

“Repair, Repair, Repair”: The Role of the Archivist in Social, Reparative, and Restorative Justice at Academic Institutions

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Abstract

The early 2020s have been years of great change across the United States – amid a global pandemic, George Floyd’s murder by police in Minneapolis focused national and worldwide attention on police brutality and anti-Black violence, and the subsequent spate of protests around the world marked a shift in institutional acceptability of Black Lives Matter as a strategic priority rather than a “fringe” or radical view. Over the past decade or so, there has been a steady increase of publications on the relationship between justice and archives, but there has not been localized, in-depth systematic studies of challenges to implementing and engaging in social, reparative, and restorative justice as an archival imperative within institutional settings. Academic archives in particular have begun to grapple with the legacies of slavery that built and funded many academic institutions, and how this past continues to echo today.

This presentation will cover early findings from Caitlin Christian-Lamb’s dissertation research, which focuses on the intersections of social, reparative, and restorative justice and archival practice in academic archives settings. Methods include interviews with academic archivists working on justice projects at their institutions, as well as participant observation and interview data from one central academic institution case study.

This research aims to provide a snapshot in time, reflecting on archives’ challenges in implementing justice as an archival lens and examining the ways in which American archivy is changing rapidly in the early 2020s, including recognizing that the base of archival theory and practice for decades has reinforced white privilege. In capturing this moment, I aim to provide a “gut-check” at a critical time in archival theory and practice, illustrating how concepts of justice are implemented (or not) on the ground.

About the author:

Caitlin Christian-Lamb is an Assistant Professor of Professional Practice in the School of Information Studies at Louisiana State University. She is also a doctoral candidate in the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland. Her dissertation focuses on social, reparative, and restorative justice initiatives in academic archival settings, particularly in terms of gaps between published theory and practice, universities as racialized organizations, and the role of the individual archivist within a larger organization. Caitlin holds a MLIS concentrating in archival management and a MA in history from Simmons College (now Simmons University) and a BA in history from Purchase College, State University of New York. She previously worked as an instructor of record at the University of Maryland’s College of Information Studies,

as Digital Archivist of Davidson College, as Project Producer for the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, and as a Research Associate on the Massachusetts Historical Society's Adams Papers Editorial Project. She previously served as the co-chair of the Society of American Archivists' Standards Committee from 2016 to 2018, and has served on the editorial board of *dh+lib*, the foremost publication on the intersection of digital humanities and libraries, since 2015.