

Community Archives and the Cultural Trauma Process

ERIC HUNG

Abstract

The current community archives literature focuses largely on standard archival issues, such as appraisal, processing, access, preservation and sustainability. Given the training and interests of most archival researchers, this is not surprising. I argue that addressing these issues is inadequate for a full understanding of community archives. For many of these projects, “archiving” is not an end, but a tool for creating new narratives and ultimately socio-political change.

To better grasp the purposes of community archives (if that is the right term for these institutions), I argue that researchers need to engage with theories developed in the humanities and social sciences. Here, I focus on cultural trauma theory, which was developed by sociologists Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, and their collaborators. They argue that, unlike personal trauma, cultural trauma does not automatically arise after tragedies. Instead, it develops when a social group finds a catastrophic event to be so devastating that it changed the group’s identity in fundamental ways. The process begins when survivors, activists and artists start disseminating personal testimonies and creating alternative interpretations that challenge the dominant narrative, forge a new identity and fight for reparations. To demonstrate how this theory can be helpful, I discuss three examples of community archives formed during different stages of the cultural trauma process.

A regular theme in the community archives literature is misunderstandings between professional archivists and community archives practitioners. My examples show that these misunderstandings often stem from a lack of attention to the broader purposes of community archives. As Harrison Apple wrote, “If there is such a thing as an inherently liberatory archives...such a liberatory apparatus may bear no resemblance to archives as we know them and may be something we would be forced to say is ‘not even an archives’” (“I Can’t Wait for You to Die,” 136-137).

About the author:

Eric Hung is Executive Director of the Music of Asian America Research Center and Adjunct Lecturer at the University of Maryland’s College of Information Studies. His research focuses on Asian American music, music and trauma, Asian Americans in library and information science, and public musicology. Current public projects include curating the Asian American + Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Learning Pathway for Smithsonian Folkways, and serving as Exhibit Writer for the forthcoming exhibit on Asian American music at Wing Luke Museum in Seattle. Before he joined the non-profit world full-time, Eric was a tenure-track and tenured professor of musicology at Westminster Choir College of Rider University and the University of Montana. He is an active pianist who has performed in Germany, Austria, Australia, Thailand, and throughout North America, and a member of the Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture Percussion Ensemble.