

# ANOTHER WORLD POSSIBLE: RADICAL ARCHIVING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by Kim Schwenk

In 1977, noted historian Howard Zinn offered a controversial opinion about libraries and archives, some archivists probably did not want to hear. He noted, “that the existence, preservation, and availability of archives, documents, records in our society are very much determined by the distribution of wealth and power. That is, the most powerful, the richest elements in society have the greatest capacity to find documents, preserve them, and decide what is or is not available to the public.”<sup>1</sup> Essentially, Zinn mused on control and the possible misappropriation of culture in our effort to sustain historical legacy. The statement actually inspires many questions such as, are we bound by ethics and morals? Or are we neutral wardens, fighting for representational equality in the face of censorship, marginality, and exclusiveness? According to Zinn, archivists wield power, as dictated by conformity to institutional rules and regulations, and inherent information dissemination “is not neutral either in origin or effect. It reflects the bias of a particular social order; more accurately, it reflects the diverse biases of a diverse social order....”<sup>2</sup> His thoughts extend beyond just dissecting the political legitimacy of the archivist, but rather constitute a call to archivists to reassess their position as activist information gatherers. It was time to go beyond the margins and not just conserve the past, but to also inform and document the present. Certainly a community presence, an academic curriculum, or a mission statement dictates the collection policies of an archive or repository, but what constitutes a notion of history? Kwame Nkrumah<sup>3</sup> wrote “the history of a nation is, unfortunately, too easily written as the history of its dominant class.” (Or its victors, as Napoleon said.) This is a practice archivists have grown to question and decipher, as ‘history’ now is writing itself through the voices, clicks, and tweets of not just scholars and researchers, but also activists, day-laborers, and citizen journalists. As John A. Fleckner, Chief Archivist, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution said, “As archivists who maintain the integrity of the historical record, we guard our collective past from becoming the mere creation of “official history.”<sup>3</sup> While this idea might seem inherent or presumptuous, is it radical?

In order to characterize ‘radical’, it is within reason to define and contextualize it for an archives perspective. The word ‘radical’ means

<sup>3</sup> Kwame Nkrumah was the first President of Ghana and the first Prime Minister of Ghana, also an influential 20th century advocate of Pan-Africanism.

“fundamental, of or going to the root or origin.”<sup>4</sup> It can also mean “thoroughgoing or extreme, especially as regards change from accepted or traditional forms.”<sup>5</sup> As a basic principle, though, applied to an archivist methodology, the word reflects an essential reason to collect and preserve history and memory, as a means to represent equality, integrity, and justice by the people who create it. It is a fair assessment to appease, yet collective memory is a complicated paradigm to stand for. “Archival memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs, all those items supposedly resistant to change. What changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied.”<sup>6</sup> The concept of memory signifies different values for different systems of communities and individuals, including ethnic backgrounds, class, and gender. To some, the efforts to which we choose to document history are as much a part of the process, as the actual material itself. Who decides what is important, what is ephemeral, and what is “worth” saving? For posterity’s sake, the idea is a basic human instinct because “we are all living history...One thing’s certain, though: if we throw it away, it’s gone.”<sup>7</sup> Ethically speaking then, it points back to Zinn’s message of selective archiving, as the custodians of history decide on the relevant and infinite virtues of time. By taking a stand for comprehensive collecting or valuing the underrepresented against a conventional standard of archiving, the method of preservation adopts its own standard of responsibility and consciousness. Frankly, it becomes radical.

#### *Bakunin, Roll Over*

The 1960s proved a pivotal instance in the history of active librarianship and public service management in the United States, reflecting the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam War and anti-war protesting, and women’s rights. There was the progressive movement in the professions to reduce the authoritarian character of the professional-client relationship; the concept of alternative institutions to pick up where traditional institutions fail, breaking their monopoly over the provision of vital services; the realization, gained in social action that people working together can bring about change.<sup>8</sup> Librarians and archivists within their respective institutions, repositories, and culture centers demonstrated the need to look from inside the profession, as well, challenging their affiliations and education status quo. They started to realize their importance as information professionals to reveal “the possibilities of information in social action, while the whole country learned how the government manipulated information to maintain and misuse its power...”<sup>9</sup> Beginning in 1969, the Social Responsibilities Round Table (SRRT) of the American Library Association was established to make ALA more democratic and also worked to promote a more progressive agenda.<sup>10</sup> The subgroups of SRRT are charged with promoting collecting disciplines such as feminism; alternative media sources, Martin Luther King Jr., and the environment, keeping in mind that, “librarians are obliged to serve the public rather than the information industry.”<sup>11</sup>

While efforts in the public sphere have modeled social responsibility and equality, many archives in academic environments traditionally, have maintained exclusive relationships with scholarship and bureaucratic interest. Archives often struggle with “hidden collections” or “materials held by libraries that, due to constraints on resources or a lack of institutional commitment, remain under- or unprocessed and therefore inaccessible to users.<sup>12</sup> Such collections are not only inaccessible, but often scholars and researchers are completely unaware of their existence; hence their status as hidden collections.”<sup>13</sup> Archivists and libraries are turning towards collaborative efforts with communities and other institutions, much like the charge of grassroots organizing in activist circles, to undertake backlogs so collections “sidelined for their purported lack of research value in years gone by are now the rediscovered cultural treasures...”<sup>14</sup>

This direction of radical archiving doesn’t necessarily apply just to the living persons of our time. To establish research and context for current radical collecting endeavors, libraries are assembling materials from marginalized individuals and movements in past history. From the inspiration of librarian John Cotton Dana, who in 1896 collected progressive pamphlets and leaflets from civic organizations to the Joseph A. Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan, time-honored institutions are realizing that “by preserving records that can provide evidence of injustice, archivists can contribute positively to attempts to overcome past uses of archives and records by elites to secure power”<sup>15</sup> and stabilize socially challenging material culture and primary sources for the succeeding posterity.

A few prominent archives have built substantial collections on the labors of disenfranchised peoples, including the Emma Goldman Paper’s Project at the University of California, Berkeley. This small, cluttered site of accumulation represents a different kind of archive, a deliberately counter-hegemonic collection centered on a radical critic of the status quo.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly enough, the irony behind the archive, Goldman was not only a feminist, but an outspoken anarchist and like Alexander Berkman, Mikhail Bakunin, Ricardo Flores Magon, and other well-documented and studied anarchists, the papers live comfortably behind institutional watch. The difference, though, is the impetus for control. The materials are safeguarded for social representation and full access for documentary and active scholarship purposes.

Likewise, the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), established in 1972, transformed the notion of “silent history” documenting the lives and experiences of lesbians, previously ignored by traditionally patriarchal institutions. Unlike many historic collections, the LHA provides radical, inclusive principles of access and public service:

- All Lesbian women must have access to the Archives; no academic, political, or sexual credentials will be required for use of the collection; race and class must be no barrier for use or inclusion.

- The Archives shall be housed within the community, not on an academic campus that is by definition closed to many women.
- The Archives shall be involved in the political struggles of all Lesbians.
- Archival skills shall be taught, one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives.
- The community should share in the work of the Archives.
- Funding shall be sought from within the communities the Archives serves, rather than from outside sources.
- The community should share in the work of the Archives.
- The Archives will always have a caretaker living in it so that it will always be someone's home rather than an institution.
- The Archives will never be sold nor will its contents be divided.

Both of these archives, while individually specific, are working towards a collective project, an aspiration of memory rather than a recollection. Yet while material culture continues to symbolize the need to educate, document, and represent, a virtual and fleeting mass of information demands the same attention. Documents do not have to be tattered manuscripts or government correspondence, to be "official history." Furthermore, records and papers not placed in a temperature controlled building for eagle-eyed archivists to police can easily represent an archive as well.

*Just a Click Away From the Truth*

The archive is an everyday tool. Whether physical or electronic, archives can narrow the gap between the exclusiveness of knowledge and the 'common' voice in history. The Society of American Archivists reminds professionals about ethical responsibilities concerning access to materials, but SAA also asserts the need to foster individual and organizational rights and interests. Certainly, government legislation threatens to manipulate civil liberties towards a vested interest of secrecy, confidentiality, and to some, the maintenance of the status quo. Before the days of digital approaches, the authority for archival control and selection remained with the archivist or whoever dictated institutional policies. The initiative of the 'open source' archive has allowed another facet to access, preservation, and public service beyond the design of a traditional repository. Because the archive encourages collective memory to the extent of sustainability and continuity, the 'living history' or the 'living community' transcends hierarchy, promotes accountability, and extends an invitation to those creating and experiencing history on a perpetual basis without the need for censorship. In an ideal situation, a well-maintained safe house for every

progressive newspaper, radical feminist, freedom fighter, or marginalized peoples histories ever created would exist. Although radical archiving isn't an exercise on authority or how one should represent another person's history, it is a model for institutional collaboration with communities and the realization that history has the potential to be commoditized and engineered, if not allowed the autonomy and inventiveness with information, all the while respecting the rights of an individual, as a creator or maker.

Grassroots activist, songwriter, and hobo historian, Utah Phillips said, "Yes, the long memory is the most radical idea in this country. It is the loss of that long memory which deprives our people of that connective flow of thoughts and events that clarifies our vision, not of where we're going, but where we want to go." Phillips was a peace activist and Wobbly supporter who hopped trains and sang songs about train tramps and the American West. His music narratives are collected and available as audio clips or audio streams, redefining the notion of a music archive through a citizen activist's perspective, not dominantly represented in mainstream scholarship. The intellectual rights of the material remains with the family (the creators of the online archive), yet the files are available for listening use. The person may not be present, but the archive is a resilient resource, contrasting the static tomb of many archives.

While the technologies rapidly developed and certainly supported "do-it-yourself" archiving, sharing and copying licensing, along with copyright issues, created obstacles impeding open access. Even large institutions like the Smithsonian Institute and the Library of Congress are utilizing image and content hosting like Flickr and JSTOR, both pressured by the demands of public access, but also preservation concerns. Undoubtedly, the open content movement, an alternative paradigm to the use of copyright, facilitates the democratization of knowledge,<sup>17</sup> but also challenges pre-disposed opinions of ephemera, cultural scholarship, and, essentially, "what is worth saving?"

The primary initiative for the Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) is to establish a "living history" archive of past and present queer zines and to encourage current and emerging zine publishers to continue to create. "In curating such a unique aspect of culture, we value a collectivist approach that respects the diversity of experiences that fall under the heading 'queer.'"<sup>18</sup> The archive also subscribes to fair use policies for the collections, as deemed by the Copyright Act of 1976, for the purpose of digitization and reproduction. Equally as important, the archive is tracing and documenting queer history, but treating "ephemera" as notable forms of media and collective history, where some archives with academic institutions, regardless of represented queer studies programs, have failed to collect. History isn't always filtered through published academic theory. It can also subsist as a personal narrative, reaction, or an explosive rant from a source not recognized within the scope of historical context. Living history, as a social proponent of social justice archives, is the dynamic

construction that can build upon the mundane policies of the post-modern archive. Without it, archivists fail to comprehensively fulfill their charge to represent history and our contemporary functioning society.

Many projects are in transition as well, as reflective of the ever-changing nature of digital surrogates and digitally born materials. The Open Archive Initiative (OAI) operates with efficiency and the function of information in mind. OAI is an effort explicitly in transition, and is committed to exploring and enabling this new and broader range of applications. The project understands the structure and culture of the various adopter communities, and continues evolutionary changes to both the mission and organization.<sup>19</sup> Collaboration between organizations whether print based or not, is fundamental. While obvious to socially conscious working groups, collaborative skills are often taken for granted in professional circles, favoring selective decision-making and administrative biases. This hegemonic practice of hierarchy is archaic and counter-productive to the principles of an archive. Without collaboration between material culture and virtual content management, the archive will remain cryptic and lost to future information seekers.

#### *Not So Radical After All*

Author Siva Vaidhyanathan describes the perfect library as “more than a repository for information. It would be a communication medium as well.”<sup>20</sup> The struggle always is and always will be, how can libraries and archives uphold the statutes of liberty, in addition to observing professional ethics and standards, all the while providing the essential services our public, our constituents, and our past deserves? The commitment is already there by radicals and non-radicals alike. Many public libraries offer non-filtering options for Internet users, circulate zines and other alternative publications, and allow grassroots, social justice community meeting spaces and workshops. Some small town librarians have even challenged the government. What is presenting itself is the idea that ‘radicalism’ isn’t unapproachable; it is inherent, practiced, and natural for libraries and archives, regardless of political affiliations or belief systems. To defy this, is to defy history, culture, and the community of people who shape and contribute to the aspiration of memory. Noam Chomsky was not far off when he stated: “for the radical imagination to be rekindled and to lead the way out of this desert, what is needed is people who will work to sweep away the mists of carefully contrived illusion, reveal the stark reality, and also to be directly engaged in popular struggles that they sometimes help galvanize.”<sup>21</sup> It is possible to imagine, to reveal, and to represent the truth. What it will take is some unlearning, relearning, and revolution, using tools earthed in the roots of existence. The archive symbolizes the fruits of our labors and has the will; we just have to make happen.

### Resources

In order to learn from radical archiving, here are a few other organizations working towards open access and representing social history. (Please note these are United States based archives)

#### Primary sources (print-based)

##### *University of Michigan, Joseph A. Labadie Collection*

The oldest research collection of radical history in the United States, documenting a wide variety of international social protest movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is named for anarchist and labor organizer Joseph Antoine Labadie (1850-1933). <http://www.lib.umich.edu/labadie-collection>

##### *California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives*

These unique collections document the lives and activities of African Americans, Asian/Pacific Americans, Chicanos/Latinos, and Native Americans in California. The collections represent the cultural, artistic, ethnic, and racial diversity that characterizes the state's population. <http://www.library.ucsb.edu/speccoll/collections/cema/index.html>

##### *Southern California People's Library*

The Library holds collections that span the breadth of social and political movements in Los Angeles--from labor, civil rights, education, and housing, to immigration, war and peace, and civil liberties. These collections include over 400 manuscript collections, as well as books, periodicals, subject files, pamphlets, posters, photographs, films, audiotapes, and more. <http://www.socallib.org/collections/index.html>

##### *Freedom Archives*

10,000 hours of audio and video recordings documenting social justice movements locally, nationally, and internationally from the 1960s to the present. The Archives features speeches of movement leaders and community activists, protests and demonstrations, cultural currents of rebellion and resistance. <http://www.freedomarchives.org/>

##### *Barnard College Zine Collection*

Although zines, a rich and democratic form of self-expression that range from scholarly treatises on diverse issues to wildly creative artworks, have been around for a long time, few libraries have yet begun collecting and preserving them. Our collection development policy provides both contemporary and future researchers a unique insight into today's feminist culture. <http://www.barnard.edu/library/zines/>

#### Online Sources

Documents for the People  
<http://www.docspopuli.org/>

Zine Library  
<http://zinelibrary.info/>

Prison Radio Mumia Abu-Jamal essays  
<http://www.prisonradio.org/>

Roz Payne Archives – Black Panther  
<http://www.newsreel.us/>

Scarlet Letter Archives  
<http://www.waste.org/~roadrunner/ScarletLetterArchives/>

Anarchy Archives  
[http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist\\_archives/](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/)

#### Endnotes

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17. "Open content" [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open\\_content](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_content)
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