

Community-Based Archives: Considering the Power of Naming Practices

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Project Description

Jamie A. Lee seeks a three-year \$373,960 Early Career Research Grant in the Community Catalysts category. Her study will examine naming practices across a range of community-based archives—from those embedded in institutional settings to those operating autonomously—to answer the research question: *How are archival appraisal and description understood, deployed, and, importantly, differently consequential for distinct communities?* In answering this question, the proposed research will connect researchers and practitioners in areas related to community, equity, and access. Significantly, this research will build capacity across community-based archives to educate and train community members, archivists, and archival studies students.

Statement of Broad Need

As community-based archives have increasingly become important sites of research in the archival studies discipline, a prevailing archival binary has emerged where community-based and institutional archives are situated as oppositional. Institutional archives are recognized as those ‘professional’ and ‘legitimate’ spaces while community-based archives may be thought of as ‘illegitimate’ as they often do not neatly apply archival standards and practices.¹ Instead, they tend to include practices that reflect a commitment to methodologies and methods that are locally relevant to the peoples, records, and ways that the archives are accessed in their communities. The proposed research extends what was initiated as an exploration into how community-based archival activities impacted professional archival thinking and practice (Flinn² (UK) and Caswell³ (US)). Flinn’s research focuses on independent community archives and the ways that collaborations among community groups and professional archivists may influence traditional professional practices over time. Caswell’s research offers new understandings of independent community archives that focus on the importance of individuals being able to record and view their histories as part of a larger societal narrative. These major studies and other minor inquiries into community-based archives have made urgent the need to re-think approaches to appraisal and description in ways that are aligned more closely with what the community itself prioritizes. This proposed study will greatly expand knowledge in this area. Lee views such locally-inflected practices as strengths of community-based archives and will engage archives that are situated at different points and in distinct relationships to the institution along what she recognizes as an archival spectrum. Her study will distinguish the myriad ways community-based archives work with and for communities and how they engage old or might imagine new descriptive practices. This research will fill gaps in archival studies research to identify distinct community-based knowledge that can inform archival curriculum, theory, and practice. Closely connecting with archives and archivists that work for and with non-dominant communities in building archives to tell their own stories is the key element for Lee’s participatory action research project.

Project Design

Partner archives include: Arizona Queer Archives (Institute for LGBT Studies, UA, Tucson); Chicano/a Research Collection (AZ State University, Tempe); Houston ARCH, Area Rainbow Collective History of archivists dedicated to preserving Houston’s LGBTQ history (University of Houston with Center for Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Rice University, Houston, TX); and South Asian American Digital Archive, SAADA (Philadelphia, PA). The PI has entrée into each as a community-based archivist working with and for the LGBTQ communities in Arizona. Working to support first generation and graduate students of color, Lee will hire two Graduate Research Assistants (GRA) from UA’s Knowledge River Program, which prepares LIS students for careers as librarians or archivists focused on cultural competencies across Latinx and Native American communities. Proposed as a participatory action research project, Lee’s methodological approach

¹ Lee, JA., “Beyond Pillars of Evidence: Exploring the Shaky Ground of Queer/ed Archives and Their Methodologies.” In *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, (2016: 324-351).

² Flinn, A, M Stevens, and E Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy, and the Mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9, (2009).

³ Caswell, M, M Cifor, and M Ramirez, “‘To Suddenly See Yourself Existing’: Uncovering the Affective Impact of Community Archives,” *The American Archivist*, Spring/Summer 2016, 79, No. 1.

aims to flatten the hierarchy between researcher and researched in order to, together, inquire into community-based archival initiatives to examine and counter stereotypes of non-dominant peoples within archival appraisal and description. Working closely with contacts at each partner archives, Lee and GRAs will facilitate focus groups with community members, users, and archivists and, then, conduct semi-structured interviews with select ‘community experts’ who emerge from the focus groups. Focus group and interview questions will be developed with input from participants and may include: *What inspired the development of your community-based archives? How do you define and situate your archives in relation to institutional archival contexts? Describe your connection to communities that your archive works in, with, and for. How do communities participate in your archives? Describe your archival appraisal and description practices. How have community members participated in developing naming practices? How do community members see themselves in the archival collections and records you have made accessible?* Recordings will be professionally transcribed. Lee and GRAs will code the data to mark institutional relationships and then corresponding appraisal and description practices to inquire into potential institutional influences on naming practices that do or do not include community input. Research design will include space and time for reflection across participating communities to understand distinct needs, relationships, and ways that that community-based archives influence community knowledges.

Performance Goals & Outcomes

In YEAR 1, Lee will secure IRB approval and develop the informed consent form; recruit two GRAs; work with partner archives to organize focus groups; develop interview protocols; gather digital video equipment; and facilitate and record focus groups and collect individual interviews at all archives sites. In YEAR 2, Lee and GRAs will code the data with NVIVO. Lee will identify community-driven subject headings and description guides (for example, [Homosaurus](#)) to complement Library of Congress Subject Headings (LSCH) to explicitly attend to the multiple non-dominant communities and representation from within. Preliminary findings will be published in archival studies journals and presented at community forums and conferences. In YEAR 3, Lee and GRAs will publish findings in academic journals; develop community-centered productions to circulate across partner archives, communities, and communities of practice; produce the ‘Community-Based Archives Keywords & Naming Practices Guide’ for archival studies curriculum and community access along with a series of 2-page research briefs and short podcasts to share research findings with scholars, practitioners, and communities.

Diversity Plan

The proposed project focuses on the multiple dimensions of lived histories, knowledges, and meaning-making contexts by engaging diverse non-dominant communities. Driven by the desire to highlight diverse and underheard voices, the PI focuses specifically on community archives that work to collect, preserve, and make accessible records and collections that offer multiple historical narratives that tell a fuller story of society. As an archival studies professor, the PI is interested in expanding curricula to support relational literacies and cultural competencies that can be applied across archival studies contexts from community to institution/university.

Broad Impact

Through the development of a cartographic spectrum of community-based archives and their relationships to institutional contexts, this project will highlight the myriad ways communities are represented within archival productions. This project will influence the archival studies discipline with scholarship and community publications that instantiate what is being done across community-based archives. Outcomes will strengthen connections among scholars, practitioners, and communities through skills, knowledge, and confidence to respectfully and relevantly represent community in archives. Importantly, this research, then, can inform a broader and more complex curriculum in Archival Studies that decenters notions of expertise and legitimacy.

Budget Summary

This proposal requests \$373,960 with no cost sharing, which includes: 3 years summer salary (\$82,882 and \$25,859 in fringe benefits), \$51,256 for two GRAs for 3 years (plus \$7,227 in fringe benefits and \$40,520 in tuition remission), travel to sites for research and to conferences (\$22,500), research supplies, research stipends for partner archives and for individual participants, transcription (\$20,000), and multimedia production and printing to share findings (\$7,500).