stack of notebooks containing the pieces of myself I left behind when I moved. I knew as the pressure of clearing out the rental house tightened on my mother, the little meanings hiding in those forgotten boxes would be tossed. If I wasn't there to intercept them, so many of the memories contained in the garage would be—gone. The rationalization "I just need to know that I existed" propelled me back home and into those boxes.*

*For three days I sat on the floor of the garage with piles surrounding me—jumbled mounds of school projects, report cards, playbills, letters, recipes scrawled on index cards or clipped from newspapers and maga-*

*zines that told a story where yield, convenience, and price dictated our meals. The garage became my domain—every time siblings ventured in, I sent them away, assuring “I have a system! Trust me, it’ll all come together, I promise!”*

*The hubris of thinking your memories are worth documenting and preserving seems not dissimilar from the narcissism of thinking you get to have kids to have a tiny nation you’re the tyrant of. But that’s not it— something inside every one of us aches to be seen, no matter how painful that can be.*

*I didn’t have nearly enough time for everything, but I’d done a service. I had to go back to know I’d been alive. That there was a me that was “a pleasure to have in class.” More than that— a me who had promise, who had adults invested in them, who, perhaps, had another trajectory.*

Sometimes I read newspaper clippings relevant to our family, always looking for the one that verifies what loomed mythical to me as a child. I remember telling people what my grandfather did; I didn’t know he’d done it because my mom’s mother had finally left him:

*“Arson, Suicide Suspected in DeWitt -Oct 14, 1974:*

*Police suspect arson and suicide of the death of DeWitt Township man and the burning of his home Sunday night. The township fire department found the Raymond O. Fink home at 15541 DeWitt Road engulfed in flames when it arrived at 7:36 p.m. Sunday. Firefighters pulled Fink, 48, from the burning house and discovered he had a gunshot wound in his chest. Police said he was dead at the scene. An autopsy was scheduled today to determine the exact cause of death. Fink was apparently by himself in the home when the fire and shooting took place, according to preliminary police reports” (Arson).*

The archives offer a kairotic space, referring not only to timeliness but also to identities, and an opportunity to document and produce counternarratives. What we are writing, what we are experiencing, are tied to a particular time and place. At the same time, archives are not fixed but changeable as they respond to specific kairotic moments. If we think of the archives as representing a specific historical moment, we can then ask: Is archiving inherently about hope, hope that what we are building in the archives is part of the past? Perhaps the hope that our fight for reproductive justice might at some point be finished, for example. In this context, we are not only affected by but also affecting the moment the archive represents. As we do, we create a sense of control or agency in becoming the archivist and subject of the archives.

On the other hand, as Gomez notes, it can be problematic to freeze issues to a past moment, seeing them as endemic to the past and not the present, such as “creating a temporal distancing from past racial harms” (184). We can uncritically relegate these issues and feelings to a specific time or underestimate their effects in the current time.

Mary describes how her project helps her to exert control over her history at a pivotal time in her life. Definitions of archives usually imply or state their use-ability or value to researchers--rather than the archivist. Archival studies scholar Michelle Caswell emphasizes the role of archives in resisting “symbolic annihilation” and the importance of “seeing yourself in history,” what Mary includes in her concept of self-care in the archives.

## Archives as a Responsive and Responsible Pedagogy

MARCH

*I struggle to untwine: what does CARE mean? If contingent on attention, on time, it's simply not something you can give to ten children. I'm almost conditioned to see care as an insult, as evidence of inadequacy-- if someone's giving it they must have known you needed it-- you must have given that away.*

*I think about what is kept of our most intimate moments. I write this now so I may remember. I think about archives and elision. I think about vantage point, perspective, and perhaps most of all, the esteem inherent to committing the act of documenting your recollection. It was up to each family member what they did with the box I saved for them. I took one picture of words that are certainly not mine to tell. That's the thing about archives, **who gives consent to be archived?** But I needed those words saved, needed evidence of them in my own eyes-- maybe it's only archived if you open it, after all.*

Mary's journey is propelled by a need to know that the childhood she remembered was real and was seeking to find present purpose by reaching back into the past. This responsibility to one's cultural roots, memories, and experiential knowledge is a key tenet in Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Race Methodology (CRM). The frameworks of CRT and CRM position personal experiences as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding (Solórzano and Yosso). Mary's impulse to hold on to these physical things fulfills a need to legitimize her experiences. Archival work provides space for legitimizing the experiences of those to whom the artifacts belonged and of those engaging with them at any given moment.

The archivist shows awareness of the interconnections to a larger narrative as they place the artifact in the context of a specific time or place. As the archivist generates the narrative of the artifacts, they also generate new knowledge. This work of the archivist is necessarily transdisciplinary. Navigating the convergence of different knowledges becomes the responsibility of the archivist and the archivist's ability to respond, their response-ability, is key to how they can traverse archival space.

Critical Race theory provides a theory with which to ground our work and Critical Race Methodology provides a methodology we can use to explore CRT, but we need a pedagogy which can put these tools into action. Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (CSP) is an actionable approach to pedagogy which builds on the tenets of CRT and CRM. Educators have a responsibility to guide students navigating the archives and

they can employ the framework of CSP to help achieve this goal. CSP “seeks to perpetuate and foster--to sustain--linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation. CSP positions dynamic cultural dexterity as a necessary good and sees the outcome of learning as additive... as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits” (Alim & Paris 1). CSP in the archives provides the space to empower students to make their own connections while challenging them to reflect on their positionality.

Further, archival research challenges the student to exercise a type of cultural dexterity, understanding the artifact’s context in both the past and the present. The archive is an ideal place to invite students to use their experiences to contribute and generate knowledge while allowing them control over their narratives of intersectionality, positionality, and identity. CRM provides a methodology to help achieve this purpose and CSP provides the educator with the pedagogical framework to foster this type of learning environment.

## Archiving Our Own

### APRIL

*Is it worth it to document why I feel mad? I lack object permanence. Out of sight, out of mind. –Maybe that’s why I grasp at sayings, hold tight to fragments of meaning /How much is my (in the recently re-discovered words of 13-year-old me!) “control freak” disposition a response to my out-of-control brain? I’m both buffered and beleaguered by the similarities in struggles from 13 to 32. But I know it’s worth it for the relief it brings me. Even in the one notebook I brought back– It was all there. It’s all painfully, obviously, there. A plaintive striving for sense in a world of sensory upset. I must forgive me for what I forgot.*

*Just settling into my new apartment, raw from the breakup but luxuriating in the privacy that feels (still!) “too good to be true,” I find out my mom’s brother Joe passed away. As next of kin, she had to go through his apartment, though she hadn’t seen him in 5 years. None of her kids met him. After so many years on the street, what had getting his own place meant to him?*

Archives have been central to the work in rhetoric and composition—finding or creating a history of the field, but also seeing value in what others may not. Glenn and Enoch distinguish the capital-A archives from the lowercase-A archives, equally important to both disciplinary history and the process of research as a lived process. “Archiving our own” individual programs can show our discipline’s importance to larger institutions (Longaker et. al). The many research projects about CUNY’s composition and rhetoric past shows the institution’s importance to the field, for example. The Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives is an example of centering individual experiences with reading and writing, and the field shows why these narratives are important by making them worthy of study, both in research and in teaching (Comer et al.).

When we read through student writing from the past in our archives, we realize that these students

may not have known their work was preserved. What, then, is our responsibility to them?

## The Responsibility of Archival Work in the Stories We Tell

MAY

*Eight weeks from my first trip, I'm back in California, picking through the apartment of an uncle I barely knew existed. I keep anything that has his name on it. I can't parse it now, but I know with later eyes I can construct a timeline of his life. The story his siblings tell, of his transience and vagrancy, of his schizophrenia. Getting it secondhand, thirdhand now, I think about coping mechanisms and the pain we had in common.*

*On his kitchen table there's a note that says "March 20, 2024- From here on out, my execution of life will be immaculate and impeccably executed! For proof, every time my feet touch the tile kitchen floor, I will do at least one set of dips- to let myself know that I mean business! H- from now on only once a week- if that!" He was dead less than three weeks later.*

*His ebullient tone echoes the way I speak to myself in writing, from my perennial to-do-lists appended by frantic assurances that "I love you!! It's okay!!" -all the way back to the way I engaged with my elementary school journals. But there's no such thing as an archive of one. Every moment documented is a prism of all occurring around you.*

All archival researchers grapple with the question of whose story gets told and who gets to tell it. Critical Race Methodology uses the tool of personal narrative to disrupt, critique, and contextualize the master narrative in any moment of time. The archivist, through storytelling, can challenge the hegemony of the master narrative. This work certainly lends itself to the anti-racism goals of CRM but can also extend beyond that. An archive's stories can dismantle or reinforce power relationships, can "serve as tools for both oppression and liberation...in bringing about or impeding social justice, in understanding and coming to terms with past wrongs or permitting continued silences, or in empowering historically or contemporarily marginalized and displaced communities" (Caswell et al. 1).

The archivist, in constant conversation with the artifact, bridges the gap between the researcher and artifact. In this way, the archivist becomes part of the archive by virtue of how they engage with, organize, and/or interpret the artifacts. Each subsequent archivist engaging with an archive is adding to the conversation while also becoming an artifact of that archive. This cycle is productive and necessary for the development of knowledge in archival space.

## Response-ability of Archival Work: Hubris vs Hope

JUNE

*Never not seeking stability in the shifting sands of my own mind, I know I may be the sloppiest archivist for my own story, just as I struggle as an unreliable narrator of my own life. But there is so much self-love inherent in the act of preserving mine and my family's legacies— especially the painful parts.*

TODAY- July 2024

*When does an archive become an archive? For some, it must be a dispassionate ledger, rotely recounting details of immense or (in)significance. For others, a desire to document threatens to veer into the pathological. But that's the whole thing- disorders, dis/orders, are all only so defined as they impact other people. It's easy to embrace an archive if we like the picture it paints. My mother may have been able to toss years of recipes without a second thought, but I struggle to even throw away the scratch paper from my students' sentences at the end of the day.*

*The feelings, lives, and identities we document, our personal pasts, our traumas, our bodily autonomy, our hubris and our anxiety: can the order of archives turn this anxiety into hope? Yes! To nurture hope, you must allow yourself to heal. To heal, you must make sense of what came before. For the first few months of the semester, I chafed against an endeavor so unapologetically self-centered. It felt not just un-academic, but unbecoming. It isn't that I've now decided I'm worth it. But Joe has allowed me to know that some of this will come to matter and maybe not just to me. It's all there. It's all painfully, obviously, there. There's relief in irrefutable proof you existed, even if the meaning you extract speaks, ultimately, only to you.*

Because the archivist is simultaneously creating and receiving knowledge, they are both subject and researcher. In this way the work of the archivist is always incomplete because any person's experiential knowledge is limited to their own experiences. Another archivist engaging with the same artifacts may develop alternative, sometimes conflicting, narratives. Thus, the archivist is a subject of critique as much as the artifacts. This difference should not be avoided but, rather, embraced. The contrasts in experiential knowledge create a rhetorical space for us to collaboratively build knowledge, come to consensus, act, and transform the destructive hegemonic ethnographic discourses that may exist in relation to the archive.

This project enabled Mary to contend with painful family legacies through an intellectual lens, while still honoring her emotional realities. Within this framework, she interrogated sources of shame that had originally led to her to feeling alienated from higher education. Andre and Wendy interrupted this perception, as they both implicitly validated her presence in academic spaces, and explicitly conferred value on her personal experiences. This will reverberate acutely as Mary continues in education, running a literacy program serving low-income, primarily migrant students. She understands intimately the urgency of need-



ing language to articulate your experience, and the existential importance of being able to document it. As educators, we can utilize archival work to help our students explore their identities, histories, and cultures. The process of archiving is storytelling, storytelling generates knowledge, knowledge generates hope, and hope is the essence of the archives.



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