

# Outside Agents: Co-Appraisal and the Capacity for Multiplicities in the Participatory Archive

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In this paper, I outline the foundations of the participatory approach to appraisal and address the potential breakthroughs and challenges that may face such models in the future. It is through the discussion of the participatory model's concrete barriers and speculative dimensions that I argue for its implementation, through a diversity of methods and with varying scopes particular to each institution. Key to the participatory framework, and why it is a desirable strategy, is not only the distribution of resources in creating and preserving historical memory, and therefore agency, but also as a means of recognizing the alternative forms of archival agencies already active within the archival repertoires of underrepresented communities.

Appraisal decisions may be seen as the foundational activity upon which an archivist's agency is enacted, where the methods used to accession records and cultural materials act as a first step in the process of the institution's identity formation. Conceptions of agency and identity formation in the archives have been significantly problematized and reconfigured, as archivists, historians, and theorists have labored to render the biases of "objective" appraisal decisions into a visible system to be studied and challenged. Through this work, a variety of participatory models have been conceived and enacted as a means to pluralize the materials and perspectives contained in archive. In this paper, I will briefly outline the foundations of the participatory approach to appraisal, a framework within which it can be activated, and address the potential breakthroughs and challenges that may face such models in the future. Acknowledging the contingency upon which "participation" in the archives can be consented to or coerced, my focus lies on the pluralistic landscape of archival repositories in the United States, particularly in universities and large cultural institutions concerned with education. It is through the discussion of the participatory model's concrete barriers and speculative dimensions that I argue for its implementation, through a diversity of methods and with varying scopes particular to each institution. In focus here is transparent, open-source documentation, participatory collecting drives, and cross-institutional projects and partnerships, among other strategies. Key to the participatory framework, and why it is a desirable strategy, is not only the distribution of resources in creating and preserving historical memory, and therefore agency, but also as a means of recognizing the alternative forms of archival agencies already active within the archival repertoires of underrepresented communities.

Appraisal has undergone large transformations in its application and understanding, and while never fully situated, its current context imbues it with considerable power. Previously Jenkinsonian notions of the archivist's objective role as custodian of the fonds, and thus its authenticity, served to diminish the role of the archivist by relying on the inviolability of the records and their arrangement. This positivistic approach to appraisal was challenged in the American context, where the archivist's role as a conscious actor was acknowledged in Schellenberg's introduction of values into the archival discourse. In the 1970s, major upheavals in archival theory reconceived of the role of the archives in relation to documenting social movements and articulations of culture that previously went undocumented in the historical record. As archivists are charged with the slippery, limited, and power-laden task of appraisal, they work with the knowledge of their own role in the material process of history described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot, where "the production of traces is always also the creation of silences."<sup>1</sup> Trouillot's framework activates the archival process as one intimately tied to socio-historical production, thus creating an imperative for archivists to address their own role as shapers of one of many possible histories. Postmodern and postcolonial critiques of appraisal's hand in instantiating bias and replicating existing structures of power in the historical record sparked new applications of appraisal.

In order to establish the need for a participatory approach to appraisal, the power and role of the archivist first needed to be rendered visible, such that it could then be seen from different perspectives and ultimately challenged. In 1972, Hans Booms expressed the

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<sup>1</sup> Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. "The Power in the Story." *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995). 29.

social responsibility of including all of society in appraising historical documentation, and thus the necessity of cooperation across domains, making the claim that “all archivists in public archives at the various administrative levels cooperate with each other in their appraisal efforts, as well as with all other archivists in non-governmental institutions.”<sup>2</sup>

Gerald Ham’s address to the Society of American Archivists called for a coordinated effort of cooperation and linkages between specialized archives and state records repositories as a means of casting a wider net, and catching the “instant archives” vulnerable to loss.<sup>3</sup>

Within her book *Varsity Letters*, Helen Samuels proposed a dynamic blend of functional analysis and documentation strategy to address in part the functional need for university archives to document student life via cultural records.<sup>4</sup> Samuel’s documentation strategy required communication and interconnection between institutions and called for outside expertise where needed, engaging participation at an administrative level. The failures of documentation strategy’s wider implementation is itself a marker of the limitations imposed by the rigidity of institutional structures that view their functions as siloed and separate. Taking up the task of documenting at the peripheries, community archives present a participatory vision that calls on members of a particular community to document their own experiences by re-collecting records of their own.<sup>5</sup> Vital to the articulation made by community archives is the developing post-custodial role of the archivist, as a consultant and mediator for distributed access to community memory.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Booms, Hans, Hermina Joldersma, and Richard Klumpenhouwer. 1987. “Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources.” *Archivaria* 24 (0): 107.

<sup>3</sup> Ham, F. “The archival edge.” *The American Archivist* 38, no. 1 (1975): 5-13.

<sup>4</sup> Samuels, Helen Willa. *Varsity letters: documenting modern colleges and universities*. Scarecrow Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Shilton, Katie, and Ramesh Srinivasan. “Participatory appraisal and arrangement for multicultural archival collections.” *Archivaria* 63 (2007): 87-101.

<sup>6</sup> Bastian, Jeannette A. “Taking custody, giving access: a postcustodial role for a new century.” *Archivaria* 53 (2002): 76-93.

Terry Cook claims that the shifting identity of the archivist is now one of the “conscious mediator aiding society in forming its own multiple identities.”<sup>7</sup> The strategy of participation, in all these cases and formulations, coalesces around the effort to distribute the power of appraisal in a more equitable fashion, as a means of documenting a wider range of perspectives that have previously been systematically under-valued.

The value or indeterminacy of placing appraisal wholly on the agency of a single archivist is often not pragmatic or realistic, but most of all it does not present a material understanding of how agencies are enacted in the appraisal process. Participatory archives are typically built using the records continuum model, as also applied to digital records shared across institutions and functions, because of the model’s emphasis on the co-creation of records.<sup>8</sup> The shared responsibility and agency enacted through co-creation creates a multi-provenancial record, that can thus be reflected in its custodial and descriptive nature. Building off of this model of co-creation, Terry Cook’s own use of the term “co-appraisal” can be invoked here to address the shared determination of value. Truly, no record is ever appraised without competing systems of value. Archivists are always subjected to the agencies enacted in the structural, economic, and legal environment they are situated in.<sup>9</sup> Archivists must operate with the pretense of these formations, always implicated within the structures of the institution which itself determines the value of their labor.

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<sup>7</sup> Cook, Terry. "Evidence, memory, identity, and community: four shifting archival paradigms." *Archival science* 13, no. 2-3 (2013): 113.

<sup>8</sup> Gilliland, Anne J., and Mirna Willer. "Metadata for the information multiverse." *iConference 2014 Proceedings* (2014).

<sup>9</sup> Cook, Terry. 2011. "'We Are What We Keep; We Keep What We Are': Archival Appraisal Past, Present and Future." *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32 (2): 173–89.

How might archivists within large educational and cultural institutions develop appraisal decisions that do not *merely* reify those structures of institutional identity and valuation? At this institutional level, a participatory strategy of appraisal is vital because it actively engages agencies that are extant and outside of the formalized institutional structure. To be clear, this should not always be inherently valued, as the issue of incorporation into this institutional structure comes with considerable care. Issues of exploitative labor practices, defanging political materials or restrictive access may be addressed through community engagement, description, post-custodial retention, and collective bargaining.<sup>10</sup> Beyond the unsettled issue of the pacification and displacement of archival materials, there is valuable, subversive potential in a participatory approach. To incorporate capacity of outside models of memory-making within the established appraisal policy allows for the potential reconstitution of previously enclosed, non-permeable identities of memory institutions.

Useful to this discussion is the term “archival autonomy,” which invigorates the participatory approach with the possibility of self-determination in historical memory: “Archival autonomy is tentatively defined as the ability for individuals and communities to participate in societal memory, with their own voice, and to become participatory agents in recordkeeping and archiving for identity, memory and accountability purposes.”<sup>11</sup> The importance of building trust and forming symbiotic connections with community sources outside of the institutional structure is a vital activity in which archivists should be involved. For institutions to choose to allocate space and resources directed to

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<sup>10</sup> Shilton.

<sup>11</sup> Evans, Joanne, Sue McKemmish, Elizabeth Daniels, and Gavan McCarthy. 2015. “Self-Determination and Archival Autonomy: Advocating Activism.” *Archival Science* 15 (4): 337–38.

participatory projects and to work with communities and organizations with differing missions is in itself a determination of value.

In order for a participatory model to work within the constellation of agents involved, there must be transparency and documentation of the appraisal methodology and progress. Transparency's role in the participatory process allows for the archivist's values, methods, and motivations to be accessible to participants and outside parties.<sup>12</sup> Using digital publishing platforms, such as GitHub or self-designed blogs, documentation of the participatory strategy and its progress can be treated as open-source material. In Web 2.0, access to the digital tools necessary for disseminating policy and internal guidelines allows for institutions to facilitate what documentation strategy called for back in the 1980s. Here, Elizabeth Snowden Johnson estimates the changing values afforded by such technological advancements:

“Believing in the professional value of intellectual neutrality, archivists in the past often strove to make their own activities and influence on their collections invisible to researchers. In contrast, today's archivists increasingly realize that their own decisions regarding appraisal, processing, and description should be documented and made available to researchers”<sup>13</sup>

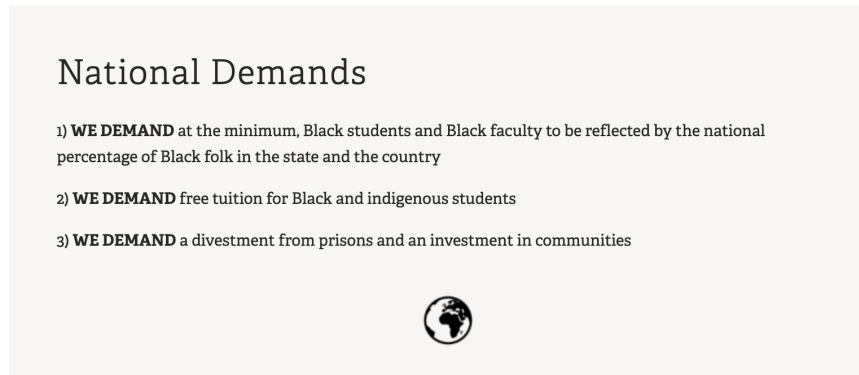
Participatory archives should not be solely determined by the invitation of outside agents, but also based on how the archive can itself participate as an agent within communities. Publishing non-sensitive documentation and instructional materials is not just useful for researchers studying archival practices, but it also allows communities and organizations

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<sup>12</sup> Huvila, Isto. "Participatory archive: towards decentralised curation, radical user orientation, and broader contextualisation of records management." *Archival Science* 8, no. 1 (2008): 15-36.

<sup>13</sup> Theimer, Kate. 2011. "What Is the Meaning of Archives 2.0?" *The American Archivist* 74 (1): 61.

understand the functioning of the archive. Archivists can learn a lot from critical librarianship and how instruction can aid information literacy. This mode of transparency creates



**Figure 1.** National Demands listed on the Black Liberation Collective's website.

inclusion and can even be used as an instructional methodology that further distributes archival awareness and records literacy.<sup>14</sup>

To illustrate how participation and active agency can occur within the digital, the Black Liberation Collective's initiative "Our Demands" compiles, archives, and synthesizes the demands made by Black student organizations across United States universities.<sup>15</sup> The national demands listed (Figure 1.) are synthesized from the overall 86 different student organizations, creating a cohesive narrative to unite the demands contextually beyond their disparate institutional goals. The repository is not inherently a static list, as student organizations are called to send in demands by email, allowing for expansion of the project. Giving space for these demands to co-exist and sit in relation with one another is vital as a means of calling to attention the power and agency of Black student organizations in spite of systemic oppression. Furthermore, the demands of Wesleyan University in particular have desired effects that would alter the archival record. In their demand for the creation of a Multicultural Center and a Director of Multicultural Affairs, the students of color

<sup>14</sup> Elmborg, James. "Critical information literacy: Implications for instructional practice." *The journal of academic librarianship* 32, no. 2 (2006): 192-199.

<sup>15</sup> "Our Demands." Black Liberation Collective. <http://www.blackliberationcollective.org/our-demands>.



community at Wesleyan petitioned for archival autonomy: “The multicultural center must be provided with institutional support and additional financial resources. Furthermore, it would be the location of an archive specifically for student activism around SOC - related issues and empowerment.”<sup>16</sup> The demands were presented to the University President Michael Roth on November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and backed by the support of 85 student groups on the campus.<sup>17</sup> In 2017, a Resource Center was created, with an “intellectually grounded mission in social justice and a focus on intercultural development and literacy,” which does not appear to house a student-led archive but a library instead.<sup>18</sup> The preservation of the students’ demands through the Black Liberation Collective allows for a marker of accountability on behalf of the university’s actions in response to said demands, and places this accountability in a larger framework.

There are active efforts to make participatory projects surrounding the complicated power relations of documenting student activism within the university archive. At Princeton’s University Archives, the Archiving Student Activism at Princeton (ASAP) initiative was designed as a collecting drive for students on and off campus to deliver their materials to the archive for digitization.<sup>19</sup> The implementation of collecting drives in archival institutions is a productive way of inviting outside engagement and gauging interest in archival memory creation. This type of open and invitational appraisal strategy

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<sup>16</sup> “Wesleyan University Demands.” Black Liberation Collective. <http://www.blackliberationcollective.org/our-demands>.

<sup>17</sup> “Students of Color and Allies Present Demands to Roth.” *The Wesleyan Argus* (blog). <http://wesleyanargus.com/2015/11/19/national-day-of-solidarity/>.

<sup>18</sup> “New Resource Center Celebrates Multicultural, Diverse Identities.” *News @ Wesleyan* (blog). <https://newsletter.blogs.wesleyan.edu/2017/09/29/new-resource-center-celebrates-multicultural-diverse-identities/>.

<sup>19</sup> Drake, Jarrett. “Announcing ASAP: Archiving Student Activism at Princeton.” Mudd Manuscript Library Blog. December 2, 2015. <https://blogs.princeton.edu/mudd/2015/12/announcing-asap-archiving-student-activism-at-princeton/>.

requires clear messaging on the part of the organizing archivists, as the framing of the drive will play a part in the kinds of materials brought in for accessioning. Archivists need to consider their methods of outreach, as the activation of certain networks will determine what communities are called upon, and to what extent they will form initial trust with the archive. Developing trust with communities is never developed overnight, but happens “through a consistent and sincere effort to consult, co-operate and collaborate.”<sup>20</sup> This consistent effort is required when specific communities being reached are actively marginalized by the institutional structure, as in the case of student activist materials.

As Jarrett M. Drake argues though, the “explicit function of the liberal arts college *commands* institutional archivists to collect and preserve records that highlight the conflicting nature of the liberal arts’ implicit function.”<sup>21</sup> This command might even be expanded to archivists at wider cultural institutions, who would be delegated with the imperative to document resistance to the institutions they represent. Acquiring materials of this nature requires transparency around the donor’s rights to privacy and the rights to access afforded to the materials, securing a “principle of prior, free and informed consent” within the collecting policy.<sup>22</sup> This process involves a negotiation of power on the part of both participating parties. For instance, the ASAP initiative gave participants the option to restrict access to the deposited records for up to 20 years into the future.<sup>23</sup> This practice of integrated, informed consent extends the dynamic flux of archival agency to the participant.

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<sup>20</sup> Faulkhead, Shannon, Livia Iacovino, Sue McKemish, and Kirsten Thorpe. "Australian Indigenous knowledge and the archives: embracing multiple ways of knowing and keeping." *Archives and manuscripts* 38, no. 1 (2010): 221.

<sup>21</sup> Drake, Jarrett M. "Documenting Dissent in the Contemporary College Archive: Finding Our Function within the Liberal..." *Medium* (blog). November 7, 2016. <https://medium.com/on-archivy/documenting-dissent-liberal-arts-e1c69e574ff8#.3dhx1z8pp>.

<sup>22</sup> Gilliland, Anne J., and Sue McKemish. "The role of participatory archives in furthering human rights, reconciliation and recovery." (2014). 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Drake, ASAP.

Archivists need to interrogate their own best practices in these scenarios and assess what rights can be afforded to participants in collecting drives, and what is out of the purview of the archive's own mission and available resources.

The participatory archive necessarily requires a distribution of resources to be directed towards parties and agents that are outside of the institutional structure; however, this does not mean that these resources are not being used in the interest of the archive. Archivists can conduct assessments of the resources available to them, and even look to other institutions for opportunities of collaboration and connection when appropriate. Participatory appraisal can occur across institutions, but we should be careful in what we call a participatory archive. The foundations of a truly participatory appraisal process aim towards extending archival autonomy to communities and organizations that do not have access to the resources, platform, or repository space contained in the archive. It is important to distinguish the ways in which multiple forms of representation are enacted in a participatory archive:

“[The] concept of a participatory archive acknowledges that multiple parties have rights, responsibilities, needs and perspectives with regard to the archives. Participatory archives consequently become a negotiated space built around critical reflection in which these different communities share stewardship and expertise—they are created by, for and with multiple communities, according to and respectful of community values, practices, beliefs and needs.”<sup>24</sup>

Gilliland and McKemmish address the ways in which representation is instantiated in the participatory model. Here, appraisal is opened up to the concerted efforts of multiple communities, rather than the monolithic, black box of the institutional appraisal policy. The

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<sup>24</sup> Gilliland. 2014. 4.

concept of the archive becoming a “negotiated space” has significant impact on the way institutional identity should be conceived. Generating room and capacity for multiplicity in the archive’s institutional identity will lead to potentials for a more equitable record. This contestation over the historical record is not about the prestige of institutional validation, but rather the infrastructure and platform that exists within the archive as it exists. As Verne Harris states, “beyond the dynamics of remembering and forgetting, a more profound characterization of the struggle in social memory is one of narrative against narrative, story against story.”<sup>25</sup> Without reifying the power of value embedded within the archive as an organ of the colonial state, it is important to recognize how power can be opened and distributed to locales outside of this traditional site. It should go without saying that the negotiation of space is also a material concern of resource management. The act of opening up access to reading rooms and physical storage space are costs incurred by the institution and are reflective of this larger project of expanding institutional identity.

Considering the limited human and financial resources and the expectations of various stakeholders, building and managing a participatory approach to appraisal is practically difficult to manage. Mindful of how the archive’s own limited resources can affect an appraisal policy, archivists should understand how this may limit the community’s valuation of the archive as a site of collaboration. This being said, pragmatism can often function as a rhetoric employed to obstruct change within the archival process. Depending on the willingness of outside groups, developing a participatory framework of appraisal can be mutually beneficial for all participants. This comes with recognizing that there are

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<sup>25</sup> Harris, Verne. ““ They should have destroyed more”: the destruction of public records by the South African state in the final years of apartheid, 1990-1994.” (1999). 205.

archival dimensions beyond the scope of the institutionalized archival framework. Communities may have their own memory models and ontological frameworks for retaining memory. Without diminishing the value of these extant forms of memory-making, appraisal of alternative sources of community documentation can create new ways to conceive of archival collections, in effect pluralizing the historical record. Shilton and Srinivasan speak to the co-existence of these archival dimensions and the symbiotic relationship that can be formed between them:

“Reconciliation between community efforts and the preservation resources of information institutions can allow communities, archival institutions, and larger publics to learn and gain reciprocally in the creation of a collective memory that acknowledges multiple cultural contexts.”<sup>26</sup>

In addressing the varying contexts which materials might be situated within, a participatory appraisal can integrate outside formulations of value in preservation. Incorporating alternative forms of media and giving room and credence to the framework as it exists within the community is a way of respecting the co-creation of the record. Essential to the development of a participatory appraisal strategy is the mutual belief in the value of preserving access to the collections and materials being included in the archive.

Postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the silences compounded in the archival record through the enactment of appraisal decisions have revealed the limits at which archival agency can operate within the boundaries of the archivist’s singular authority. In attempting to address the accumulated silences that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, distributing archival agency through the means of co-appraisal strategies.

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<sup>26</sup> Shilton. 92.

Expanding the notion of what is representative of the institution's archival record, allowing for external input to what determines the institutional identity of the archive is, can enable those participating communities begin to see themselves reflected in that identity. Always a complicated and contested space – the participation in identity, and by vector, the institutions we are implicated in – Fred Moten iterates, via philosopher and poet Edouard Glissant and jazz musician John Coltrane, his poetic estimation of the web that creates boundaries between our agencies and those outside ourselves:

“This involuntary consent of the volunteer is our descent, our inheritance, should we choose to accept it, claim it, assent to it: forced by ourselves, against force, to a paraontological attendance upon being-sent, we are given to discover how being-sent turns to glide, *glissando*, fractured and incomplete releasement of and from the scale, into the immeasurable.”<sup>27</sup>

From Moten, we can imagine the invitation of participation into the archive, the complex and difficult implications that may arise from such a proposal. And yet, we may also see the missed opportunity and continued silences compounded if no such invitation were to be made. It should be a goal for archivists to develop participatory methods within their own appraisal policy, in creating records that rectify elisions from the past and look towards a more inclusive future. As Gilliland and McKemmish invoke, “spread[ing] a participatory ethos more broadly in networks of archives and archival partnerships around the globe is one of the grandest archival challenges of all”<sup>28</sup> While implementing a truly participatory approach is a near impossible task, it is a necessary limit potential to approach, and a challenge archivists should be taking.

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<sup>27</sup> Moten, Fred. “To Consent Not to Be a Single Being.” *Poetry Foundation*, 10 Nov. 2018. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2010/02/to-consent-not-to-be-a-single-being>.

<sup>28</sup> Gilliland. 2014 10.

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