Building Digital Archives as We Fight
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Session Type: Paper session, traditional format
A guaranteed session sponsored by the ASA Digital Humanities Caucus

Session description

Thanks to advancements in digital technology, the volume of our collections and the immediacy of our documentary practices have exponentially increased, allowing us to collect data and build archives as we fight. This panel, sponsored by the Digital Humanities Caucus of the American Studies Association, will consider the affordances and challenges of building digital archives, as well as the ethical dimensions of using emerging technologies that affect the process and pace of digital archiving. Drawing on firsthand experience building digital archives, panelists will address questions of how we should curate and archive sensitive material, how the immediacy of our fight informs our archiving practices, and how communities can benefit—and also be put at risk—through the publication and circulation of digital archives.

The papers on this panel come together around the common theme of engaging students, collaborating with community members, and/or employing crowdsourcing methods to discover, curate, and circulate archival material. Through collaboration with those communities represented in the archive and with groups who learn as they build, panelists have developed strategies that go beyond traditional methods of digital archive building to expand not only the archive’s offerings, but also to challenge conceptualizations of the archive itself.

The presentations will discuss methods of digital archiving for a range of communities and historical events. Beginning with the efforts of the Colored Conventions Project, Brandi Locke and Anna Lacy will discuss curricula developed to interrogate archival silences and recover the vital roles Black women played in 19th-century organizing efforts. Continuing the discussion of the recovery of lost or suppressed historical events, Gordon Lyall will present on Landscapes of Injustice, a community-engaged archive that documents the displacement and dispossession of Japanese Canadians from 1942 to 1949. Taking up the challenge of archiving a community’s ongoing struggles and present-day activism, Vivian Truong and Minju Bae will discuss successful grassroots strategies to resist gentrification and police violence through collecting and archiving visual histories of Asian communities in New York City. Travis Rountree and Elizabeth South highlight efforts to correct archival erasures by training students in ethnographic methodologies to empower them to collect and showcase oral histories of the LGBTQ community in Richmond, Indiana. Christa Craven and Catie Heil will also showcase student
work, discussing, along with student collaborators Abigail Lang, Eleanor Linafelt, Amrin Alnoor
Remtulla, and Alexis Sotelo, the successes of documenting the genesis and growth of the
Women’s Studies Program at the College of Wooster.

Through documenting—and working within—material inequities and social, political, and racial
injustices, these panelists have addressed issues such as consent and the right to be forgotten, the
centrality of the archive to the studies and histories of marginalized groups, and the implications
and obligations of institutionally supported digital archives. Ultimately, by sharing firsthand
experiences of using the affordances of digital technologies, as well as negotiating the challenges
of building digital archives as they fight, this panel will initiate productive conversations about
the need for critically grounded and thoughtful archival practices that are flexible, adaptable, and
ultimately sustainable.

Papers

Building Crowd-Sourced Collections to Recover Resistance: The Colored Conventions and
the Digital Age

Brandi E. Locke, University of Delaware
Anna E. Lacy, University of Delaware

From 1830 until the end of the nineteenth century, tens of thousands of Black delegates met at
state and national Colored Conventions to advocate for educational justice, labor, voting rights,
and abolitionism. ColoredConventions.org is one of the longest-running efforts to bring
nineteenth-century African American history to digital life. This collaborative project has
developed a robust set of materials relating to more than two hundred conventions enriched with
item-level metadata and interpretive digital exhibits. This presentation focuses on CCP’s newly-
launched “Seeking Records” curriculum, a crowd-sourced research module that engages students
in scholarship that resists dominant racial, gendered, and geographic narratives of early Black
activism. Embracing a collective ethos that mirrors the organizing it recovers, the Colored
Conventions Project (CCP) has created a distributed model of bringing this record of nineteenth-
century activism to digital life through pedagogy. In the past 7 years, the CCP has developed a
network of more than twenty teaching partners and engaged more than 1,800 students in original
research to locate the many different types of documents generated by the conventions
movement. Expanding our archive and interrogating its limitations is crucial to recovering Black
women’s activist contributions. Viewed alone, the movement’s minutes conceal the central role
women played in organizing and infrastructure, rendering invisible their labor in the Black press,
churches, boarding-houses, educational institutions, and businesses. We intervene in narrow
conceptualizations of Black archives by treating women’s absences and silence as counter to
evidence of our intellectual and activist heritage. Instead CCP uses the movement’s associated
documents and more to create digital exhibits that represent women like Frances E.W. Harper and Mary Ann Shadd Cary in all of their complexities— as political theorists, founders of institutions, and emerging leaders in public discourse.

Navigating Archival Landscapes of Injustice

Gordon Robert Lyall, University of Victoria

From 1942 to 1949, Canada enacted mass displacement and dispossession of Japanese Canadians on racial grounds, a collective moral failure that remains only partially addressed. *Landscapes of Injustice* (LOI) is a 7-year interdisciplinary community-engaged project dedicated to recovering and grappling with this difficult past by making available thousands of government and court records, land title documents, community resources, and personal accounts (oral histories) of incarceration, dispossession, and exile, previously unseen by the public. These offer multifaceted evidence of racial injustice in Canadian history that helps de-centre nationalist narratives of liberal progress through the twentieth century by addressing the abrogation of citizenship rights in a democratic state. As political polarization in North America increases, it is important to make this data accessible for the benefit of citizens who are in search of historical lessons on social injustice (such as the procedures by which rights are eroded and responses at the time), or who may be questioning the security of their own rights.

Japanese Canadians participate as members of a consulting Community Council for LOI, as advisers to the archive team, and as institutional partners through the Nikkei National Museum. While they support our project because they believe that this history must be shared and known, they also have reservations as this massive digital record stands ready to go live. This information is important, but sensitive too. Many of the records created about individuals and families are rife with racism and founded upon the invasion of privacy. Also, oral histories can be profoundly self-revealing. Our project is in the midst of negotiating these complex problems while developing the archive. The LOI team will present how these challenges have been approached and suggest ways in which academics and communities can work productively together in the creation of digital databases.

Archives Against Erasure: Visualizing Resistance to Gentrification and Police Violence

Vivan Truong, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Minju Bae, Temple University

This presentation posits intergenerational, community-engaged preservation of visual histories as a form of resistance to gentrification and police violence. We focus on a grassroots archiving
project with New York City-based organization CAAAV Organizing Asian Communities, formerly known as the Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence. In 2018, youth members of the organization contributed to the digitization of over a thousand historical photographs documenting CAAAV’s organizing with low-income Asian immigrant and refugee communities since 1986.

We argue that collective memory can be a powerful tool against the interconnected processes of gentrification and police violence, which both participate in attempts to erase and remove the presence of people of color in New York City. Over the past two decades, the influx of luxury developments and high-end businesses has accelerated the displacement of longtime residents from New York City’s Chinatown. The digitized photographs serve as visual reminders of what once existed and the historical and ongoing struggles to preserve the neighborhood as a home for poor and working-class immigrants. The photographs also uncover lesser-known histories of Asian American coalition-building against police violence in the 1980s and 1990s. They document CAAAV’s work with families of police violence victims, who have insisted on keeping the memories of their loved ones alive through their activism.

Through this project, the youth archivists have preserved histories of resistance to support and contextualize current campaigns for police accountability and affordable housing. In the process, they have also been part of the transfer of institutional memory. The digitized photographs have additionally been used in a multilingual timeline of the organization and augmented reality map of Chinatown developed in collaboration with the Chinatown Art Brigade, a collective that creates art to support campaigns against gentrification and displacement. This presentation will discuss the process and products of this community-engaged digital archiving project.

**The Rainbow in Rose City: Documenting, Engaging, and Celebrating the Richmond, Indiana LGBTQ Community**

**Travis A. Rountree, Western Carolina University**

**Beth South, Indiana University East**

While there have been various attempts to create visibility for the LGBTQ community in Richmond, IN including pride marches, LGBTQ organizations, and Facebook groups, there has never been a sustainable, visible presence of queer life in Richmond. In the spring of 2019, Professor Travis Rountree’s Argumentative Writing course provided an opportunity for residents in the area to participate in telling their stories and establishing a history that has since been untold about queer life in Richmond and the surrounding areas. With the help of Safe Zone and Beth South, the Indiana University East Campus Archivist, students honed their research, argumentation, and information literacy skills to create our first digital LGBTQ archive. They were also introduced to methodologies of basic ethnographic research. In order to collect these
narratives, students looked at examples of LGBTQ narratives from the Kinsey Institute in Bloomington, the LGBTQ archives at IU South Bend, and the Williams-Nichols LGBT archives at the University of Louisville. Through this collaboration, the course created a system link to these campuses demonstrating the investment in sharing the stories of LGBTQ communities across the states of Indiana and Kentucky. Community engagement opportunities for the course offered another opportunity for connections to be made. These consisted of two LGBTQ films (*Southern Comfort* (2001) and *Love, Simon* (2018)); a reading by an award-winning poet, Stephen Mills, a gay man who was born and raised in the area; and an unveiling of the collection at the end of the semester at a multi-generation community panel. This panel spoke about these artifacts and the current state of LGBTQ life here in Richmond. Specifically acknowledging this community through the creation of the archive and the local events helped students to recognize the presence of LGBTQ and ally community members; it also joins these community members together to celebrate their identities.

**Building a Collaborative Digital Archive: Feminist Histories, Interdisciplinary Alliances, and Activist Partnerships**

**Christa C. Craven, College of Wooster**  
**Catherine Heil, College of Wooster**  
**Abigail Lang, College of Wooster**  
**Eleanor Linafelt, College of Wooster**  
**Amrin Alnoor Remtulla, College of Wooster**  
**Alexis Sotelo, College of Wooster**

In 2018, the digital archive “WGSS at Wooster: Past, Present, and Future,” (http://woosterdigital.org/wgssatwoo/) was launched as a website dedicated to charting the history of the Women’s Studies (now Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies) Program at the College of Wooster in honor of the Program’s 40th Anniversary (1978–2018). Building a digital archive that documents the history of multiple marginalized groups—at the intersection of women’s history, civil rights organizing, LGBTQ movements, and transnational feminist movements—requires complex conversations about participant consent, the right to privacy, and the politics of whose histories are recorded and whose are not. Rather than a singular institutional vision, the site has been guided by students’ research interests—such as LGBTQ+ histories on campus, community-campus activist collaborations, and women of color and transnational feminist contributions to the Program. At present, it includes over 30 interviews with faculty and alums, over 100 archival items (many digitized from our physical archives), a digital timeline of the Program, and a section on Campus and Community Activist Partnerships. The archive is designed to allow future students and other online visitors to conduct original research and create exhibits and presentations based upon the collection that documents an important piece of history not only for the Program, but also of the development and growth of an interdisciplinary field.
Our panel will explore the way our team—which incorporated a faculty member, a digital librarian, and over 15 students—weighed best practices for oral history with feminist ethical research practices, such as prioritizing respect for those who participate in the interviews, centering marginalized histories and voices, financially compensating students for their labor, and ensuring that student contributions are personal and academically meaningful. We will also highlight the immediacy of creating public documentation of the emergence of interdisciplinary fields in this particular historical moment.

Participant bios (in order of appearance)

Panelists:

**Brandi Locke** is a PhD student at the University of Delaware. Her work focuses on nineteenth-century African American women’s activist literature and history. She is co-chair of the Digital Archives and National Teaching Partners Committee of the Colored Conventions Project.

**Anna Lacy** is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at the University of Delaware. Her dissertation explores household accidents in the nineteenth century and changing ideas about safety and danger in the home. She is Project Coordinator for the Colored Conventions Project and the co-chair of the Digital Archives and National Teaching Partners Committee.

**Gordon Lyall** is a PhD candidate at the University of Victoria studying the modern history of marine resource management in the Salish Sea bioregion and its effects on relationships between settlers and First Nations. He is a Research Assistant on the *Landscapes of Injustice* project having done two years of archival research and currently a member of the digital archive team working in partnership with the Nikkei National Museum, as well as the project manager of the *Colonial Despatches* digital archive. He also works with the Chawathil First Nations in a community-engaged research project studying the historical impacts of settler infrastructure rights-of-way through their reserve.

**Vivian Truong** is a PhD Candidate in the Department of American Culture at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and a Visiting Scholar at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University. Her research, including her dissertation, “Whose City? Our City!” *Asian American and Multiracial Movements Against Police Violence in New York*, explores the intersections of Asian American studies, urban history, and women of color feminisms. Since 2014, she has coordinated “Memory and Movement,” a public history project that documents over thirty years of Asian American movement-building in New York City through the archives of the grassroots organization CAAAAV Organizing Asian Communities.
Minju Bae is a PhD Candidate in the History Department at Temple University. She is also a Visiting Scholar at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University and a Mellon predoctoral fellow of History Education at the Museum of the City of New York. She is currently completing her dissertation “One Rise, One Fall: Labor Organizing in New York’s Asian Communities since the 1970s.” She also has been working on an oral history project that amplifies the voices of AAPI labor activists from New York. She works closely with CAAAV: Organizing Asian Communities, supporting the organization and digitizing its archival collections. She is also a member of Nodutdol, a multi-generational organization of diasporic Koreans working towards peninsular reunification and the liberation of people of color.

Travis A. Rountree is the Writing Program Director and Assistant Professor at Indiana University East. He earned his PhD from the University of Louisville, his MA in English from Appalachian State University with a certificate in Appalachian Studies, and his BA in English from James Madison University with a minor in American Studies. He teaches first year composition courses as well as online graduate courses in composition and rhetoric. His research interests include archival research and pedagogy, Appalachian rhetorics, place-based pedagogy, and public memory studies. He has been published in The North Carolina Folklore Journal, Journal of Southern History, and Appalachian Journal.

Beth South is the Assistant Librarian for Access & Technical Services at the Campus Library and the Archivist for Indiana University East. She earned her dual Master’s degrees in Library and Information Science, specializing in rare books, in 2012 from Indiana University and her BA in History and English from Purdue University in 2010. Her current research interests are history of the book and bookbinding, oral histories, digital archives, campus sustainability, and open educational resources (OER).

Christa Craven teaches Anthropology and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the College of Wooster, Ohio whose research centers on reproductive politics in the United States. She is the author of Reproductive Losses: Challenges to LGBTQ Family-Making, Pushing for Midwives: Homebirth Mothers and the Reproductive Rights Movement, and co-author of the textbook Feminist Ethnography with Dána-Ain Davis.

Catherine (Newton) Heil is the Digital Curation Librarian at the College of Wooster in Wooster, Ohio. She holds a Master’s degree in Women’s History from Sarah Lawrence College and a Masters of Library and Information Science from the University of Denver. Her research lies at the intersection of women’s history, community archiving, and digital preservation. Her recent publications include: “Giving voice to the community: Digitizing JeffCo oral histories,” in Participatory Heritage and “Finding Access and Digital Preservation Solutions for a Digitized Oral History Project: A Case Study.” She is currently the Principle Investigator on a CLIR
Digitizing Hidden Special Collections and Archives grant, “Letters from Harriet Noyes: Missionaries and Women's Education in 19th-Century China.”

**Abigail Lang** is a History and Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies double major at the College of Wooster. She has conducted research in digital humanities, public history, and histories of sexuality.

**Eleanor Linafelt** is an English and Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies double major at the College of Wooster. She is interested in poetry, creative nonfiction, and queer literature.

**Amrin Alnoor Remtulla** is a Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies major at the College of Wooster. Her senior thesis explores second-generation South Asian women immigrants and their relationship with cultural traditions and ideologies.

**Alexis Sotelo** is a Political Science major with an Africana Studies minor at the College of Wooster. She has conducted and collected interviews about the Latinx immigrant community in Ohio.

**Presider:**

**Carrie Johnston** is the Digital Humanities Research Designer in the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest University. Her research considers the ways that technology has historically informed women’s literary labor. In 2014, she earned her Ph.D. in English from Southern Methodist University, where she partnered with the university libraries to create a digital collection of rare Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railroad advertisements and ephemera.