

Archivists and the Collecting Reflex

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Research Forum
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Brenda Gunn CA, FSAA (she/her/hers)
Associate University Librarian for Special Collections and Preservation
Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library
The University of Virginia

Introduction

Archivists and the Collecting Reflex

This study:

- *explores the practice of gathering material and objects documenting a tragic event in the immediate aftermath of that event.*
- *questions ideas of professional obligation, service, and responsibility*
- *addresses the emotional labor, both in the moment and future.*
- *introduces the concept of a "collecting reflex"*

Study

What prompted the study? The Library's responses to two events:

- Unite the Right Rally, August 11 and 12, 2017
- Murder of three students, November 13, 2022

Developed a Qualtrics survey: 30 respondents

Disseminated invitation through Society of American Archivists' communication channels, social media

Sent invitations directly to interview participants: 5 interviews

One of the spontaneous memorials to the three students.



Alt. txt: image of barrier with the word "HEARTS" painted on it.

Survey questions

Question 1: What was/were the tragedy/tragedies in which you were involved as an archivist and community member?

Question 2: What was your response?

Question 3: My sense of professional archival responsibility influenced my decision to collect materials

Question 4: My sense of professional archival responsibility affected my ability to process my own emotional response

Question 5: My obligation was to immediately collect lest important material would be lost.

Question 6: The fear of losing historical documentation influenced our decision to immediately collect.

Question 7: I felt pressure from my institution to collect immediately.

Question 8: A professional emphasis on documenting history as it happens affected my ability to participate in my community's grieving process.

Survey questions

Question 9: There is a conflict between professional responsibility to collect and personal participation in communal grief.

Question 10: Opting not to collect immediately is a valid choice

Question 11: Institutional messaging influenced my decision to collect immediately.

Question 12: Institutional messaging influenced my decision to prioritize my personal need to grieve. .

Interviews

Five interviews over a three week period

Archivists and special collections librarians

4 in a higher education setting

1 history center, but a member of the targeted community

All were shootings



Alt. txt: Image of Cabel Hall at nighttime on the University of Virginia campus with a large crowd assembled.

What I heard . . . “a humble honor”

Themes:

- Fear for loss of material
- Obligation and responsibility
- Emotional landscape
- Trauma, both during and after
- Made decisions without intervention from administration

Some had:

- Experience with previous crises
- Sensitivity training
- Awareness of trauma informed practice
- Embedded in the community

“**radical empathy** in archival practice means holding space for grief and taking a trauma-informed approach to our labor; unpacking, understanding, and supporting care work as an imperative in our profession.”

Arroyo-Ramirez, Jones, O'Neill, Smith, “An Introduction to Radical Empathy” 2021

- Continue with interviews
 - Expand the types of tragedies and crises
- Revise the survey and redistribute
- Explore aspects of trauma and training
- Use the lens of vocational awe and radical empathy
- Refine the collecting reflex concept

Reflexive Collecting (working definition)

- privileges speed and automatic action
- bypasses conscious deliberation
- relies on ingrained and standardized practices and processes
- overlooks care for the emotional and physical wellbeing of memory workers and adds to trauma
- misses critical ethical and legal considerations

Resources

Arvanitis, Kostas and Jen Kavanagh. "The impact of collecting after sudden, unforeseen or violent events on the mental wellbeing of the record-keeping workforce," Archives and Records Association, UK & Ireland, January 2025

Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith. "An Introduction to Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," in "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," eds. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021).

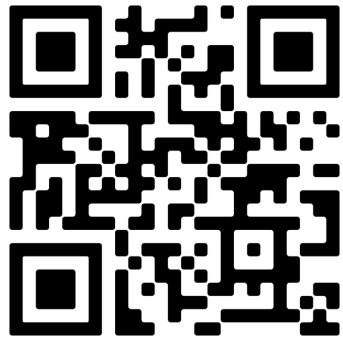
Tansey, Eira. "No one owes their trauma to archivists, or, the commodification of contemporaneous collecting." June 5, 2020.

Ettarh, Fobazi. "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library With the Lead Pipe*. January 10, 2018.

Thank you

Brenda Gunn
University of Virginia Library
Small Special Collections Library
Charlottesville, VA 22901

brenda.gunn@virginia.edu



Alt. txt: Image of The Rotunda at the University of Virginia.