

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

CUNY Graduate Center

---

2015

### Interference Archive: A Free Space for Social Movement Culture

Alycia Sellie

*Graduate Center, CUNY*

Jesse Goldstein

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Molly Fair

Jennifer Hoyer

*ARTstor*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_pubs/56](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/56)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

## **Interference Archive: A Free Space for Social Movement Culture**

### **Introduction**

The veneer of impartiality has been blown off of the archival profession. Discussions of the archive within the asymmetrical power relations of preserving and crafting select histories has opened a space for some to critique the inherently political nature of archival practices (Derrida 1996; Halberstam 2011; Harris 1997; Jimerson 2006; Zinn 1977). For archivists, these critiques have promoted engagement with experimental and alternative institutional forms, conscripting archival practices into a wide range of community-based, non-traditional, and even at times counter-hegemonic projects.

While many archives collect and preserve the work of activists communities, in this essay we are concerned with community-based archival projects on the left that are conducted by and for activists themselves, or “activist archives.” These projects share many characteristics of community archives, in that they provide local, autonomous spaces for alternative historical narratives and cultural identities to be created and preserved. Activist archives not only honor specific communities but forge new relationships between parallel histories, reshape and reinterpret dominant narratives, and challenge conceptions of the archive itself. Further, as we will discuss, the activist archive serves as a platform for archivists— as activists—to contribute to the ongoing production of social movements with which they identify.

In order to better understand the activist archive, we present an ethnographic case study of Interference Archive (IA), which has been archiving and exhibiting “social movement culture” since 2011. All four authors have been intimately involved in the creation, growth and maintenance of IA. Three of the authors are professionally trained archivists or librarians, and one is a sociologist. All identify as activists and view IA as an important political and social project. Through our examination of IA, we look at the interplay of activism and archival practice as they interweave to create a dynamic institutional space that pushes the boundaries of what a 21<sup>st</sup> century archive is and can be. As both participants and observers in the founding and ongoing work of the archive, we reflect critically on the process of creating an activist archive.

In preface to this case study, we first discuss activist archives in relation to the traditions of community archives. Then we look at the intersections between activist archives and the larger practices of archiving activism. We introduce IA as a point of reflection through which to view the work of other activist archives. Finally, we turn to scholarship on the critical geography of social movements to understand how the activist archive functions as a “free space” within broader networks of social movement actors and institutions (Evans and Boyte 1986). Following Francesca Polletta’s typology of movement spaces, we argue that IA functions as a transmovement and prefigurative free space, illustrating how the activist archive works to forge connections between communities, creating new networks of solidarity through the archival process (Polletta 1999).

Through an analysis of the processes, infrastructure, and practices of IA, we determine

that the activist archive provides a space for experimentation with alternative modes of professional and movement organizing. We argue that while archives have traditionally been regarded as spaces that exist in perpetuity, the nature of the activist archive might reflect the temporality of social movements themselves.

### **Archives and Activism**

The activist archive has a close relationship with both community archives and also the practices of archiving activism. Here we describe each of these topics, before turning to our examination of Interference Archive.

### **Community Archives**

Community archives encompass “collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control” (Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd 2009, p. 73). Paramount to the idea of community archives is the notion of access and shared ownership over a collection; these archives allow themselves to rethink standard processes with the community’s best interests as priority. Though preservation of the materials in a collection remains an obvious goal, the standard intent of long-term preservation is tempered by the belief that the materials should first and foremost be accessible to those who are represented within them. By assembling archival collections, communities are able to reflect on dominant historical narratives preserved by social institutions, and create space to represent and redefine their own lived history (Moore and Pell 2010, p. 258).

Examples of community archives are abundant. As Andrew Flinn describes, community archives “encompass all manner of community identifications including: locality, ethnicity, faith, sexuality, occupation, shared interest or a combination of one or more of these” (Flinn 2010, p. 41). Community archives can be as straightforward as representations of local governance or repositories for the records of local organizations. Or they can be more significantly activated as empowerment tools: in New Zealand (as well as in many other locations), archives are used by indigenous groups as sources of evidence about their cultural histories (Wareham 2001). Similarly, the Archive of Lesbian Oral Testimonies strives to capture what makes up the “lesbian existence,” or experience, from first- hand accounts (Chenier 2009, p. 264). The South Asian American Digital Archive is an example which tries to build an archive around identity categories while simultaneously showcasing materials that denaturalize these categories (Caswell 2013, p. 41).

Whether a local neighborhood project or a collection of oral histories, community archives play a role in how self-determined groups create collective memory of and about themselves. They decide how they view past struggles and what ways they will frame future goals and projects (Flinn et al. 2009). Critical examination of community archives explores the role they play in the formation of individual identities and collective memories, in the development of community cohesion, and perhaps most importantly, in how they contribute to a community's social reproduction (Bastian 2001; Flinn et al. 2009; McKemmish et al. 2005; Wareham 2001). The use of the label “archive” amongst

community archives carries symbolic weight. By calling their work an archive, a group conveys the historical value of the collection that they have assembled, which they maintain with varying degrees of autonomy.

### **Archiving Activism**

Over the past few decades, there has been an emergent critical discourse surrounding the politics of archives, resulting in a shift in the archival paradigm (Zinn 1977; Derrida 1996; Cook 2006). Archivists began to proactively change acquisition strategies, collecting materials representing a range of marginalized groups. Approaches to outreach have also changed with the goal of developing more holistic relationships with a broader spectrum of groups and communities (Kaplan 2002). Additionally, archivists are developing past their former post-custodial roles and addressing the concept of parallel provenance, especially in the post-colonial and Indigenous contexts (Bastian, 2001; Hurley, 2005; McKemmish et al. 2005; Wareham 2001).

Many materials made by activists have found their way into the collections of libraries, archives, and other institutions of cultural and social memory. Yet these new collections do not always develop from an affinity between the institution and an activist group. We refer to this broad phenomenon of collecting, organizing, and preserving material culture originating from social movements as “archiving activism.” Any archive can collect objects made by activists. But this process does not automatically signify that this collecting establishes a relationship between the archive and the community that it draws materials from. While archiving activism can result in mutually beneficial relationships, some institutions have contentious interactions with the communities whose records they possess. These problematic relationships can invoke or maintain legacies of oppression, colonization, and displacement (Bastian 2001; Wareham 2001), or connote the power relations of policing and surveillance (Maynard 2009).

A notable example of an archive that is explicitly dedicated to collecting activist work is the Joseph A. Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan, which houses materials related to “the history of social protest movements and marginalized political communities from the 19th century to the present” (Herrada 2014). Another is the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Archives at New York University, which is an archive of labor and the political left (Davey 2012). These collections both have origins in radical communities, but they have come to reside within institutions that maintain an order of political centrism. In the case of the Tamiment Library, this positioning was a strategic choice. Without the capacity to remain independent after its tax-exempt status was revoked due to its socialist ideology, the Tamiment Library chose to become part of New York University in order to survive (Cary 2013, p. 18). The decision to donate the Labadie collection to University of Michigan was a deliberate attempt by its founder to challenge the institution’s conservative ideology (Anderson 1998, p. 229).

These activist collections have thus far been able to remain autonomous within larger institutions due to individual archivists’ interest in promoting and protecting them, and

through activists' devotion to the leftist histories they represent. Though information professionals in traditional institutions strive to make the collections in their custody accessible, policies—such as requiring scholarly credentials or letters of research intentions—often limit who is permitted access to these materials. While both the Tamiment and Labadie collections remain important resources, access to these collections remains constrained by institutional policies. Furthermore, though their positioning within established and well-funded institutions might seem to secure their permanence, the fact remains that peripheral authority figures ultimately control the fate and funding of these collections, and decisions made about their survival are not always in public view (Forresta 2009, Telegraph Staff 2012).

## **Activist Archives**

We locate activist archives in the historical and cultural space where community archives and archiving activism overlap. When we discuss activist archives, we refer to both the generalities of working with activist materials (i.e. the practice of “archiving activism”), and the specific ways in which activist archives embody the close relationships between those who are represented within a collection and those who perform archival labor (as we find with community archives). Thus, a community-based effort does not determine an activist archive, nor does the act of collecting activist artifacts. An activist archive demands both community involvement as well as a collection of activist materials.

Activist archives are often initiated to document specific issues, events, or groups—not merely as a celebration of uncontested identity or history but as an intentional disruption of the dominant historical narrative. Participants in these projects believe strongly in taking responsibility for curating and cultivating historical narratives without deferring to established authorities or hegemonies (Moore and Pell 2010). Beyond maintaining a space (whether virtual or physical), activist archives promote community empowerment and social change (Flinn et al. 2009).

The intersection of archives and activism has emerged from many liberation struggles in numerous locales. In New York, the Lesbian Herstory Archives has existed since the 1970s. It was created out of a need “to end the silence of patriarchal history about ... women who loved women” (Nestle 1990, p. 87). The founders decided to house their archive within their own community, as opposed to within institutions that have traditionally upheld barriers against women (Nestle 1979). The Freedom Archives in San Francisco was initiated by a former political prisoner and his colleagues from the independent radio station KPFA. The organization makes its holdings of radio shows and other documents publicly available through its online database, publications, and community projects, raising awareness of critical issues, including legacies of state repression and persecution of activists since the 1970s (Berger 2009). The London-based MayDay Rooms is “a safe house for vulnerable archives and historical material linked to social movements, experimental culture, and marginalized figures and groups.” Former members of Wages for Housework and the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa have both donated collections to MayDay Rooms (MayDay Rooms nd). Also in London, the rukus! archive was established with a mission to preserve the culture of the Black queer community based in the UK, since its founders felt their intersectional history

should be documented (X et al. 2009). Each of these activist archives does more than collect; they also enact the politics of their communities.

As we will illustrate with the case study of Interference Archive, activist archives adapt archival practices while deconstructing power dynamics. By encouraging participation and relationships of reciprocity, and attempting to challenge systems of oppression, activist archives can become forums for collective identities to be cultivated, for a multitude of stories to be represented and considered, and for solidarities to be strengthened. That said, we want to emphasize that creating and maintaining an activist archive can be a difficult and even chaotic process. As we will show with the following investigation of Interference Archive, these projects can be places in which activist ideals are evoked, while not always fully achieved.

### **Interference Archive**

Our study is an ethnographic examination of Interference Archive (IA), an archive and exhibition space in Brooklyn, New York. IA's mission is to explore the relationship between cultural production and social movements (Interference Archive 2014 "Our Mission"). Three authors of this essay have been involved in IA as members of the "core collective", the main organizing body of the archive, while one of the authors has primarily used IA's space to organize activist projects. Therefore, we write from the perspective of participant observers, as both organizers and users of the archive. In addition, we think that this viewpoint is a somewhat standard experience for activists involved with IA—there is a difficulty in separating "users" from volunteers, or researchers, or to find distinctions between those who use the collections and those who contribute to, or are represented within them. As such, our research stems more from critical reflections on past (and ongoing) practice than from a pre-meditated research agenda. In order to distill our experiences into a cohesive analysis of IA, we have engaged in a series of group discussions, where we began to articulate our unique experiences with IA into a cohesive set of themes, questions and critiques. We were also able to incorporate previously gathered informal communication and comments from other IA participants: responses to a questionnaire sent to donors, a survey of volunteers, and documents that help define IA, such as its mission statement and collection policy.

IA began as the private collection of two individuals, Dara Greenwald and Josh MacPhee. Through decades of engaging in art, activism, punk, and DIY culture, together Greenwald and MacPhee amassed a large trove of social movement publications and ephemera. They envisioned creating an archive as a means to bring their collections to the public, to make it accessible and available for use within their own community, and to preserve the legacy of creative activism from which their collection was born.<sup>1</sup>

Sharing their vision for Interference Archive with friends and colleagues, Greenwald and MacPhee pulled together a small group of collaborators to make the archive a reality.

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the history and founding of Interference Archive, see Molly Fair's essay, "Building an Archive from Below: Reflections from Interference Archive" in *Informed Agitation: Library and Information Skills in Social Justice and Beyond*.

They rented a 725 square foot warehouse space in the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn. The one-story building houses several small workspaces, ranging from artist studios to small businesses. Historically, Gowanus was a center of industrial warehouses and the shipping industry, but the neighborhood is currently undergoing gentrification with an influx of condos, coffee shops, and artist-run spaces all set near the infamously toxic Gowanus Canal. While this might seem an unlikely place for an archive of activist material, offices of several activist groups, public library branches, and galleries are also situated in the neighborhood, and the Lesbian Herstory Archives is located nearby in Park Slope.

### **Interference Operations**

Over the past two years, volunteers worked to transform the warehouse space into an archive and study center, donating labor and resources, including such basics as used Hollinger boxes from friends working in archives. Keeping in mind the “geosemiotics” which K.J. Rawson describes, and also the intimidation which researchers can experience at more formal institutions, volunteers have taken care to make the archive feel welcoming (Rawson 2009 p. 127).

The front half of IA functions as a reading room and meeting space. Bookshelves were built into the walls to hold a vast monograph library. Activist groups often stop by to leave free publications, stickers, and event flyers for distribution. Visitors are invited to explore the collection, and to research together at communal tables. The center of the room holds the bulk of IA’s collections. Serials, zines, and pamphlets are organized by format on four rows of floor-to-ceiling shelving units. Boxes of political buttons, postcards, and other ephemera likewise fill these shelves, and folders of alternative newspapers live in flat files. The back of the room houses several tables that are being prepared as workspaces for processing collections and to accommodate upcoming digitization projects. Since opening, IA has expanded into an additional unit in the building, which now serves as the primary exhibition and event space. IA is in constant motion—the archive and exhibition spaces are open to the public during regular volunteer-staffed hours several days a week. IA working group meetings organized by volunteers are held during off-hours, and several events are organized per month.

Since its inception, decisions regarding critical IA operational issues, such as finances and scheduling, have been reserved for a smaller administrative group known as the core collective: a ten-person group, the majority of whom are information professionals or students. The rest are artists, designers, and professional organizers. While the core collective has managed the main operations of the project, there has been a steadily growing network of volunteers (around fifty people) who help out in various capacities from building shelves, to cataloging materials and staffing events.

The early concept and vision of the project remains paramount. However, core members appreciate how this vision could continue to grow through the input of its expanding roster of participants. There have been concerted efforts made to disperse organizational power, and to make decisions using a consensus-based model. This has not been an easy process, and the group has struggled occasionally to reconcile differences in political and

personal politics. Though the core collective is not a closed group, new members must be invited to take part. Invitations are made without prescribed criteria, but weighted on a volunteer's sense of responsibility for IA and an ability or desire to share the workload for key tasks. Not everyone who has been invited has accepted, and not every volunteer is able to assume the expected responsibilities. While the core collective has been viewed as vital to the successful functioning of the project, as more people become involved, this managerial group may eventually become obsolete.

Increasingly, there has been a demand from the general volunteer base to make the decisions and processes of the core collective more transparent. Those involved in the core collective have welcomed this criticism and have tried to be more accountable in IA's decision-making processes. Bi-monthly open meetings with all IA members were instituted to increase communication across all areas of the archive. Documentation about IA has also increasingly been shared through a variety of online forums, including wikis, collaborative project management software, and email lists, in an effort to increase transparency. Greater effort has been made to cultivate a network of support, and to ensure that all participants are working in tandem.

Nevertheless, there remain difficulties in coordinating the work of so many people and integrating new volunteers. This process takes time and effort. New volunteers first undergo training sessions before they take on tasks such as staffing open hours or hosting events. While core collective members might be on site several times a week, most volunteers are present once a week or less. As volunteers become acclimated, they are encouraged to initiate projects based on their specific interests, to fill a need where they see gaps or otherwise address issues that require attention. IA's projects have been beneficial for volunteers who have internship requirements for school, while for others involvement in IA remains a labor of love and an opportunity to be part of a thriving activist community that is still coming into being and that each volunteer can help shape.

### **Interference Archive's Collections**

In late 2011, IA was introduced to the public with an exhibition displaying a wide variety of materials—t-shirts, zines, posters, records, and other ephemera—from the 1990s riot grrrl movement. The opening exhibition revealed just a segment of the materials that exist in the archive. The collection as a whole includes material from a wide cross-section of social movements from the turn of the century onwards, from Industrial Workers of the World songbooks to posters from the Zapatista's "Other Campaign". The initial collection assembled by Greenwald and MacPhee illustrate their own immersion within intersectional social movements, as well as their personal collecting preferences and organizational tendencies. It has since expanded as other activists and cultural producers have donated materials to the archive.

IA's holdings reflect "social movement culture." Greenwald and MacPhee coined this term in relation to a 2008 exhibition, "Signs of Change," which featured materials created by activist movements around the world. Social movement culture encompasses the creative production and social relations arising from struggles for social transformation and is connected to "alternative ways of existing, both within movements and to society



at large.” Social movement culture is not only comprised of artifacts that social movements produce—its “resonance can be found in social formations [that] movements create, such as public protests, demonstrations, encampments, affinity groups, collectives, and solidarities.” The materials housed in IA display evidence of a vast network of struggles, solidarities, and political debates waged throughout history (MacPhee and Greenwald 2010, pp 11-12).

Rather than maintaining the closed stacks model used by many archives, at IA visitors are invited not just into a delineated reading room, but into the archive itself—to explore and interact with all of its contents. No white gloves are required. Though this might invoke anxiety for professional archivists, it has led to fortuitous moments of discovery that keep with the spirit of the project. Often a visitor will come to IA with a specific research request, and end up becoming inspired by something else entirely, simply because they were permitted to browse boxes and drawers without restriction. This approach informs IA’s collection development policy, which explicitly states that materials should not be donated if they cannot be handled extensively, albeit with care (Interference Archive 2014 “Donate Materials to Our Collection”). Again, such policy is indicative of IA’s approach to archiving as more than a means to preserve cultural heritage objects, and illustrates what IA volunteers call “preservation through use.” IA’s mission privileges using the materials in its collection as a means of helping others (re)discover marginalized social histories and continue to build new social movement culture. This approach has been overwhelmingly supported by those who have donated materials to the archive. Donors who choose IA over other possible repositories do so precisely because of IA’s focus on activating materials via their accessibility (Shannon O’Neill, personal correspondence, 2014). As one donor has stated, “the idea that material knowledge from all times can be preserved in an autonomous and public space to be used as data, inspiration, context and, in general, a free resource for social problem solving right now is made a reality at the IA” (Marshall Weber, personal correspondence, 2014).

Finally, care is taken to ensure that materials that might contain potentially incriminating information are not accepted into the collection. Traditional archives maintain a record of donor information as well as patron activity; in the case of the materials in activist archives, this could put individuals at risk (X et al. 2009, p. 293). When activists retain material that record incriminating activity, these records could be used against them if made accessible in a public archive. Likewise, when archive visitors use materials to research plans for participation in direct action against the state, a record of this activity could be used against the community that IA is working to support or provide evidence of past actions. For these reasons, IA does not record user information or requests for materials. IA’s collection, as well as the use of this collection, should not be discounted as a potential source of legal evidence. The public and open nature of the space must be balanced with a sense of security. IA volunteers continue to discuss issues surrounding how to protect personal data of donors or the subjects of materials in the collection, but for the most part donations which require any level of restriction from the public are recommended for safekeeping elsewhere. Recent news concerning the Belfast Project at Boston College has solidified IA’s decision to avoid collecting materials that could be used against activists in current or future legal proceedings (McMurtrie 2014). That said, it is impossible to predict what acts of social activism might be of interest to the state.

## **Longevity and Sustainability of an Activist Archive**

The question of the sustainability of IA has been raised on occasion by outside activists and archivists. There is no means to predict future obstacles the project will encounter (be it state repression or encroaching real estate development), but as the project is young, negotiating daily operations has taken precedence to securing a more permanent future home.

Anne Gilliland points to the aforementioned Lesbian Herstory Archives as an example of a community archive that has maintained its autonomy from the state for over 40 years. She notes that such a staunch position necessitates a dependency on the “significant personal sacrifice (financial, physical, and mental) of key activists and a network of volunteers”, in addition to seeking monetary donations from a devoted base of sustainers (Gilliland and Flinn 2013, p. 12). Likewise, IA relies on volunteer labor, making it challenging to always secure enough staffing to operate four days per week. Since no one is a paid contributor, the more intangible rewards of being part of and building a community project must suffice as compensation. This places limitations on who is able to participate, as not everyone is in a position to donate the time and resources to perform uncompensated labor on top of their other daily responsibilities. And even those that do choose to volunteer, especially those participating in the core collective, are often pushed past their limits.

Beyond volunteer labor, IA maintains itself via a sustainer, or donor-driven funding model. More than 130 sustainers give funds (ranging from ten to fifty dollars) annually or monthly. This funding base covers most of the basic operational costs (rent and utilities) of the archive. Another funding source comes from visiting groups or classes who can afford to pay an honorarium for their visits. IA is beginning to seek larger funding sources, and has successfully received several small grants from foundations and city departments supporting activist-driven and community-arts based projects. To be eligible for more of this type of funding, IA is undergoing the process of incorporating as a nonprofit. The core collective is wary, however, of becoming reliant on state and foundation-funded grants, which might threaten the organization’s autonomy and result more volunteer time being devoted to chasing highly competitive and increasingly scarce funding (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence 2007). For this reason, IA is committed to maintaining and expanding its sustainer-base, and continuing to build a shared sense of community investment in the project’s survival.

The temporal nature of activist spaces and the operational challenges involved in housing collections permanently raises questions about whether activist archives are forever fated to be short-term projects. Both the collections themselves and the movements they represent may be associated with the idea of impermanence. Social movement culture is often created in formats that are difficult to preserve, whether because they have been created using mass-production and inexpensive materials, or because they may involve formats – including audio, moving image, or digital materials – that are unstable.

In an effort to keep rukus! more flexible and fluid, Ajamu X described how he and his collaborators approached their archive “with an artistic sensibility” that allowed more

options than a traditional archive might have considered. This “sensibility” helps the group view their archive as a process for building a community of artists, rather than establishing an institution (X et al. 2009, p. 289). Like other activist archives, IA plans to remain nimble and open-minded as it progresses. IA, and other activist archives, presents a challenge to prior notions of archival permanence.

IA need not be considered a failure if its collections are not preserved forever. This is a controversial suggestion in light of the fact that archives are generally conceived as permanent and reliable. Instead of judging the success of an activist archive by the longevity of its holdings, we argue that the significance of projects like IA can be viewed using Francesca Polletta’s framework of free spaces.

### **Interference Archive as a Free Space**

As an activist archive, IA seeks to play an important role within the broader network of social movements in New York City and beyond, providing a space for activists to learn from (and with) one another. Though IA is grounded geographically in one specific neighborhood within one city, it is nonetheless situated at the interstices of a wide variety of global and networked communities. IA was created not just to house material culture, but also to function as a social space for learning about movements of the past and for organizing in the present. Even as older generations struggle with what they perceive as failed movements or deferred revolutions, today’s left and radical cultures can glean valuable information from their experiences. IA provides a space to process, analyze, and draw conclusions about what went wrong, what went right, and what can (or should) be tried again. IA is, accordingly, a “living archive, whose construction must be seen as ongoing, never-completed project.” (Hall 2001, p. 89).

Beyond being a site of information and learning, an activist archive like IA can be a shared social space—it serves both as a physical location and also as a locus out of which a community, real and imagined, can emerge. Just as physical records need a space to reside, people need a physical (or virtual) space to come together to recount and create shared histories (Ketelaar 2008). The strategy of taking a physical space also provides “the fuel for a ‘revitalisation’ of discourse within a broader social environment” (Hopkins 2008, p. 94).

As IA is primarily a physical space, with a much less developed virtual presence, our analysis of activist archiving is skewed accordingly. We do not want to overlook or discredit the possibilities for activist archiving to also operate in virtual spaces, and future possibilities for IA to do so as well. The connections and community-building between the virtual and the physical open a whole range of fascinating questions that are, regrettably, outside of the scope of this present analysis. For an excellent reflection on two community archives that live online, see Elise Chenier’s discussion of the Vancouver Queer History Project and the Archive of Lesbian Oral Testimonies (Chenier 2009; Caswell 2013).

Spaces in which to convene, converse, and interact are often a resource that activist communities lack (Sewell 2001). The decline of free spaces is evidenced by social center

evictions and the increasing ubiquity of surveillance technologies, as well as the assault on organized labor and a general rise in economic inequality (Harvey 2005). Many movement actors are left without the resources—either time or money—to contribute to building autonomous spaces. Although they are our focus here, activists are not the only groups who need space in which to commune and work, whether physically or virtual. Consider the trend of hacker spaces and maker spaces moving into institutions like universities and libraries (Buckley 2014) and also the pressures and difficulties of artists who need space to work in cultural centers like New York (Burke 2014). The politics of austerity and neoliberalism have led to an increasingly surveilled environment which is divided between private dwelling and commercial space. This only heightens the need for informal cultural institutions such as activist archives (Hackworth 2006; Sorkin 2008; Goffman 2014).

Here then, we turn to the study of social movement spaces to provide context on the ways such activist archives function as part of the broader network of political actors. Just as state power can be fixed in space—through monuments, buildings, surveillance and policing—social movements can also express their power in spatial terms. Temporary expressions of such spatial control, from marches and protests to encampments, occupations and temporary autonomous zones (Bey 1991), are all regularly practiced movement tactics that can provide short term expression of a movement’s spatial presence and therefore power (or lack thereof) (Sewell 2001).

Beyond these temporary spaces, there is a history of more permanent spatial expressions of social movement power, from union halls to social centers and worker education centers. Margaret Kohn argues that social centers, or what she calls “houses of the people,” have historically played an important role in providing a welcoming space for a diverse array of subjugated populations and their allies (factory workers, peasants, servants, educators) to build a shared community and form a common cultural and political backbone that would ultimately support their respective struggles (Kohn 2003). Paul Chatterton writes, “social centres offer a steadiness, longevity, a sense of history and something gentler to hold a position from. It is this stability and openness together that can allow some really amazing and powerful politics to emerge” (2008, p. 7).

Sara Evans and Harry Boyte refer to such places as “free spaces,” which they describe as “environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue. Put simply, free spaces are settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence and vision” (Evans and Boyte, 1986 p. 17). Francesca Polletta further advances this definition, arguing that free spaces can be an essential component of social movement mobilization, both in helping form community identity and then establishing networks and skills for action (1999).

Perhaps most importantly, such spaces help strengthen the ties that bind movement networks both synchronically (in one time, across many places) and diachronically (across many times, in many places). With the latter, it becomes clear how closely connected the community archive is, or can be, to a movement’s free space. As Doug McAdam writes, such free spaces are “repositories of cultural materials into which

succeeding generations of activists can dip to fashion ideologically similar, but chronologically separate, movements” (1994, p. 43). Seen through the lens of an activist archive then, it becomes clear how “free spaces offer people something beyond the opportunity to penetrate the sources of their subordination” (Polletta 1999, p. 6).

Polletta distinguishes between three types of free spaces: transmovement, indigenous and prefigurative. In Polletta’s typology, an indigenous free space is a space that emerges out of an already established network of actors, a community that is in some ways marginalized or under attack.<sup>2</sup> While indigenous free spaces are generated by pre-existing communities that are often excluded from mainstream institutions, the individuals involved in transmovement spaces may represent a multitude of movements across place and time; these movements coexist within the space. Prefigurative free spaces, by contrast, do not evolve so much from any existing movement as from the desire to create a new community, one which may intentionally focus on a shared identity or idea, and which grows out of an agenda to form a new movement (Polletta 1999).

Community archives could be intuitively associated with the indigenous form of free spaces, emerging out of a specific, discretely bound community, and strengthening close ties amongst its members. In fact, the definition of community archive offered by Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd leans heavily towards Polletta’s conception of an indigenous free space (2009). As will become clear below, the activist archive should also be conceptualized as both a transmovement and prefigurative space. Not only is this the case with IA, which approaches its archival practice and organizing structure accordingly, but this case speaks to how other activist archives function at the intersection of multiple and diverse communities, connecting disparate nodes within a broader network of social actors and creating a new community in and through the process of building and maintaining an archive.

Reflecting on Polletta’s three types of free spaces, the next two sections focus on the ways in which IA operates as a transmovement and prefigurative space. As a transmovement space we argue that IA helps to strengthen links between geographically, temporally and organizationally distinct social movements. Then, as a prefigurative space, we show how IA serves as an active site of cultural production, where both social movement culture as well as the activist archive itself can be actively reimaged.

### **Exhibiting Connections: Interference Archive as Transmovement Space**

For Polletta, a transmovement space serves as a node connecting different movements and movement actors. It is not typically a space where movements are fomented or where participants are recruited to rally around a cause, or where new leaders are cultivated (1999). Instead, it is a place for interactions, cross-pollination, and the sharing of

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to realize that Polletta’s use of the term “indigenous” differs considerably from common usage of the term in the archival context, usually in reference to collections originating from Indigenous, Aboriginal, or First Nations peoples. Polletta uses the term “indigenous” to typify groups with “dense horizontal ties and the lack of ties to groups in power” (Polletta 1999 p. 11).

experiences, tactics and ideas across the boundaries of distinct social movements and their sometimes insular communities. As such, a transmovement space serves to create what Meyer and Whittier call “social movement spillover” (1994).

Through the diversity of its holdings and programming, IA actively embraces its role as a transmovement space. IA’s perspective accepts that movement identities are not static or definitive, but are continually reformed, retrenched and redefined through the active management—and often contestation—of numerous interconnected constituents. As opposed to seeking a general or cohesive sense of what social movement culture is or has been, IA presents the materials in its collection as inherently multiple and diverse: a tapestry of interwoven narratives, struggles, people and moments connected to one another and connected to the present in complex and even contradictory ways.

As a collection, IA offers an opportunity for materials from concurrent movements to be co-present, functioning as a catalyst for activists from diverse movements to work alongside one another. The process involves a degree of serendipity; one day a housing rights activist might share the space with a group of youth muralists, another day a student researching street art might be sitting with an archivist digitizing prison abolition posters. Public programming, on the other hand, is a more intentional and orchestrated way for broader cross-sections of IA’s network to come together, and for new visitors to be introduced to the space. Organizing film screenings, artist and activist talks, design workshops, skill-shares, open houses, and exhibitions are opportunities to have a creative and critical dialogue.

In some instances, exhibitions have created space for people who took part in similar struggles to see their work as part of a cohesive movement. *Serve the People*, an exhibition that opened in late 2013, brought together the stories and histories of Asian American activism in New York during the 1970s. Artists and cultural producers, labor organizers, students, and sectarian revolutionaries were involved in the same moment when a politicized Asian American identity was forming but retained distinct goals and organizing strategies (Ryan Wong, personal communication, 2014). This exhibition brought many Asian American activists together for the first time. At the opening as well as at events throughout the exhibition, IA was filled with a broad intergenerational cross-section of Asian-American activists, many of whom had been directly involved in the histories on display. *Serve the People* allowed movement participants to see connections between their activities, which had previously been eclipsed by disagreements over ideology and tactics. In this way, the exhibition helped to mitigate the effect on historic internal conflicts and provided a more neutral forum to voice many perceptions of shared past experiences. At the same time, younger generations of Asian American activists who were previously unaware of this history had the opportunity to engage with older generations to better understand how their own activism is part of a continuum.

If these exhibitions were able to foster diachronic connections—linking past with present—other exhibitions have focused instead on synchronic connections, putting a number of current activist projects in one room, and allowing for interconnections and solidarities to be explored. For instance, the 2013 exhibition, *This is an Emergency!*, highlighted reproductive rights and gender justice. During a panel presentation organized in

conjunction with the exhibition, health worker advocates who provide access to reproductive healthcare for marginalized groups (including transgender and gender variant people, sex workers, and drug users) engaged in discussion with formerly incarcerated activists who are working to end the practice of shackling incarcerated women during childbirth. The majority of the audience came from outside the communities that the speakers represented (though a number of birthing workers and doulas were in attendance), but all were interested in understanding and connecting issues of reproductive justice and the carceral state.

By refusing to tell history from one particular stance, and bringing together evidence from multiple perspectives under one roof, IA is fundamentally serving as a transmovement space. IA recognizes that not all historical narratives will be in agreement with one another and fully embraces this discord. From the breadth of events, exhibitions and collections at IA, the archive explores not only the multiplicities of social movements, but also how they connect and interact with one another (or do not).

It is important not to idealize the process of building connections among movements. In practice this process can be slower and more recalcitrant than the above descriptions might suggest. Divisions between activists and social movements that exist in society do not simply melt away under the roof of IA. Most people attending an event already identify in some way with the topic. This is an Emergency! was attended almost exclusively by women, and Serve the People was attended predominantly by Asian Americans. This should not necessarily be seen as negative, as homogenous spaces are often perceived as safer or more conducive to the goals of a particular group or event. Despite these limitations, IA's goal is to create a network of activists and communities that will be genuinely interested in learning from and with one another. The process of turning such a vision into reality is not easily achieved. But as we will see in our next section, the act of envisioning such possibilities can itself be worthwhile.

### **Participatory Organizing: Interference Archive as Prefigurative Space**

Though IA's exhibitions have not always succeeded in creating transmovement connections, IA has fostered inter-movement contact by providing space for volunteers to be involved in the mechanisms of IA itself. The collective project of making IA—imagining what it can become and how it could and should operate—becomes a social movement project in its own right. This work connects IA's community of volunteers through a collaborative process of prefiguration: creating the archive and the social space that participants want to experience. In explaining how IA attempts to function as a prefigurative space, we focus on the active role that volunteers play in shaping the project, and the inventive ways that standard archival practices are molded into the IA's participatory processes, practices and infrastructure as an activist archive.

Interference Archive is a nexus between archival work and social justice organizing. It is a space where librarians, archivists and students can experiment with alternative approaches to professional practices—within a context that is explicitly political. It also allows those who are not trained archivists to learn skills and engage in the creation of the archive. Likewise, IA welcomes both experienced organizers and those who are only just

beginning to imagine themselves as political activists. IA is a place to think critically about how the processes that are intrinsic to archives, such as arrangement and description, creating access, collecting materials, and preservation, have an effect on the transmission of information.

In order to address the many different responsibilities associated with running an activist archive, the collective has formed working groups to address burgeoning projects such as preserving born-digital objects, organizing educational initiatives, and building an online catalog. The latter project is the main focus of the cataloging working group, which is building IA's content management system as well as creating taxonomies and workflows for the description and arrangement of the collection. The work of this group is crucial to IA's focus on providing access to the collection. Those involved in the group have varied backgrounds as technologists, librarians, archivists, and taxonomists.

Though this working group is theoretically open to all, the higher level of expertise that is needed to use online tools like content management software demands that the group take time and care to discuss and demystify technical issues. This process involves teaching each other about the necessary tools and exploring concepts such as metadata schemas, controlled vocabularies, software revision control systems, and other topics that might be new to many in the group. The working group also holds cataloging "parties" as a means to test the user interface (IA is using CollectiveAccess, described by its creators as "open-source, community-driven" software). These gatherings are held so that builders are able to understand the experiences of catalogers, and to provide a dedicated time when any volunteer can learn to use the catalog alongside more experienced users. There has been extensive work done to document all of these experiences, which are then used as the basis for writing cataloging workflows. This approach takes time, but avoids pitfalls like relying on a single volunteer for technological fixes. It also achieves the goal of lowering the threshold of expertise needed to get involved in the cataloging project by allowing communal learning and knowledge-sharing. Our documentation about our process have been useful to other archivists outside of IA— archivists using this CollectiveAccess at institutions such as the La Mama Archives in New York have read our online notes and applied them to their own catalogs-in-progress (Rachel Mattson, personal correspondence, 2014).

A prefigurative political motivation propels the cataloging group as it grapples with common issues: whether or not to institute a traditional metadata schema which might replicate systems of oppression (Gilliland 2014; Rawson 2009, p. 132); whether or not to use Library of Congress subject headings, which politically conscious information workers have challenged as problematic (Berman 1971; Knowlton 2005); and how to create a minimum level record with enough information to preserve historical context and political meaning of the materials in hand. Additionally, a policy addressing ownership of intellectual property was created which supports open data standards for the metadata recorded in IA's catalog records; influenced by advocates of linked open data and the approach taken by Digital Public Library of America, IA intends for its catalog records to be in the public domain, or as close as can be accomplished, by using a Creative Commons Zero license (CC0) (Cohen 2013). These are not issues that are applicable to



IA alone, but rather are pertinent to all those working in the field of information science. IA's participants have the freedom to diverge from accepted professional standards, and will hopefully arrive at solutions that others can benefit from—activists and information professionals alike.

## **Conclusion**

Interference Archive is positioned at the junction of community archives and the practices of archiving activism. Through this ethnography of IA we have illustrated how the day-to-day operations of an activist archive attempt to put activist ideals to practice, reinterpreting the very form and expectations of the archive itself. We have illustrated how IA plays an active role in the networks of social movements of which it is a part. This has led us to think through the ways in which IA, and more broadly the activist archive, functions as a free space, or a shared social space for activism. Using Francesca Polletta's typology demarcating three distinct forms of free spaces (indigenous, prefigurative and transmovement), we have shown how an activist archive such as IA can function as both a prefigurative and transmovement space. Activist archives, like all forms of free spaces, are much needed today as the politics of austerity and neoliberalism have created an increasingly surveilled landscape, shrinking the divide between public and private spaces.

We have touched upon issues of sustainability and permanence, as they present unique challenges for projects such as IA that aspire to maintain some semblance of autonomy. For the authors of this paper, all of whom contribute to IA as a project, finding a way to sustain and support the activist communities who have come to rely on IA as a resource is more crucial than preserving the individual items that make up IA's collection. This includes, perhaps most importantly, the community of volunteers that are actively working to re-envision archival practices through the production and maintenance of IA itself. As Polletta writes, "while physical settings are important to establish or reaffirm social relationships, it is the relationships themselves rather than the physical sites that are important in explaining their role in mobilization" (Polletta 1999 pp 12).

IA's work as an activist archive is not unique; there are a number of activist archive projects working to re-envision what an archive can become. By examining IA through the lens of a transmovement and prefigurative free space, it is possible to understand the activist archive's potential to impact and inspire people working to create change. Projects such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, MayDay Rooms, rukus!, and the Freedom Archives are also activist archives that understand the importance of creating free spaces for movement actors to connect and learn from one another, and to put into practice ideas regarding the functioning and coordination of counter-institutional spaces. Another archive is possible, so long as activist archivists are willing to put their imaginations to work.

## **Reference List**

- Anderson C (1998) All-American anarchist: Joseph A. Labadie and the labor movement. Great Lakes Books, Detroit
- Bastian, J (2001) A question of custody: the colonial archives of the United States Virgin Islands. *Am Arch* 64: 96-114.
- Berger D (2009) Preserving a radical past: Ten years of the Freedom Archives. *Win Mag* (Fall).
- Berman S (1971) Prejudices and antipathies. Scarecrow Press, Metuchen
- Bey H (1991) T.A.Z.: the temporary autonomous zone. Autonomedia, Brooklyn
- Buckley C (2014) Rising rents leave New York artists out in the cold. *New York Times* <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/09/arts/design/rising-rents-leave-new-york-artists-out-in-the-cold.html> Accessed 12 Aug. 2014
- Burke J (2014) Makerspaces: a practical guide for librarians. Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham
- Cary, L (2013) The 35-year history of the Robert F. Wagner labor archives. *Am Communist Hist* 12(1): 17-29
- Caswell M (2013) Inventing new archival imaginaries: Theoretical foundations for identity-based community archives. In: Daniel D and Levi A (eds) *Identity palimpsests: archiving in the U.S. and Canada*. Litwin Books, Sacramento, pp 35-56
- Chatterton P (2008) Autonomous spaces and social centres. *Shift*: 7-11
- Chenier E (2009) Hidden from historians: preserving lesbian oral history in Canada. *Archivaria* 68: 247-269
- Cohen, D (2013) CC0 (+BY). <http://www.dancohen.org/2013/11/26/cc0-by/> Accessed 15 Aug 2014
- Cook M (2006) Professional ethics and practice in archives and records management in a human rights context. *J Soc Arch* 27(1): 1-15. doi: 10.1080/00039810600691205
- Davey D (2012) Collections overview. The Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/tam/collections.html>. Accessed 13 May 2014
- Derrida J (1996) *Archive fever: a Freudian impression*. Trans. Prenowitz E. University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Evans S, Boyte H (1986) *Free spaces*. Harper & Row, New York
- Fair, M (2014) Building an archive from below: reflections from Interference Archive. In: Morrone, M (ed) *Informed agitation: library and information skills in social justice*

movements and beyond. Litwin Books, Sacramento, pp 185-191

Flinn A (2007) Community histories, community archives: some opportunities and challenges. *JSoc Arch* 28(2): 151-176. doi: 10.1080/00379810701611936

Flinn A (2010) Independent community archives and community-generated content: 'writing, saving and sharing our histories.' *Converge: Inte J Res New Media Technol* 16(39): 39-51. doi: 10.1177/1354856509347707

Flinn A, Stevens M, Shepherd E (2009) Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream. *Arch Sci*9(March):71-86. doi: 10.1007/s10502-009-9105-2

Forresta M (2009) Suppose we decide to dispose. *Smithsonian Institute Archives* <http://siarchives.si.edu/blog/suppose-we-decide-dispose>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2014

Gilliland A (2014) A platform for radical archival description. *Radical Archives* <http://www.radicalarchives.net/ra/participants.html> Accessed 12 Aug. 2014

Gilliland A, Flinn A (2013) Community archives: what are we really talking about? *CIRN Prato Community Informatics Conference 2013: Keynote*. [http://ccnr.infotech.monash.edu/assets/docs/prato2013\\_papers/gilliland\\_flinn\\_keynote.pdf](http://ccnr.infotech.monash.edu/assets/docs/prato2013_papers/gilliland_flinn_keynote.pdf) Accessed 28 July 2014

Goffman A (2014) *On the run: fugitive life in an American city*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago

Hackworth J (2006) *The neoliberal city: governance, ideology and development in American urbanism*. Cornell University Press, New York

Halberstam J (2011) *The queer art of failure*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC

Harris V (1997) Claiming less, delivering more: a critique of positivist formulations on archives in South Africa. *Archivaria* 44: 132-141.

Hall S (2001) Constituting the archive. *Third text* 15:54: 89-92

Harvey D (2005) *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, New York

Herrada J (2014) Joseph A. Labadie collection. *University of Michigan Libraries* <http://www.lib.umich.edu/labadie-collection>. Accessed 13 May 2014

Hopkins I (2008) Places from which to speak. *JSoc Arch* 29(1): 83-109. doi: 10.1080/00379810802515069

Hurley C (2005) Parallel provenance: (If these are your records, where are your stories?). *Archives and Manuscripts*, 33(1) and 33(2). Accessed 10 August 2014 from <http://www.infotech.monash.edu.au/research/groups/rcrg/publications/parallel->

provenance- combined.pdf

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2007) *The revolution will not be funded: beyond the non-profit industrial complex*. South End Press, Boston

Interference Archive (2014) *Our mission*. Interference Archive <http://interferencearchive.org/our-mission/>. Accessed 27 July 2014

Interference Archive (2014) *Donate materials to our collection*. Interference Archive <http://interferencearchive.org/donate-materials/>. Accessed 13 May 2014

Jimerson R (2006) Archives for all: professional responsibility and social justice. *Am Arch* 70(2): 252-281.

Kaplan E (2002) Many paths to partial truths: archives, anthropology, and the power of representation. *Arch Sci* 2: 209-220. doi: 10.1007/BF02435622

Ketelaar E (2008) Archives as spaces of memory. *J Soc Arch* 29 (1) 9- 27. doi: 10.1080/00379810802499678

Kohn M (2003) *Radical space: building the house of the people*. Cornell University Press, New York

Knowlton S (2005) Three decades since prejudices and antipathies: a study of changes in the Library of Congress subject headings. *Cataloging Classif Q* 40 (2) 123-145. doi: 10.1300/J104v40n02\_08

Macphee J, Greenwald D eds (2010) *Signs of change*. AK Press, Oakland CA

McAdam D (1994) Culture and social movements. In: Larana E, Johnston H, Gusfield J (eds) *New social movements: from identity to ideology*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia

McKemish S, Gilliland A, Ketelaar E (2005) Communities of memory: pluralising archival research and education *Agendas*. *Arch Manuscr* 33(May): 146-175.

McMurtrie B (2014) *Secrets from Belfast: how Boston College's oral history of the Troubles fell victim to an international murder investigation*. *Chron High Educ* <http://chronicle.com/article/Secrets-from-Belfast/144059>. Accessed 13 Aug. 2014.

MayDay Rooms (nd) *About*. MayDay Rooms <http://maydayrooms.org/about/>. Accessed 13 May 2009

Maynard, S (2009) Police/archives. *Archivaria* 68: 159-182

Meyer D, Whittier N (1994) Social movement spillover. *Soc Probl* 41(2): 277-298.

- Moore S, Pell S (2010) Autonomous archives. *Int J Herit Stud* 16(4): 255-268 doi: 10.1080/13527251003775513
- Nestle J (1979) Radical archiving: A lesbian feminist perspective. *Gay Insurgent* 4(5): 10-11.
- Nestle J (1990) The will to remember: the Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York. *Fem Rev* 34(Spring): 86-94 doi:10.1057/fr.1990.12
- Polletta F (1999) "Free spaces" in collective action. *Theory Soc* 28: 1-38. doi: 10.1023/A:1006941408302
- Rawson KJ (2009) Accessing transgender // desiring Queer(er?) archival logistics. *Archivaria* 68: pp 120-140
- Sewell W (2001) Space in contentious politics. In: Aminzade et al (eds) *Silence and voice in the study of contentious politics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp 51-88
- Sorkin M, ed (2008) *Indefensible Space: The Architecture of the National Insecurity State*. Routledge, New York
- Telegraph staff (2012) The Tate denies plans to throw archive 'in a skip'. *The Telegraph* <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/9103592/The-Tate-denies-plans-to-throw-archive-in-a-skip.html> Accessed 13 Aug. 2014
- Wareham, E (2001) Our own identity, our own taonga: voices in New Zealand record-keeping. *Archivaria* 52: 26-46
- X A, Campbell T, Stevens M (2009) Love and lubrication in the archives, or rukus!: A black queer archive for the United Kingdom. *Archivaria* 68: 271-294.
- Zinn H (1977) Secrecy, archives and the public interest. *Midwest Arch* II (2): 14-27