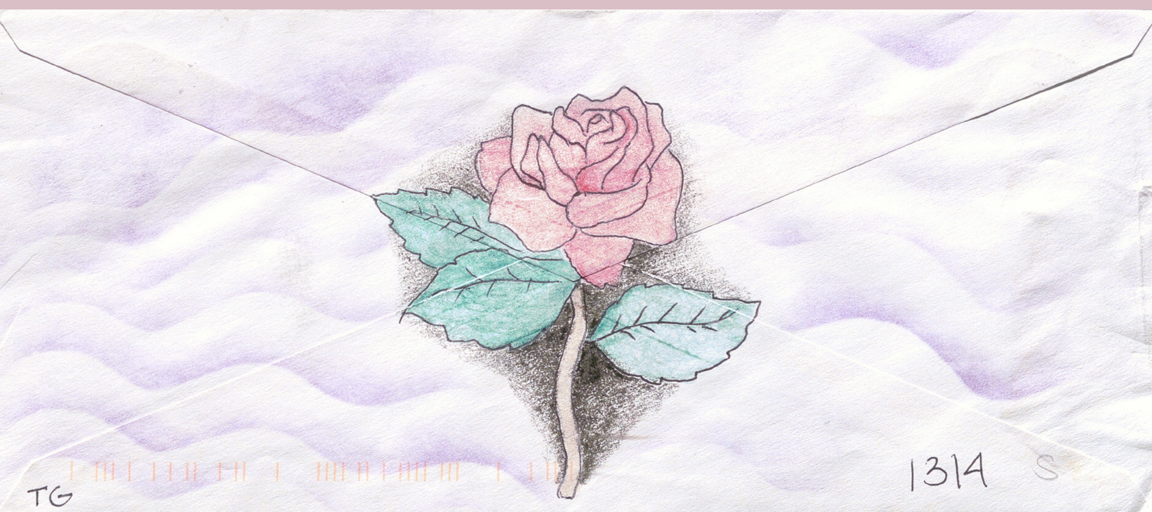
ARCHIVIST ACTIONS, ABOLITIONIST FUTURES:

Reimagining Archival Practice Against Incarceration



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CLIR Publication 193

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Council on Library and Information Resources
Alexandria, VA, USA

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Introduction

By Alison Clemens and Jessica Farrell

> Abolition defines both the goal we seek and the way we do our work today.
>
> —Rose Braz, co-founder, Critical Resistance

The prison industrial complex (PIC) is embedded in institutions and processes throughout the United States. A plethora of literature and lived experience demonstrates how the PIC's logic and functions shape our lives. Libraries and archives are shaped by this system too. Practitioners in the field of Library and Information Science (LIS) are examining how their professional practices and institutions are involved with policing, surveillance, and the PIC, with the intent of disrupting the perpetuation of carceral practices in favor of abolitionist ones. This volume shares work from several practitioners with the goal of further developing and platforming abolitionist literature and practice within the field. Some of these intertwinings of archives and the PIC will be explored in this Introduction before sharing a series of vignettes authored by practitioners who are exploring abolitionist practices in archives.

Incarcerated people work sub-minimum wage jobs that produce goods and keep American society running, libraries and archives included. For example, public and private college libraries and government offices, where many archives and special collections are located, routinely purchase furniture from correctional services (Abolitionist Library Association, n.d.). Sometimes, the use of corrections industry vendors is mandated by state laws; for example, in Wisconsin it is mandated by state statute (Wisconsin 2023). Sometimes, the choice to use corrections industry vendors is influenced by institutional policies. For example, many states require state-funded entities to take the lowest bid contract when using state funds. Procurement offices at public institutions often include this policy, even if they are not required to do so by state statute, because it is an industry norm. When a corrections industry vendor bids, it is routinely the lowest bid, since their overhead costs are subsidized by nearly free labor supplied by the state via the people it incarcerates. This perpetuates a cycle of profit for the state (Abolitionist Library Association and ding, n.d.).

Imagine walking into your public library. Look around. Can you see evidence of incarcerated people? Maybe not at first; you'll have to look

deeper. You see a chair. Look underneath it. In addition to an impressive collection of gum, you see a stamp for a corrections industry vendor, telling you that this physical artifact was crafted by an incarcerated laborer (Abolitionist Library Association and ding, n.d.).

You make your way to a computer terminal and enter your library card information to gain access to the computer. You're lucky to have a well-funded public library that provides access to Ancestry, and you open it up to do some genealogical research. While the mark of incarcerated people's labor is now almost completely invisible, it is still there. Incarcerated people digitize public and private records at reduced labor costs. In Utah, for example, inmates typically make between $0.60 and $1.75 an hour scanning government documents (Bauer 2015). The skills that they build doing these professional activities prepare them for "jobs" (not careers) such as "data entry, research assistant, office clerk, records technician, and word processor" – but not librarian, archivist, digitization assistant, digital imaging specialist, or many of the positions that libraries and archives create to direct this work outside prisons (UCI, n.d.). FamilySearch, a website operated by the largest genealogy organization in the world, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has an extensive volunteer program that includes opportunities in digitizing records (FamilySearch 2013). Incarcerated people in several states, including Utah, Idaho, and Arizona, perform digitization labor for free under the program (Bauer 2015 and Logsdon 2019). Sometimes, there is photographic evidence of incarcerated people in digitized records, revealing to archivists and researchers that the prospect of digitization would be unaffordable without their help. Meanwhile, incarcerated people are not given credit for their work in metadata records, one key way that information professionals build up their portfolio and public proof of work (Matienzo 2018).

The roles that incarcerated people play in archives include invisible laborer, subject (i.e., in records themselves), and donor, but rarely researcher. Restrictions such as freedom of movement, capacity, time, attention, and access to the Internet largely prevent incarcerated people from participating in cultural memory work as researchers. Some may experience emotional benefits of interacting with archives as donors, but material benefits are rarely actualized, even once on the outside. And while we have seen that incarcerated people interact with archives as workers, formerly incarcerated digitization specialists rarely transition to comparable jobs in libraries and archives. In fact, the hiring process at many libraries and archives includes background checks, which likely eliminate applications from formerly incarcerated people from consideration.

Peeling back the layers of any industry that relies on incarcerated workers

reveals an increasingly complicated web of white supremacist cultural norms, coercions, exploitations, and attempts to reduce the impacts of the PIC from within.[1] Structures and systems that embed the PIC into our daily experiences compromise our collective liberation while also preventing researchers, archivists, and librarians from separating our activities from reliance on the PIC by obscuring our understanding of how embedded we are in it.

An exploration of archives and the PIC reveals divergences between professional archival values and archival practices. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) maintains a list of core values for the profession (SAA 2020), many of which conflict with the reality of living in a society so intertwined with the PIC. This conflict raises important questions:

- If, as SAA states, "archivists should promote and provide the widest possible accessibility of materials," why do some archives uphold restrictive access protocols (e.g., requiring multiple forms of legal identification)?
- If "building support and understanding for all forms of archival labor is necessary to secure the vital resources required to continue our work and to ensure continued access to materials held within archives," why is there not broader awareness of how incarcerated people's labor is exploited in cultural heritage programs?
- If "the archival record is part of the cultural heritage of all members of society" and "archivists must embrace the importance of identifying, preserving, and working with communities to actively document those whose voices have been underrepresented or marginalized" what responsibility do archivists have to incarcerated people who are actively restricted from conducting cultural memory work, accessing information, and communicating with their friends, families, and communities?[2]

Addressing divergences between SAA's values and practices and liberatory memory work often happens through outside funding for new projects (e.g., funding from philanthropic foundations) rather than through long-established programs. Philanthropic foundations fund work that aims to reduce conflicts between archival values and realities. But the foundations' own actions or programs can be incongruent with this goal. Using

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[1] For an exploration of the relationship between people who are incarcerated and the labor they perform, we refer readers to *Inquest's* "Why Incarcerated People Work" by Stephen Wilson et al (2023).

[2] By posing these questions, we don't intend to imply that archival practice and the related field of librarianship are inherently beneficial practices. For an exploration of librarianship's intersections with white supremacy, we refer readers to Gina Schlesselman-Tarango's "The Legacy of Lady Bountiful: White Women in the Library" (*Library Trends*, Volume 64, Number 4, Spring 2016) and Fobazi Ettarh's "This is still who we are."

resources such as Worth Rises (2024) and the Harvard University Prison Divestment (HUPD) Campaign's methodology, and by consulting the 990s of library and archives-related funds, it is possible to find direct evidence of investments in companies that manage bail bonds and probation and operate private prisons (HUPD 2019). How can funders reduce the gap between values and practice in archives while relying on many harmful systems, including the PIC, to flourish?[3]

In forming our conceptions of abolitionist approaches to archival theory and practice, the editors of this volume have benefitted from the scholarship of other archival workers, including Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, Tonia Sutherland, Jarrett M. Drake, and Stacie Williams, who are actively interrogating the PIC in archives. We encourage anyone seeking to grow their knowledge of abolitionist perspectives on archives—and on archival theory and practice more generally—to seek out and engage with the work of these scholars.

We understand that the liberatory possibilities of archives are limited by our foundations in hegemonic structures like the PIC and colonialism that enable the existence of archives in American society. Howard Zinn observed that "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" (Zinn 1977, 18). Lae'l Hughes-Watkins writes that "archives and their practitioners engage in the same violent practices with decisions to cultivate, preserve, and make accessible homogenous narratives that eliminate evidence of other communities" (Hughes 2018). Her article "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive" provides a good summary of how the promise of archives is delivered to the wealthy and powerful people of society, but not to others.

We acknowledge how our collections themselves, and the paradigms that practitioners draw on for information management in the United States, are closely bound up with the PIC. Sutherland (2019) offers a robust picture of how the PIC and law enforcement data practices "draw upon and generate documentary records and risk narratives that propagate a carceral archive, and how this carceral archive in turn perpetuates discriminatory practices in the criminal justice system."

We echo and amplify Drake's observation that upholding statist notions of kinship and citizenship are two primary functions of archives. As Drake explains in "'Graveyards of Exclusion': Archives, Prisons, and the Bounds

[3] For an exploration of the non-profit industrial complex, we refer readers to INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence's *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded.*

of Belonging," prisons work against these functions through the separation of families and suspensions of citizenships. Archives could therefore be seen as already having an abolitionist capacity—insofar as they instantiate, complicate, and expand these functions—that "must be marshaled to dismantle the systems and sites based on exclusion from belonging." Drake writes:

> If archivists care as much about families and citizenship as their websites, publications, and projects profess, then they would begin to see the prison as the ultimate rupture of these notions and envision their work as seminal in contesting these graveyards of exclusion. Nobody belongs in prison, and it is past time for archivists to press the boundaries of society to make this world possible. To do so commands an insurgent intentionality and an orientation to the work that, if practiced, brings us all to a more approximate version of freedom (2019).

The vignettes in this volume and other scholarship around this topic point to the need to refashion many of our most fundamental archival principles, such as respect des fonds, appraisal, curation, access and engagement, arrangement and description.[4] For example, Drake addresses complications with provenance, which he describes as "*the* formative foundation of archival records and their description within the Western world" (emphasis Drake's) and which "thrives with the presence of a clear creator or ownership of records and with a hierarchical relationship between entities, both of which reflect the bureaucratic and corporate needs of the Western colonial, capitalist, and imperialist regimes in which archivists have most adhered to the principle" (Drake 2016).

It is possible to apply a critical lens to nearly all archival practices to identify where the PIC appears. For the purposes of this publication, we have chosen to illustrate how archival goals of access, efficient and effective use of resources, care, and knowledge-sharing are complicated by hegemonic practices. The vignettes in this volume weave these illustrations throughout their stories: the vignettes frame abolitionist principles within archival practice, describe practices in working with communities and collecting their stories, and detail challenges of administering security practices within archives and library spaces.
The work of the scholars cited in this Introduction and the vignettes are intended to prompt readers to consider their own intersections with the PIC, within and beyond their professional practice. Prioritizing abolitionist frameworks requires building knowledge about how the PIC works,

[4] For definitions of these terms, readers may consult the Society of American Archivists *Dictionary of Archives Terminology* (SAA 2024).

empathizing with people incarcerated and affected by incarceration, and engaging in collective action to find solutions on every scale.

Readers are encouraged to first turn to a.e. dinunzio's "**a psychotopography of archival abolition**" to consider abolitionist direct action and find ways to resist co-optation, dilution, and liberal reform that reproduces racial-capitalist power. dinunzio prompts readers to explore questions such as how are libraries and archives—especially projects espousing social movement discourses of liberation, transformation, mutual aid, and community—disciplined, described, and funded? What material and structural economies might these discourses obfuscate? What effect does that funding have on archivists' work? How are rhetorics of diversity and inclusion used by "capitalism's adaptive hegemony" (Ferguson 2012) to sustain carceral power? How can practitioners maintain abolitionist values and practices in their work when significant challenges arise?

To begin to answer this final question, we turn to centering care in information work, a theme that has been explored broadly in archival literature and that recurs throughout the vignettes in this volume. Archival and curatorial work, and indeed all information work, is care work (Olson et al. 2019). Stacie Williams in her 2016 Digital Library Federation Forum keynote, "All Labor is Local," said, "We know that information work has followed the trend of late capitalism, which has an anti-care ethos that affects the ways in which we are taught to value our labor" (Williams 2016). Archival workers often feel pulled to care for or nurture the mental and physical health of the users and staff, their community and the community's knowledge, and other campus entities or their organization as a whole. Hegemonic practices complicate their ability to consistently care in all these areas.

The second essay in this volume, "**PrisonPandemic Procedures of Care: Case Study of Letter 154**" by Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Joanne DeCaro, Keramet Reiter, Alexis Rowland, and Lacey Wood, illustrates several barriers to care and reciprocity in archival work. The project team's archival training and the best practices to which they were accustomed did not prepare them for the challenges they faced. And like any archival collecting project, this one required decisions regarding scoping and compliance with a collection development policy. These limitations complicated the team's ability to honor contributors' wishes and care for project participants. The PrisonPandemic team charted several new paths forward as they faced these barriers.

To disrupt white supremacist systems, archival practitioners must intentionally shift their care and attention from what they have learned to what care is needed right now. Naming what practitioners care most about

in a project is revealing; each stakeholder may have a different answer. The PrisonPandemic authors found it difficult to prioritize care when working within the confines of an academic institution. The drive to preserve the academic institution incentivizes caring about legal and financial risks during project planning over how the project will affect individuals involved—archivists, donors, and users. It is an act of repair to keep re-centering care to individuals rather than institutions.

Privacy and confidentiality are difficult to manage in any archival project, especially ones involving incarcerated people. As Hannah Whelan and Gabriel Solís of the Texas After Violence Project explore in "**Centering Abolitionist Principles of Community Care, Safety, and Wellness in Archives**," people who are currently or formerly incarcerated and their families and friends have their privacy and confidentiality directly threatened by the PIC . The tension to protect collection contributors from privacy and confidentiality threats is also explored in the PrisonPandemic vignette, as the team wrestles with whether to maintain anonymity given conflicting requests from contributors. Within the current system there will always be inherent tensions between creators', archivists', researchers', and archival institutional needs, and as the PrisonPandemic authors articulate, "If we are to write/collect against hegemonic archival practices, we must consider the ways in which our best intentions are themselves carceral."

The PrisonPandemic team rejected certain traditional preservation practices and implemented new kinds of training for project team members that acknowledged the emotional labor involved in the project. Their project illustrates the wide gaps that remain between the traditional archival training typically obtained through LIS programs and the deep care work required to collect the work of incarcerated communities. There is no roadmap for a holistic post-custodial, anti-colonial archival practice: practitioners are still unlearning and rebuilding as they go. The team explores this further as they discuss unlearning and rebuilding their pedagogical practices. The PrisonPandemic team had to address issues of teaching with sensitive material without introducing violent conversations or perpetuating harm through teaching. Much work remains to be done in this critical area; archives cannot be activated as agents of change in the classroom unless students can learn about the harms in the system without being traumatized in the process.

Centering care in spaces where people interact with archival materials is also of paramount concern. The security theater that traditional archival reading rooms operate under is detrimental to shared trust and community building (Schneier 2009). In "**Responsible Collections and**

Ethical Collectives," Caitlin Rizzo shares the story of what happens when archivists choose not to call law enforcement (diverging from library "best practices") to address theft or conflict. Rizzo's vignette illustrates what can happen when people have access to care rather than carceral responses to conflict. It is important for archivists to proactively set up systems of care that resist the carceral systems that extend to libraries. Archivists are accustomed to thinking about risk mitigation, and they have a healthy community of disaster planning that is only growing as climate change urges archivists to prepare. Rizzo demonstrates the need to prepare for interpersonal conflict that cannot be predicted. This vignette illustrates how preparation is an act of care that can lead to better outcomes; it is an activity that archivists should further lean into to repair their practices.

Readers are invited to think about these issues in the context of their work. Whether you are a department head or member of the team, you can acknowledge that archival work is care work and treat it as such. You can bring team members together to develop plans for difficult situations that center care for individuals. This kind of action can start at any time. Indeed, abolitionist actions in archives are happening beyond the pages of this publication. We received far more interest to share information about powerful abolition-centered projects in archives across the US than we could accommodate in this volume.

We encourage engagement with the broad array of abolitionist literature to facilitate personal reflection, both within and outside professional areas of practice.[5] We encourage building power with and learning from information professionals who are disrupting the parts of their work that have roots in criminalization and surveillance. We encourage readers to build relationships with incarcerated people through reference services programs, pen pal programs, and other programs of connection and care. Readers can join local and state movements for PIC abolition and meaningful, non-reformist reforms[6] (Kaba 2014) to move toward collective action. Organizations like the Abolitionist Library Association can provide information workers with valuable connections to these groups.

Above all, we encourage readers to imagine a different future and start building it in the present—one without the PIC, without capitalism, and without the hegemonic structures that harm all of us. The materials we steward as archivists teach us that these structures did not always exist, and they can (and must) be overthrown, for our own liberation.

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[5] For an introduction to abolitionist literature, we recommend the Abolitionist Library Association's website (Abolitionist Library Association, n.d., "Resources").

[6] As Kaba explains, non-reformist reforms—also called transformative reforms—seek to transform systems in liberatory ways and, in the case of abolitionist non-reformist reforms, seek to improve conditions for people who are incarcerated.

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a psychotopography of archival abolition

a.e. dinunzio
contributor: e. b.

> We are the children of the light and we will continue to fight. Not against the flesh and blood, but against the system that names itself falsely. For we have stood on the promises far too long now that we can all be equal under the cover of a social democracy where the rich get richer, and the poor just wait on their dreams.
>
> —Lizzie Borden, *Born in Flames* (1983)

November 2022, Austin, Texas. I am sitting in a hotel conference room, staring at the walls. The room's topographies are causing me cognitive dissonance, blending and blurring the contours of the conversations within. Looming above these conversations on the liberatory potentials and futures of community archives are artifacts and photos of the Texas Rangers, the state's glorified paramilitary border police.[7] The Rangers were established 200 years before to facilitate the expulsion and genocide of Mexican and Indigenous peoples, and to solidify the socioeconomic *status quo* of the settlers who believed that "to establish a monetized economy added to the need for law enforcement and civil defense" (Johnson 2017). On the opposite wall, photos of Native Americans are propped on a shelf of kid lit and pulp westerns—as if their lives, too, were fairy tales. Lives like Sitting Bull's, construed as myths to be pulled from the bookshelves as arbitrarily as he was pulled from his bed and murdered by police. Adjacent to his photo, there is stark red wallpaper of fantastical birds, bugs, and foliage contributing to the psychic mélange of *history, myth, fantasy, fairy tale.* Looking past the wall, I see "the club room" filled with more ornamental books and photographs. A foundation representative is taking notes on a conversation between a nonprofit employee and a conference attendee.

This gathering grew from a 2018 symposium, "Architecting Sustainable Futures," focused on "information gathering and analysis, knowledge sharing, and developing recommendations . . . ensuring the long-term sustainability in community-based archives" to "begin envisioning new

[7] The organizers were unaware of the decor before reserving the venue and called attention to its violence in the opening conversation.

models for the future" (Jules 2018). Futurity and sustainability remain central topics in the 2022 convening and across community archives (CA) scholarship, providing many generative insights and analyses. They are evocative concepts, appealing as we struggle to survive in a present that feels irrevocably violent.

At times, however, these ideas are susceptible to abstraction, making them susceptible to the discourses of *racial capitalism* and development. Cedric J. Robinson theorized racial capitalism to illustrate the ways that racialized exploitation and capital accumulation are mutually constitutive (1983; 2019). When I refer to racial capitalism, I am also evoking cis-heteronormativity, ableism and debilitation, authoritarianism, colonization, imperialism, fascism, and anti-Blackness. By development, I refer to the "spread of the transnational economic complex" serving elite interests in processes of modernization, globalization, and enclosure (Sachs 2019, vii). Development rhetoric includes *participation, progress, resources, sustainability, futures, and management,* and ideals include "hopes for redress and self-affirmation," a "desire for recognition and equity," and emphasis on a "common good" (Sachs 2019, viii).

These discourses are common in community archives scholarship. For instance, in their article "Defining the Undefinable," Welland and Cossham say:

> It is important to understand the scope of [community archives in] the heritage sector because . . . this facilitates explicit recognition, support and acknowledgement of an important source of archival records . . . Definitions are helpful . . . for supporting the development of community archives and generating understanding . . . of the nature of and possibilities offered by such archives (2019, 630).

This is a common narrative: that by contextualizing and placing minoritized archives within a professional sector, the archives will be granted legitimacy and recognized as resources with diverse potentials that can be further developed. The authors continue to say:

> It could be possible to *develop a taxonomy of types* of community archives and from that build an understanding of the practices and needs of different types and different communities…this would enable community archives to *place themselves in a more concrete framework of understanding* that *helps to actualize a corporate identity around community archives managemen*t that … draws support from similarities of roles, purposes, and practices across the heritage sectors, *leading to a more sustainable future* (2019, 630, emphasis added).

Again, this is not a unique narrative, in Library Information Science (LIS) or other fields; emergent knowledge formations rarely escape the impulse to taxonomize, define, and be placed in frameworks that facilitate easier management and use. Even the most radical aims can inadvertently homogenize ways of living under a rubric of progress, modernization, corporatization, and innovation—all necessary components for the expansion of capitalist systems and social relations. In fact, to be considered a field of study or source for scholars demands discipline, development, and professionalization. Geographer and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore says these processes are,

> indicative of top-down crisis containment, the managerial methodology encoded in 'strategic planning.'. . . [T]his tendency indicates what [Antonio] Gramsci calls a 'passive revolution,' [the purpose of which is] 'to restore . . . the fundamental social relations of production on a more stable basis for the future (2022, 70).

Abolitionist direct action brought me to archives, and I have been at varying points energized and critical of how it shows up in library and information science (LIS). Professions tend to appropriate and leverage radical ideas to the point of abstraction. However, I am of the mind that "words belong to those who use them only till someone else steals them back" (Bey, 87). Just as "decolonization is not a metaphor" (Tuck and Yang 2012), abolition is not an abstraction. While there is a utility in metaphors (e.g., as analytical or pedagogical tools), imprecision can occlude the clear intents of material political projects practiced in past and present social movements. For instance, Ruth Wilson Gilmore identifies "the archival record of self-organization and world-making activity" of Black people during Reconstruction as:

> abundant evidence showing how freedom is not simply the absence of enslavement . . . [but] the undoing of bondage–abolition–is quite literally to change places: to destroy the geography of slavery by mixing their labor with the external world to change the world and thereby themselves (2022, 481).

Archives of social movements, abolition, and anti-capitalism are examples of these "world changing" practices. This is why I am concerned about the increasing number of initiatives, backed by tremendous amounts of capital, focused on the "thick description" (Geertz 1973, 6) of counter-hegemonic memory practices under the rubric, category, and taxonomy of "community

archives."[8] As geographer Katherine McKittrick puts it—speaking on the "institutionalization of identity" and "biocentric and colonial categories"—"description is not liberation" (McKittrick 2021, 39). Instead, "the splitting and differentiation of ways of knowing is in part, Edward Said reminds us, the function of empire. Discipline is empire" (McKittrick 2021, 38). What is it about rhizomatic, autonomous, and ephemeral memory practices that call for professionalization, discipline, and centralization? What institutions are invested in such a project, and to what ends? How and why are we—archivists and LIS workers aspiring to some form of liberatory practice—mediating these processes?

If, as Gilmore notes, "elites fashion political, economic, and cultural institutions using ideologies and methods acquired locally, nationally, and internationally" (481), then, I contend that these counter-hegemonic archival formations are susceptible to what Ferguson calls "capitalism's adaptive hegemony" (2012, 5) ; i.e., co-optation and use that ultimately sustains the status quo. What is to be done? Can we struggle for the survival and autonomy of minoritized memory practices from within the violent systems in which we are currently embedded?

In our present state of despair and crisis, we often assume that the solutions offered to us are the only ones possible. As capitalism expands its carceral geographies, it not only undergirds academic, political, and professional spaces, but it also infects activist, familial, and interrelational ones. Enclosure funnels our memory into a mode of relation under capitalism, and capitalism is fundamentally carceral.[9] Yet, as Gilmore affirms, "non-elites are never passive pawns. . . . Signs and traces of abolition geographies abound, even in their fragility" (481). What might it mean to decenter fiscal management, development, and professional legibility in favor of abolition? Gilmore calls abolition "a plot against racial capitalism," including "a plot in a geographic sense . . . in which we aim to make all space, not just some space, free" (Gilmore 2017). Inspired by Gilmore, Kaitlyn Selman expands:

> Abolition is horizontal as it requires and facilitates solidarity across people and communities, vertical as it deftly navigates multiple scales, and it is deep as it seeks to transcend the temporal limitations of linear progress . . . abolition embodies the complexity required for the creation of new worlds (2022).

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[8] *Thick description,* coined by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, is "intensive, small-scale, dense descriptions of social life from observation, through which broader cultural interpretations and generalizations can be made" (Oxford Reference, n.d.).

[9] One well-put insight from e. b., who shared many useful suggestions for this piece. She has been involved with the Defend the Forest movement since 2021, documented in part through "*Notes from the Forest*" (2023).

How might we enact the “plot” of abolition in archives?

March 2023, Atlanta, Georgia. I am sitting in a forest staring at a police helicopter overhead. Its searchlight is crawling across the trees they plan to destroy after extracting the people camped underneath. Two hundred years ago, as the Rangers stole land in the West, settlers in the South stole the Weelaunee Forest from the Muscogee Creek peoples. They used the sacred land as a plantation, and—a century after—as a prison farm, both extracting profit from coerced labor and brutalized bodies; the forest was also used by the city as a dumping ground for the detritus of development and carceral containment (Belgard 2023; CrimethInc. 2022). Bodies of the enslaved and incarcerated lie amongst the bricks of the Carnegie Library, left there after its demolition in 1977 (Edwards 2023). In 2021, the city of Atlanta, the Atlanta Police Department, the Atlanta Police Foundation, and their many individual, corporate, and government sponsors ascribed the future of the forest as a “Police Safety Training Center” (PSTC)—“Cop City.” In 2023, the Weelaunee cradles our tents and dwindling fires, because we reject this future.

Fig. 1: Bricks from the Carnegie Library. After it was torn down in 1977, the city dumped its debris in the Weelaunee Forest. “Untitled,” by Ryan Fatica. May 2022.

For our rejection, they call us “domestic terrorists,” “extremists,” and “racketeers” (Shamsi 2023; Pratt 2023). Why do they need a playground to “simulate real-world crisis situations” (Atlanta Public Safety Training

Center, n.d.) when they are already generating perpetual crises in actual cities, locally and internationally? As I am writing this, Israel is invading Palestine. The settler state is bolstered by exchanges of funds, weapons, and military strategy with the US. Programs like the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange (GILEE) enable shared access to carceral training grounds like Cop City (James 2023). Such collaborations (between universities, foundations, police and nation-states) sustain the "ideology of Progress—conquest and subjugation of peoples, ruin of lands and sacrifice zones for the empire" (Watson 1991) and reveal the ways that "racial capitalism is the equivalent of a giant necropolis. It rests on the traffic of the dead and human bones" (Mbembe 2017, 136).

The necropolis of Cop City was imagined as a direct response to the George Floyd uprisings and subsequent protests against police murder, the climate crisis, mass detainment, and border violence (Pratt 2023). Cop City would recuperate the carceral terrains of police hegemony by being the largest of its kind in the nation, a model to be adopted across the states. Its construction was framed as a means to boost police morale in light of the Atlanta Police Department's "struggles with recruitment and retention" and to "improve their professionalism and enable them to execute their oath." The Atlanta Police Foundation went so far as to claim that "in addition to the focus on tactical training, the PSTC will emphasize cultural awareness [and] community knowledge" ("Public Safety Training Center," n.d.)

Overhead, they have searchlights, drones, and guns, which they use to surveil our bodies; our "community and cultural knowledges" distilled into burning blotches on a heat map. What they miss in their mapping is that "the forest is not just a particular concentration of trees . . . [but] a network of relationships between living creatures of all species" and "an ungovernable, indestructible, breathing barricade" (CrimethInc. 2022).

Reflecting on a walk through the forest, writer and educator Alex Edwards describes its "signs of resistance to the world-unmaking projects of policing and prisons," adding that "forests are abolitionist worlds" (2023). Encountering the "bricks and tablature" of the Carnegie Library (Figure 1) dumped there in the 1970s, she is "struck by the beauty of the native forest reclaiming this former monument to capital and white supremacist literacies" (Edwards 2023). Plantations, prisons, monuments, "training facilities": they rise and crumble and are reconstituted and torn down again, each time more fractured than before.

June 2023, Atlanta, Georgia. I am walking along Sugar Creek, looking at the roots plunging into its polluted waters, in awe of the forest's resilience despite the refuse and poison it has been subjected to since settlers arrived.

A centuries-long trajectory of racial capitalist extraction and violence is documented in the archive of a creek. A glass medicine bottle from the early 1900s promises reprieve for the ill. A CD-ROM lays stained and snapped in gravel. The skeleton of a chair perches like an empty throne (Figures 2 and 3). An owl flies overhead, pulling my eyes back to the trees. She lands in dense foliage, far less discernible than the metal and glass and rubber below. I cannot capture her image with my cheap burner phone, but I can see her placid self-possession and assurance. Our intergenerational detritus stains her home, but she will outlive it. Her throne is not a skeleton, but a canopy. She is a thousand years old, and a CD-ROM or medicine bottle could never contain her.

Fig. 2: CD-ROM in Sugar Creek, Atlanta. Photo by the author, 2023.

Fig. 3: Empty chair in Sugar Creek, Atlanta. Photo by the author, 2023.

July 2023, Tucson, Arizona. In Carceral Capitalism, Jackie Wang says "racialized economic practices and modes of governance are linked insofar as they both emerge to temporarily stave off crises generated by finance capitalism" (2018, 69). Capital will always formulate new methods to reproduce and stabilize itself in times of crisis, uprising, and resistance. Abolitionists' direct action combats these adaptations and safeguards spaces of prefiguration—spaces to enact the world we want here, in the present. In response, racial-capitalist power aims to enclose the commons of counter-hegemonic memory; to swallow up and abstract our radical aspirations—*revolution, liberation, autonomy, abolition*. How can we subvert such a project?

> We are looking for “spaces” (geographic, social, cultural, imaginal) with potential to flower as autonomous zones—and we are looking for times in which these spaces are relatively open, either through neglect on the part of the State or because they have somehow escaped notice by the mapmakers, or for whatever reason. Psychotopology [and -topography] is the art of dowsing for potential TAZs (Bey 1991).

In addition to direct action, I imagine Bey’s psychotopographies and “temporary autonomous zones” (TAZs) as these spaces of subversion. For instance, over the last year, I have worked with comrades across multiple states to grow the Abolitionist Collaborative Archive and Bibliography (ACAB), digital collections of the Defend the Atlanta Forest Movement, and other pockets of counter-memory. Abolitionists, anarchists, and unnamed collectives co-create the collections, adding, removing and editing as needed to maintain our safety and survival. In this sense the site is an autonomous zone, averting academic, professional, and statist disciplining—the “cartographies of control.” Other TAZs—exhibits and installations, actions, collaborations and conversations—have sporadically emerged and dispersed throughout the years to combat Cop City and other carceral cartographies, and they will continue to do so.

November 2023, Atlanta, Georgia. I am staring at a wall, its topography raging and rippling between us and the forest. The wall is made of transparent polycarbonate riot shields, and I can see the faces of the police behind them. They look afraid and murderous, shoving as hard as they can, brandishing their “less lethal” weapons (as in *probably* won’t kill you). We are carrying saplings in our backpacks to plant where they have uprooted. The only trees they carry are embedded in black batons. I cannot imagine being so murderous and afraid of people who pray for the “probably” in “*won’t kill you,*” who have come to replant saplings out of love for the forest, each other, and our fallen comrade, Tortuguita (Defend the Atlanta Forest 2023). Perhaps they are afraid because they know we are willing to live and die for the present and future of the forest–when I doubt they truly know what they are living and dying for. They are saplings of kevlar, velcro, and polycarbonate, the proxies of empire; they come and go in waves of smoke and blood. Tear gas canisters sprout new waves. One lands by my feet, its plume rising as I belatedly pull my goggles over my face. I remember the baggy a comrade gave me with a damp scrap of cloth, rapid first aid for chemical weaponry. A flash grenade deafens me as I use it to clear my eyes, and the burning starts to recede. Shoving the baggy back in my pocket I cannot help but think, what a great addition to the archive.

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PrisonPandemic Procedures of Care: Case Study of Letter 154

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GENESIS, GOALS, AND CHALLENGES

PrisonPandemic is an archive project that preserves stories of people who were incarcerated in California during COVID-19. In March 2020, carceral facilities across the United States shut down to outsiders: no family visits; no access to religious or educational programming; limited, if any, time out of cell. Even phone calls, which increasingly represented incarcerated people's only connection to the outside world, were often difficult to make (Reisdorf 2023). Across US prisons in 2020, the COVID-19 case rate for incarcerated people was more than five times higher than for non-incarcerated people, and the death rate was three times higher (Saloner et al. 2020). In June 2020, California's San Quentin prison experienced the largest COVID-19 outbreak in the country. One staff member and 28 prisoners died within a few weeks. This COVID-19 crisis in carceral facilities galvanized a group of educators at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), a campus committed to providing both higher education opportunities and archival spaces for incarcerated voices, to build pathways of communication for people inside prison.

UCI faculty and doctoral students—all with deep community and research connections to experiences and impacts of incarceration—founded PrisonPandemic in the summer of 2020. We started by working with student volunteers to staff an evening hotline and establishing a post office box where people could send letters. We then reached out to incarcerated people (via advertisements in newsletters, flyers sent through organizational contacts, and individual letters sent to people with common last names obtained from public lists of institutional occupants) to inform them of the hotline and PO box. Over the nearly two years the hotline operated, we recorded 884 calls and received 3,771 letters. Callers and letter writers consistently described feeling silenced, scared, alone, and abandoned in facilities that were sealed off from communication with the outside world but simultaneously acutely vulnerable to viral infections.

From the outset, the project's priority was to center the safety of our contributors by inhibiting unintended identification and potential retaliation. To ensure this, the team reviewed all contributions for topicality (Is the story about COVID-19?) and anonymized contributions

before digitizing and sharing materials with the public. Applying these principles to individual cases, however, creates challenges. To make this all more concrete and to re-focus on the individual, living voices among the thousands infected and the hundreds dying in carceral facilities, we turn to Letter 154.

Letter 154 is from a self-identified "transfeminine nonbinary person" who describes multiple instances of physical and sexual assault, along with persistent denials of her gender identity in violation of multiple civil rights laws. Letter 154 says nothing about the COVID-19 crisis but includes a prison newsletter about the crisis with a column written by the author. Letter 154 forces a confrontation with multiple questions of care implicated in the archive: How do we demonstrate care for contributors, who have suffered violence, who desperately want to be identified, but who face potential retaliation for the identities and experiences described in their letters? How do we enact care for processors who read, sort, and redact these stories? How do we define the boundaries and archival best practices of an anonymized archive about COVID-19, when contributors speak of other life-impacting events that do not relate to the pandemic crisis? How do we help educators manage the precarious, emotional conversations that surround the pain and trauma contributors have experienced, and help students engage with the archive authentically while showing care to the writers and themselves?

Few models exist for how to best care for contributors and processors, and few standards exist to govern archival practices for processing sensitive materials contributed by vulnerable subjects in real time. Too often institutional rules—both academic and carceral–structure collection decisions and place limits on extending care. Developing best practices that center care for contributors, materials, and the team (i.e., those receiving and reviewing materials) presented persistent challenges that we are still grappling with in the midst of transitioning from active collecting to permanent archiving.

RECONCILING WITH INSTITUTIONAL PROCEDURES OF (NON) CARE

We faced continual limitations to the forms and extent of care we could provide, especially in the context of an academic institution, which often prioritizes caring for legal and financial risks over individual vulnerabilities. Our team wishes we could have provided so much more to participants, including long-term correspondence with participants who desired it; legal, financial, or other forms of support to participants in crisis; and respect for the wishes of those participants who asked to be named.

The commitment to anonymize all stories in PrisonPandemic has particularly challenged the team, as exemplified by Letter 154. At the outset, following consultation with campus counsel, we told all contributors that all stories would be de-identified. The PrisonPandemic team was primarily concerned with preventing aggrieved prison staff from identifying and retaliating against contributors. Underscoring this, we received several letters expressing concern about anonymity and its implications for their personal safety. Ethical authorities across our team's professional and disciplinary arenas (including social science, information studies, public health, and law) prescribe anonymity as the primary tool for preventing harm, under the assumption of anonymity's universal good. Letter 154 challenges these assumptions about ethical good and even the feasibility of anonymization in the carceral domain.

Letter 154 highlights how incarceration renders people simultaneously hypervisible and invisible, and how vulnerability—both as a result of differential visibility and COVID-19 more broadly—falls unevenly across various identities and bodies. Transfemme people, in facilities designated for men in particular, are hypervisible, very few in number, and at much higher risk of violence from both staff and other incarcerated people (Jenness and Rowland 2023). The same gendered institutional logics and practices that generate vulnerable housing situations for transfemme people also generated resistance to implementing COVID-19 precautions in prison. Trans prisoners, like those with COVID-19, are repeatedly trapped in solitary confinement (Arkles 2009). This same isolation and visibility complicate anonymization practices: in having been rendered so easily identifiable, a transfemme contributor-author forcibly boarded in a facility designated for men may be insufficiently protected by the same tools that researchers use to protect other types of people across myriad domains. In attempting to keep the contributor safe through anonymity, we risk erasing their transness and attendant experiences and perspective. Because carceral practices similarly deny trans identity in the name of upholding safety and security (Sanders et al. 2022), we must ask ourselves whether anonymization practices can be ethical within this compact moral economy. Further, Black feminist scholars warn that ignoring the experiences of the most marginalized not only perpetuates minority subjugation, but ultimately harms larger emancipatory movements in which they are embedded.

Despite the many factors that heighten their risk, like many of our contributors, the author of Letter 154 requests to not be anonymized, going so far as to provide a copy of their published contribution to *Prison Covid News*. In addition to containing many identifying details, the article they enclosed with the letter is a passionate indictment of state authority,

especially how it silences activists like the author. Another letter (Letter 128) by an incarcerated transgender person similarly troubles anonymity for the gender-nonconforming; that author writes, "it will be a waste of history if I am unknown." Together they illustrate how anonymity maps unevenly across various identities and bodies and call into question the transgressive power of archiving anonymized stories. Anonymity's promise of safety in the context of this project is meaningful only in as much as it offers incarcerated people an opportunity to communicate about carceral facilities from within them with the goal of resistance. If we are to write and collect against hegemonic archival practices, we must consider the ways in which our best intentions are themselves carceral.

PROCEDURES OF CARE FOR CONTRIBUTORS

The challenge of enacting PrisonPandemic's anonymization policy on Letter 154 exemplifies the ethical conflicts we repeatedly encountered in developing procedures of care. We began the project centering principles of receptiveness, transparency, and anonymity. At the outset, we had to identify which ethical regulations governed a project like this. Our goal with PrisonPandemic was to build a publicly accessible archive, rather than to immediately produce analytic research. Because the materials we collected were not part of a research project, the project qualified for an Institutional Review Board (IRB) exemption. We worked with a university lawyer to develop a plan to anonymize letters (to prevent retaliation against either individual contributors or the university) and to develop language to clearly communicate to contributors how their stories would be anonymized and publicized. We also convened and met at least quarterly with a community advisory board, including previously incarcerated and systems-impacted people, which advised on outreach practices, anonymization decisions, and redaction processes.

Still, the requests and identities of contributors, the content of their stories, and the texture and tone of the materials they shared have challenged what initially seemed to us like simple principles of receptiveness, transparency, and anonymity. In particular, we worked to do more than just share standard language with contributors about how their contributions would be used. Outside the privacy and legal context, our team sought to invoke a person-centered care approach in the ways we initiated contact and collected stories. We encouraged undergraduate team members to personalize their letters (working from a standard template) to the people whom they were writing by, for instance, writing the first paragraph in their own voice with words of support and encouragement, or using or making beautiful cards to contain the letters. We personally

responded to people when they wanted more information about the project and returned materials to people upon request. However, written and unwritten prison mail policies constrained everything about our correspondence. At a minimum, we sought to respond to contributors with a note thanking them for their contributions. Incarcerated people expect not to receive responses to their letters and requests, so our initial, personalized outreach, followed by even a generic thank you note, generated many expressions of appreciation for being acknowledged, heard, and cared for.

But letters like 154 remind us of the limits of these care procedures; we could do nothing to protect this contributor from the violence she experienced. Given the processes we set up to protect all contributors through anonymization and redaction, we could not even honor her request to be identified.

PROCEDURES OF CARE FOR ARCHIVAL MATERIALS

As we received and processed letters, we realized that we needed to develop additional protocols for managing off-topic letters, like Letter 154. We estimate that about 23% of our submissions are off-topic, meaning that they are not about COVID-19; some contributors sought friendship, romantic partners, or legal help. We also received both on-topic and off-topic submissions that describe instances of violence committed prior to a contributor's time in prison and during, as well as instances of racism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, or religious evangelism.

We defined "Levels of Sensitivity," [10] which allow us to think more deeply about methods of access, appraisal, and retention. Level 1 pertains to on-topic letters, which pose no sensitivity risk; these letters will be digitized, and their metadata will be made available online on the digital collections portal, Calisphere. Level 2 letters pertain to on-topic narration of a sensitive nature; these letters will be digitized but will require mediated access (metadata only; item is available by request) through Calisphere. Level 3 letters pertain to off-topic narration and thus will not be digitized; these are candidates for removal from the collection. Letter 154 straddles many gray areas that helped define our "Levels of Sensitivity." In the narrative of the letter the author does not relay any experiences with or about COVID-19; in fact, the letter primarily details multiple instances of violence and discrimination that the author and her partner experienced

[10] Arroyo-Ramírez, Elvia, L. Castillo, J. DeCaro, K. Reiter, G. Rosales, and A. Rowland et al. (2023). "UC Irvine PrisonPandemic Levels of Sensitivity and Redaction." UC Irvine: Libraries. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6bq9g542.

and expresses a desire for legal help. As mentioned previously, the author included an issue of *Prison Covid News,* to which she contributed. *Prison Covid News* is a newsletter published by and for incarcerated people to share national and international infection rate updates, survivor guides, letters, and artwork. Because of the enclosure of this newsletter, we decided the letter as a whole is on-topic and therefore retained it in the archive.

Our redaction protocols have evolved as we engage with questions of access, retention, and care. All letters have been physically redacted with blackout tape, which is a reliable method for redaction before digitization (providing a physical blocker during scanning) but not for managing the originals (anyone could remove the tape, revealing underlying information). We decided to either excise or destroy the originals and make the digitized scans the retained copies. This decision has been one of the hardest to consider and enact for the project team. There is a very affective quality of holding the original letters—sadness, anger, frustration can be felt on the topography of the letters; the digital context flattens this affective quality.

We developed “Levels of Redaction” to think beyond the scope of digitization toward careful paths of providing access to the originals in UCI Special Collections & Archives without compromising contributor identities. From the outset, physical redaction was difficult to consider because of the labor involved. The option of digital redaction, blacking out parts of the letters and materials after digitization, was quickly dismissed since this increases the potential of having unredacted copies stored in local drives. Our approach on redaction integrates lessons learned from human rights organizations collecting, storing, and using vulnerable people’s stories (Vannini et al. 2019, 927), navigating the “liminal space between the protection of human lives and… enforcement processes,” developing protocols for “effective information sharing” that avoid compromises to “privacy and confidentiality” (Newell et al. 2020, 211).

Our “Levels of Redaction” include three tiers that correspond to whether a letter is single-sided and the amount of redaction a letter needs. For example, for Level 1, Special Collections & Archives will retain the original, if it is single-sided, meaning there is no redaction needed on the verso, or if the letter is double-sided, but does not require any redaction work on the body (e.g., only the signature on the letter needs to be excised, as well as the information on the envelope). We estimate 45% of all letters are single-sided allowing us to retain originals in Special Collections & Archives with minimal excision work. If the letter is double-sided and has any redactions (Level 2), physical excising is not an option

since information would be lost on the other side of the page. Level 3 is reserved for letters that are double- or single-sided but require extensive (>25%) excision work on the body of the letter. For Levels 2 and 3, Special Collections & Archives will remove the original letter from the archive and replace it with a high-quality printout version of the digital scan.

PROCEDURES OF CARE FOR RECEIVING AND PROCESSING TEAMS

Our team sought to center care for the people receiving and reviewing archive materials. We have had hundreds of undergraduate students work closely with the collected materials. They have staffed the hotline, written letters, and processed letters and calls. They became deeply immersed in the often heartbreaking and painful stories of people inside. We partnered with the Counseling Center on campus to have a representative meet with each new cohort of students as part of their training process, to discuss how emotionally challenging work can impact their well-being and to provide them with resources on self-care and counseling. Graduate students, staff, and faculty leading the project also shared personal experiences of working with incarcerated people and our own techniques for taking care of ourselves in the face of secondary trauma, as well as personally coaching many people through individual challenges on the project.

For example, in December 2020 one student finished her shift on the hotline, and she immediately called the hotline supervisor, Joanne DeCaro, to discuss a call that had deeply shaken her. The caller told our student about his very real fear that he would be the next person on his “yard” to die; he had underlying conditions, was not getting the care he needed, especially as a transgender person, and isolation measures—a 24-hour version of administrative segregation, or solitary confinement—had pushed him to start creating a suicide plan and writing goodbye letters, until he was transferred to a crisis bed on suicide watch. Joanne has listened to the recording of this call multiple times, and it is harrowing; the extreme anger, pain, and desperation etched into this man’s voice is enough to make most listeners cry. When the student who originally took the call ended her shift, she was distraught. Joanne and the student talked on the phone for two hours that night–about how powerless both felt in the face of this story (and many others). We attended to Wright and Laurent’s argument: “Normalizing discussions of, and support for, trauma, vicarious trauma, self-care, and mental health enables students and volunteers to feel safe bringing up issues and know they will be supported when doing so” (2021). Joanne and other team members checked in on the student who took this call each day for the rest of the week and offered to take her off the hotline for as long as she needed. Most of the project team founders

had been there with people they cared about locked inside, and they were familiar with the feeling of being helpless to stop the horrors within the institution. We were able to affirm the student's experience, validate the tears shared with the caller, and remind each other that we are humans first, and our primary goal was always simply to listen and give someone an opportunity to feel heard.

PROCEDURES OF EDUCATIONAL CARE

Ethical questions surrounding the redaction of calls and letters and the mechanisms of their long-term storage have been continuous and complex. Nonetheless, once the PrisonPandemic team established a workflow, we began to think through the dissemination of the archive. Pedagogical materials seemed like one clear path to invite a wider audience to engage with the archive. As a team, we decided that creating modules that educators could plug into a syllabus might allow for the widest variety of engagement. At first, this process seemed relatively straightforward: create a health module that could be used for a week on incarceration in a public health or medical sociology course, a module on race and ethnicity that could be used for social science or humanities courses, etc. But the pedagogical portion of the project has presented its own set of ethical concerns, especially how to give educators and students the tools to have difficult conversations in a constructive way that avoids violent conversations in the classroom.

This issue became particularly sticky in the lesson plan on gender in carceral facilities, as Letter 154 foreshadows. Discussing the challenges trans people face during incarceration inherently opens classrooms to transphobic comments from students that would be difficult for educators to navigate. However, leaving trans people out of the conversation of gender would be its own type of violence. The modules themselves would not be enough to extend the kind of care to our pedagogical materials that had become so central to our work.

We are, therefore, working to include two supplements to the more traditional learning materials available on our website. The first helps educators manage the types of difficult conversations that inevitably arise in classrooms where social problems are open for discussion, walking educators through how to make the classroom more accessible, put together lists of on and off-campus resources for care, effectively use content warnings, handle precarious teaching moments, and find ways to care for themselves. The second supplemental document focuses on supporting students engaging with the archive, walking students through why we read these types of stories, with special attention to the

idea of "bearing witness," and suggestions for ways to mitigate the risk of vicarious trauma or retraumatization. This document also invites students who have experienced trauma to reflect on where they are in their own journey to recovery and offers an opportunity to consider whether they are in a place where they can succeed in a course that requires that they work with traumatic stories. Although the goal of the pedagogical materials has always been making archival materials accessible to a broader audience, doing so at the risk of the materials themselves causing trauma never felt like an acceptable trade-off.

EVOLVING PROCEDURES OF CARE

The PrisonPandemic project has developed a continuously evolving set of procedures around care. The project responded to one crisis but has confronted many collateral challenges, from receiving thousands more letters over a longer time period than we ever imagined, to identifying and implementing consistent anonymization policies. These crises and challenges have forced us to develop, question, and revise procedures of care for contributors, processors, and consumers of stories from prison. On one hand, being part of a major academic institution has provided resources (from student volunteers to legal advice) that made the project both feasible and legitimate. On the other hand, being part of a major academic institution has constrained our options for creating direct lines of tangible care—especially to and with contributors. As members of a university community, we have wondered whether a nonprofit or community organization built on a mutual aid framework might have more readily facilitated opportunities for more direct care of contributors. Indeed, through team members' work with nonprofits and community organizations serving incarcerated populations, we have re-encountered the author of Letter 154 and hope to continue this conversation with her.

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Centering Abolitionist Principles of Community Care, Safety, and Wellness in Archives

Hannah Whelan and Gabriel Solís

Widespread public indignation about mass incarceration and police brutality has radically increased in the US over the past five years, primarily due to the near-ubiquitous reach of social media and other digital technologies that have exposed the traumatic impacts of state violence on individuals, families, and communities. For generations, targeted communities have responded to this violence with storytelling and memory work as strategies for resistance and survival; they have also fought for decisions about ethics, control, preservation, description, and access to be made at the community level. Through this re-envisioning of archival practices, a community archives movement has emerged and remains strong.

Over the past few decades, archivists and scholars working in academic institutions have joined community efforts to contemporaneously document the stories of people impacted by state violence and human rights abuses. Community-based and institutional archival projects can serve as powerful sites for self-documentation, counter-narrative creation, and movement building. However, they also risk reifying carceral tactics of surveillance, criminalization, and erasure, especially as they relate to collecting, digitizing, and sharing materials originating from prisons, jails, and detention centers.

In this vignette, we focus on the Texas After Violence Project (TAVP), which is a public memory archive that fosters deeper understandings of the impacts of state violence. TAVP'S mission is to help build power with directly impacted communities, centering their dignity, agency, and expertise to cultivate restorative and transformative justice. Our work aims to create a culture in which family and community relationships that have been torn apart by state violence–including incarceration, police brutality and execution—can create their own narratives about loss and survival in the aftermath of violence.

At TAVP, we learn from our communities to evolve our documentation, preservation, and archival activation practices. We are also paying close attention to the practices of similar documentation and archival projects, including their consent processes, questionnaire forms, submission requirements, metadata collection practices, and public interfaces.

While we are encouraged by the growing interest in this work, we are concerned when policies and protocols replicate information collection practices of the prison-industrial complex (PIC) and expose participants to retraumatization, retaliation, re-criminalization, and increased surveillance. These concerns are not unfounded.

Police and prison administration have long surveilled correspondence and other documents originating in US prisons, jails, and detention centers, but over the last two decades they have increasingly leveraged AI-based security technologies to significantly increase their surveillance capacities (Glenn, 2021). Public records requests have revealed that surveillance software is used to scan audio and written communications entering and leaving carceral institutions—often using culturally specific or non-English key terms that prison administrators believe to be related to criminal activity (Asher-Schapiro and Sherfinski, 2021). A coalition of civil and digital rights groups also obtained records that revealed that AI-based technology has been used to identify information in conversations that could cause reputational damage or legal exposure for prisons and jails, such as complaints about inadequate and inhumane responses to the COVID-19 pandemic (Asher-Schapiro and Sherfinski, 2021; Biddle et al, 2020).

To better understand how abolitionist practices address and subvert these risks, we engaged in a series of conversations with archivists, memory workers, university staff and faculty, and community activists involved in archival projects caring for records and stories documenting incarceration. Jennifer Toon, Project Director for Lioness: Justice Impacted Women's Alliance and TAVP's Community Advocacy Manager, discussed how carceral institutions control narratives by stealing the stories of incarcerated people, and increasingly leverage their own storytelling through social media in their narrative control efforts. "They're doing exactly what they've always done to us," Toon explained. "But now it's on a greater scale because we're getting louder" (Toon, 2023). It's true. Abolitionists and advocates are getting louder. In their community and in communities across the US, currently and formerly incarcerated people and their loved ones are leading movements for decarceration and abolition.

It should be acknowledged that many currently and formerly incarcerated advocates and organizers continue to be targeted (and possibly reincarcerated) as a result of their abolition activism. For instance, people who are on "supervision" (such as parole or probation) are given limited Fourth Amendment rights, meaning many of them fear frequent searches and seizures of their property—whether digital or physical. An article in an *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* released by the US Department of Justice

concluded that the usual requirement of a search warrant based upon probable cause is not required in these cases, and that a probation or parole officer needs only to act on reasonable suspicion that criminal activity is occurring to initiate a search (Colbridge, 2003). Currently incarcerated people face even less protection. The 1984 case Hudson v. Palmer determined that Fourth Amendment protections against unlawful search and seizure do not protect incarcerated people from searches of their personal property by correctional officers whatsoever, and that they have no reasonable expectation of privacy in their cells (Goring, 1984).

Apparently, community storytelling constitutes a critique of the PIC and justifies "reasonable suspicion," as one TAVP collaborator was recently threatened with reincarceration after publicizing videos and photos of deplorable food conditions in Texas prisons. Unfounded searches and threats of reincarceration are not the only forms of retaliation. Jennifer Toon also shared how she was threatened by prison administrators with removal from her loved ones' visitation lists after writing a piece for a major publication detailing her own lived experiences with incarceration (Toon, 2023).

The risks of participation in storytelling and archival projects should not outweigh our commitment to dismantling the PIC and collectively building an abolitionist future. Still, the risks demonstrate the importance of transparency, sustained diligence, and protocols for support when collaborating with currently or formerly incarcerated people. As Jarrett M. Drake and Stacie M. Williams point out, "It is paramount that archivists take an interest in how the state enforces its legitimacy" (Williams and Drake, 2017). Encouraging conversation and collaboration between projects helps advocates to collectively identify risks for further violence and build better support for those who are most impacted, including currently and formerly incarcerated collaborators.

With this in mind, we spoke with an archivist of the PrisonPandemic [11] initiative, a documentation and archival project housed at University of California Irvine (UCI), which preserves the stories of people incarcerated in California and their loved ones. Like TAVP, PrisonPandemic also works closely with submitted archival materials to identify risks for archival contributors, most of whom are currently incarcerated. As a safeguard, PrisonPandemic implemented a careful anonymization process that ensures there are no digital trails linking contributor names to their records. While PrisonPandemic's anonymization process is thorough, the project's archivist acknowledged concern about the use

[11] See previous chapter, *"PrisonPandemic Procedures of Care: Case Study of Letter 154."*

of voice recognition and handwriting detection tools to circumvent anonymization procedures. However, they share TAVP's belief that fear of PIC's suppression strategies should not prevent stories from reaching the public despite knowing that blanket anonymization has the potential to contribute to the very erasure and censorship that the state enacts through prisons, jails, and detention centers (Arroyo-Ramirez, 2023).

We also spoke with archivists at The Visiting Room Project (TVRP), a digital archive containing interviews with 100+ people serving life without the possibility of parole at Angola (Louisiana State Penitentiary). The project team discussed the difficulty of having to remove or anonymize certain information that could increase personal risks while also balancing the ethics of narrative censorship or removal. TAVP and PrisonPandemic are navigating similar difficulties. Archivists with TVRP also shared our fears about how to keep up with these risks as they evolve, stating, "we're treading water as it is". As one team member shared, "we're constantly remembering and in conversation with the people who have participated in our project, and those people want their freedom" (Cull, Kondkar, and Nisenson, 2023).

Whether at Lioness, PrisonPandemic, or The Visiting Room Project, participants we interviewed shared the same goal: to help people tell their stories and build narrative power while not jeopardizing their freedom or imposing paternalistic censorship practices. Understanding these risks while not letting them overwhelm us with fear or encourage complicity in silencing is imperative. As abolitionist memory workers and loved ones of people who are currently incarcerated, we are committed to continuing these conversations and working to build more diligent practices.

Examples of more diligent practices that we are implementing at TAVP include:

- Ensuring that all records in which a pseudonym is used or in which a contributor has requested anonymity be completely disassociated from use of a legal name
- Offering voice and image alteration technology for interviews
- Collaborating with archival contributors through encrypted channels of communication
- Creating and making publicly available access statements that reveal who has access to archival records
- Avoiding discussion or mention of supposed criminal offenses (whether charged or uncharged)
- Having a plan to respond to subpoenas and resources to dedicate towards anyone negatively impacted by participating in archival projects

Even in the face of surveillance and other threats, abolitionists have long documented and preserved stories of loss and survival, protecting this endangered knowledge and refusing to be complicit in the state's project of erasure. To build on these traditions, we must remember that abolition is centered on community care, safety, and wellness. The same must also be true for our documentation and archival practices. We urge archives to center the voices, dignity, and expertise of directly impacted people so they can tell, describe, and protect their stories while recording them on their own terms. We urge archives to cultivate meaningful and equitable partnerships with currently and formerly incarcerated people and community organizations providing on-the-ground support to incarcerated people and their loved ones. These partnerships are essential to effectively demonstrate the importance of community memory projects and to understand the risks for retraumatization, retaliation, surveillance, and other threats that come with participation in these efforts.

Precisely because prisons, jails, and detention centers intentionally sever community ties, many incarcerated people rely heavily on dialogue with people on the outside; this reliance on community-building produces self-documentation and storytelling that can be seen as generative acts not only of memory work, but also of survival. As archivists, memory workers, and activists dedicated to both our work and our humanity, we must challenge our current practices to ensure that these documents of survival are protected and that those who create them are afforded care within the space of the archive.

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Responsible Collections and Ethical Collectives

Caitlin Rizzo

In 2018, I accepted my first career position as the head of collection management (later collections services) at a major research university. In the speech I delivered to prospective colleagues during the interview, I spoke about the importance of maintenance as a core tenet of my approach to librarianship. I emphasized that I felt a sense of responsibility to care for the collections donors give to archives because, in my experience, those collections were quite literally gifts given freely. Early in my career as an archivist, I had the privilege of seeing individuals entrust librarians with materials that mattered a great deal to them, including the last possessions of their loved ones and treasured family heirlooms. Now further along in my career, I strive to maintain an ethos of service as critical to the work of "good" collections stewardship. In part, I do so because I want to care for researchers by ensuring that collections are preserved and accessible in the future. I also do so because I understand my work as part of a much longer tradition of attending to the memories of a community, to the people who create and pass on objects that impart memory as well as the people that receive them. Often, I do this in very simple ways: ensuring materials have sustainable containers and providing preservation-level storage environments, accessible finding aids, and digital surrogates to promote discovery.

Over the course of my career, I have increasingly been placed in positions that pit collections maintenance against community care. This divide proves particularly difficult when one understands that collections care is primarily a form of community service. Yet the profession seems to have naturalized systems that promote suspicion, distrust, and surveillance of the people around collections as the preferred ways to promote collection care. As my career progressed, maintenance shifted to monitoring surveillance cameras, alarming doors, and auditing access to insured assets. In archives where these measures are often business-as-usual operating practices, it can become very easy to accept these measures as ethical decisions that serve to protect collections against the threat of theft or, more benignly, missing items. The decisions to protect the collections in these ways do come at a cost. Unfortunately, archival maintenance staff rarely discuss the toll these measures take on the community.

Politicized rhetoric often seeks to oversimplify or present only one side of difficult debates. For example, for many years the American Library Association (ALA) has publicized the work of Steve W. Albrecht, an expert in collections security and author of *Library Security: Better Communication, Safer Facilities* (2015) and T*he Safe Library: Keeping Users, Staff, and Collections Secure* (2023). Albrecht presents a reductive view of the work of responsible collections stewardship and safety in libraries by dehumanizing the communities that libraries serve. This view may at first appear to ease the heavy burdens placed on collections staff by creating a simple narrative that places the blame for these burdens onto community members; however, such an oversimplification ultimately divides staff from their communities. In the end, this view only demeans and weakens the bonds that connect the two groups. For example, Albrecht writes:

> Some libraries seem to attract the poor and the bewildered, the opportunistic crook and the sneaky thief, gang members, abandoned or runaway kids, people who can't control their Axis II disorders or maintain sobriety, the sexual predator who prefers children, or the pornography enthusiast who, for some unknown reasons, doesn't have his own computer or access to the Internet. . . . I tend to view things in the library as either safe or not safe, secure or not secure (Albrecht, ii).

I could say much about the uncharitable descriptions Albrecht uses (and ALA ostensibly endorses) to characterize the groups of individuals he would remove from those welcome in libraries. However, in this vignette I want to focus on drawing out the reality of one group of straw men that Albrecht depicts here: the "people who can't control their Axis II disorders."

My desire to illuminate the realities of safety and responsibility in libraries regarding mental health began in 2018, during the first months of my position at a major research university. As the head of collections maintenance management in the library's special collections, I was responsible for collections security. This included maintaining the closed-circuit television system surveilling patrons in the reading room, the alarms that secured the perimeters of collections storage, the individually assigned keys to the vault that deterred access to the assets deemed most valuable in the collection, and the overall relationship with our campus facilities and security groups. In my first months in the position, I was centrally involved when a special collections staff member witnessed a patron remove an item from a folder of material, place it into their personal belongings, and leave the reading room. After years of working in special collections, I had finally encountered my first incidence of theft.

Fortunately, the head of special collections had established a management team that met regularly to address difficult issues at the highest administrative level. This management team included the head of special collections; the heads for research services, instruction and outreach, and collections services; the university archivist; and the born-digital archivist. After witnessing the theft in the reading room, the staff member immediately notified the head of research services, who immediately brought the issue to the management team for discussion. What happened next turned out to be one of the most significant examples in my career of how collective leadership and decision-making can fundamentally change outcomes for the better.

The head of research services reported that a staff member had witnessed a patron remove a small photograph of a college volleyball player from a folder in the athletics collection. At the time, professional guidelines from ALA's Rare Books and Manuscripts Section recommended that the first step should be to alert campus police. However, the head of research services noted that they knew the patron in question had ongoing struggles with mental health. (N.B: We did not know enough about the individual's personal struggles to know whether they suffered from what Albrecht outdatedly refers to as an "Axis II disorder" or another more complicated confluence of mental health struggles, but several interactions had alerted us that this individual faced circumstances that may have impaired their judgment in a case such as this.) Within an hour, the management team quickly ruled out calling campus police as we were concerned that this might endanger the individual in question. Instead, the head of special collections composed a letter to the individual and any guardians requesting that the material be returned. Very shortly after sending the letter, staff was able to return the photograph to its collection, and the theft was resolved.

Other than my own personal fears, the theft ended up being one of the more inconsequential situations I faced in the course of my position. While professional guidance might have seen the situation escalated through increasing levels of state violence, a simple interpersonal communication de-escalated the situation and abruptly transformed the cycle of harm. Two years later in 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement led the way in asking whose collective safety the policing and carceral system of the United States protects and whose collective safety that system endangers. In March 2020, police officers in Rochester, New York, murdered Daniel Prude during a mental health crisis. Two months later, police officers murdered George Floyd, and a series of protests raised awareness of the ways that the security and safety of predominantly white populations provided an excuse for police officers to target and kill Black, Brown, Indigenous, and disabled

peoples across the United States with impunity. My spouse has given me permission to share that in that same year just a few months later, I voluntarily admitted them into inpatient care after they began to show visible signs of suffering from a mental illness (i.e., talking incessantly and screaming obscenities on hours-long walks across our heavily policed, sparsely populated college town).

In my memory, the incident of the reading room theft and my spouse's suffering ran together like muddy paint on a wet canvas. The events seem compressed by intersecting fears not simply of what could have been, though certainly the threat of societal violence against individuals with mental health disorders is real and well-documented. My second fear is a bit harder to describe: the fear of culpability. In Are Prisons Obsolete? Angela Y. Davis argues that the prison "relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism" (2003, 16). The reading room incident forced me to confront two things. First, my position in special collections so frequently relied on surveillance tactics and technologies created for policing precisely in order to relieve me of having to seriously engage with "problem" individuals in exactly the way (if not the language) Albrecht described. Second, this attempt to remove collections from collective social issues ultimately proved futile. There is no collections maintenance without collective maintenance, no position that can pretend to be invested in archival boxes and not in the society that produces, cares for, uses, and misuses them.

In 2023, the American Library Association was still publicizing the work of individuals who would like to see libraries disengage from "people who cannot control their Axis II disorders." In this vignette, I argue that libraries may be one of the last safe spaces for serious collective engagement with how to care for cultural assets, including one another. I call on special collections librarians to work together to protect and welcome vulnerable populations.

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Acknowledgments

The editors of this volume extend their gratitude to everyone inside and outside who's worked toward prison abolition. Within the library and archives communities, we thank the authors of the pieces contained in this volume, the members of the Abolitionist Library Association, the members of the Abolition in Special Collections group, and the many practitioners and thinkers who submitted pieces for consideration for inclusion in this volume -- we've learned so much from working and thinking with you. May our numbers continue to grow, and may we walk together toward shared freedom.

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