

Whose memories, whose archives? Independent community archives, autonomy and the mainstream

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Abstract Over the last three or four decades in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, an enormous variety of grassroots projects and initiatives have sprung up dedicated to recording and preserving the memories and histories of different communities, often under-voiced and under-represented within the mainstream heritage. The impetus for such projects arose from a range of motivations but in general all were responding to the desire to document, record and preserve the identity and history of their own locality and community. Some custodians and creators of these collections remain suspicious of the mainstream archival profession and are determined to preserve their independence and autonomous voice by retaining direct ownership and physical custodianship of their collections, at least for the foreseeable future. In this context, seeking to ensure that these valuable materials are preserved and possibly made accessible presents a number of challenges and opportunities, including an encouragement to re-examine some aspects of traditional professional practice. By examining independent community archive activity in the UK, and in particular in London, and its implications for community interaction and identity within the multicultural context of contemporary British culture and society, this article seeks to contribute a different but relevant perspective to international debates about contemporary professional archival theory and practice.

Keywords Independent community archives · Black history · Heritage · Diversity · Professional practice · Custody

For years some young Black people have faced the forces of racism and its contradictions and have been ashamed to identify their Blackness as a positive attribute. Victims of the assimilation process, their lack of recognized history has rendered them invisible, thereby disinheriting and undermining their sense of a Black British heritage. The Black Cultural Archives would hope to play a part in improving the image and self-image of people of African and African-Caribbean descent by

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seeking to establish continuity and a positive reference point. Advancing this scheme within an educational context, outside a university setting, is a development that would bring primary sources of archaeological, historical and contemporary materials within reach of both Black and White communities. It would also provide a basis for recording the social and cultural history of African and Afro-Caribbean people in Britain.

Len Garrison, founding member of the Black Cultural Archives (1994, p. 238).

One of us calls it a hobby. The other is under no such illusion. It is a disease...But what justification is there for allowing such a deterioration in the normal living conditions of a home where there is not even room for a television? The answer to that must lie in a deep conviction that there is a value in what you are trying to do. In our case the conviction is political. We know that eventually there will be a change in our social system; that the country will be governed by those who produce the wealth; that there will be a need and a longing to know what preceded these changes. Recognizing this we set out to gather a library of books and ephemera relating to the labour movement in its broadest aspects.

Ruth & Eddie Frow, founders and life-long custodians of the Working Class Movement Library, Salford (1976, pp. 177–178).

Introduction

The two quotations which introduce this article are from individuals who were pioneers of independent community archives in the UK. The quotations give a strong impression of the political purpose and commitment to change and transformation with which these archive projects were invested. Len Garrison was a co-founder of the Black Cultural Archive (BCA) and was associated with the BCA and many other black history and education projects for all of his adult life. Ruth and Eddie Frow turned their own house into a library, archive and museum dedicated to working-class struggle and organisation. Not all community archivists are driven by such clear political and cultural missions, but nevertheless most derive their commitment, passion and enthusiasm from a desire to document and record their own history and that of their communities; histories which are often absent from mainstream archives and other heritage institutions. In exploring this activity, this article will first define its terms and give a brief introduction to what have become known as ‘community archives’ in the UK. It will then continue with an introduction to the research into independent community archives conducted by the authors at UCL.¹ The data gathering period of this research finishes in the autumn of 2009 and the subsequent publication of a more detailed report and several articles will disseminate the full findings of that work, but even at the introductory stage, we believe our research prompts a number of interesting and valuable reflections.

This article was originally delivered as a keynote address to the fourth International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (ICHORA4) ‘Minority reports:

¹ UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project, ‘Community archives and identities: documenting and sustaining community heritage’, 2008–2009. The research team comprises Andrew Flinn, Elizabeth Shepherd and Mary Stevens. This research would not have been possible without the help and partnership provided by all our case studies (Future Histories, rukus!, Moroccan Memories, Eastside Community Heritage) and all the other participants and interviewees. For further details see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/icarus/community-archives/>.

Indigenous and Community Voices in Archives’ and in outlining some of our initial findings we will touch briefly on some of the themes of that conference including the challenges of under-voiced or marginalised communities to absences in mainstream heritage accounts, resistance to dominant heritage narratives, consideration of the potential for independent community archives to impact on exclusion and perhaps even contribute to the healing of the trauma of alienation and disempowerment. Although this article focuses on activity in the UK, and in particular in London, it also seeks to situate such developments and their wider implications in a broader, international context.

Defining independent community archives in the UK

First, it would be helpful to try to define what is meant by the term, community archives. A recent article by Flinn (2007) gave a more detailed overview of the community archive movement from a UK perspective so what follows is only a brief introduction. Given that the terminology employed includes the words ‘community’ and ‘archives’, it will be apparent that there are no absolute agreed definitions or positions here. However, the term ‘community archives’ has a growing popular and professional recognition in the UK, and for this reason we continue to use it.² For the purposes of this article and our research, by ‘community archives’ we understand collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control. This allows both for collections that are sustained entirely independent of mainstream heritage institutions and those that receive support in some form from such organisations. Indeed, we argue that the defining characteristic of community archives is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality *on their own terms*. These terms range from complete autonomy from the ‘mainstream’ to the delegation of the custody and preservation of their materials to public-sector archivists and a wide range of options in between. The emphasis on community control makes these collections substantively different from the town or city collections managed or supported by local authorities and whose closest counterparts in Canada, for example, are also referred to as ‘community archives’.³

The emergence of ‘community archives’ in the UK coincides with concerns that where public or government-funded archives do contain material on those not from the dominant sections of society, that material has tended to view them as objects (of concern, of action, of surveillance) rather than as citizens and individual actors in their own right. Whilst this

² Growing awareness of community archives and their importance in the UK has resulted in the establishment of a group (formally the Community Archive Development Group (CADG), now the Community Archive and Heritage Group (CAHG)) which acts as forum for community archivists and heritage professionals to come together to discuss issues of importance and to act as a collective voice for the community archives movement in the UK. More details of CAHG can be found at <http://www.communityarchives.org.uk/>. Among the documents which can be downloaded here is CAHG’s Vision which Flinn helped to draft in 2008. This seeks to define community archives and their activities in way which explains but does not seek to limit or exclude. Significant public policy documents relating to archives and heritage including the Museums, Libraries and Archives’ Council (MLA) Archives Task Force report (ATF 2004) and the final report of Mayor of London’s Commission on African and Asian Heritage (MCAAH 2005) recognised the importance of community archives in the consideration of the UK’s archival heritage. Other policy documents issued by MLA and others have made reference to the impact that community archive activity might have on different aspects of social policy (CADG 2006; Jura Consultancy 2009).

³ For examples of Canadian community archives see Nanaimo Community Archive at <http://www.nanaimoarchives.ca/> and the Mission Community Archives at <http://www.missionarchives.com/index.html>.

material often contains valuable historical information for researchers, especially if read ‘against the grain’, most formal archives until recently held little which, for instance, ‘tracked the political and social organisations run by black people, operating within the black community’ (Phillips 2003, p. 297). Reacting to these absences and the widespread perception of a lack of interest from (Francis 1976, p. 183) or general mistrust (Martin 2005, pp. 197–198) of the mainstream heritage sector, some individuals and communities established their own archives. Amongst others, Schwartz and Cook (2002, p. 14) have identified factors inherent in conventional record creating and keeping practices that mean ‘that some can afford to create and maintain records and some cannot; that certain voices thus will be heard loudly and some not at all; that certain views and ideas about society will in turn be privileged and others marginalized’. The establishment of a community archive is, for many, a form of activism that seeks to redress or rebalance this pattern of privileging and marginalising. In other cases, although there is often an underlying assumption that these are histories not told or preserved elsewhere, the inspiration is not so directly political or cultural. Rather, it is a manifestation of a shared enthusiasm for the history of a place, occupation or interest. The study of family history, local history and community history can be very closely connected, with considerable overlap in terms of motivation, subject and materials (Mills 1994, pp. 281–283).

These informal or independent archives are not new phenomena, but over the last 10 to 20 years, their numbers in the UK have grown substantially. Reasons for this include a growth in awareness of the absences and challenges to dominant heritage narratives; the continued impact of migration (within the UK as well as international movements) in stimulating interest in place and belonging; the impact of deindustrialisation and other developments which result in significant changes in the lives of many communities; the growth in the availability of project funding for community heritage activities and finally the impact of developments in ICTs which have enabled the formation of virtual communities and allowed geographically distributed individuals to focus on and collaborate around the heritage of a shared identification, or specific geographical location.

Collections held by community archives include created as well accumulated materials and frequently comprise museum objects, books, ephemera, clothes as well as more traditional documents, photographs and audio-visual materials. These can be located in a physical space or brought together in a virtual archive or perhaps more typically in some sort of hybrid arrangement. The variety of groups, activities and collections is reflected in the many different names used: as well as community archives you might find independent archives and libraries, autonomous archives, oral history projects, local heritage groups, community museums, community resource and archive centres. In this area at least, distinctions between archives, museums and other ‘unofficial’ heritage activities are often not perceived by those undertaking such work as being very meaningful. Nevertheless, the self-selection of the term ‘archives’ to describe many of these collections conveys a sense of the historical significance and treasured nature in which these materials are held by those responsible for their collection which perhaps the terms library or even museum might not.

The diversity of collections and collecting practices demonstrates the extent to which ‘community archives’ can problematise the conventional notions of the archive. It is important, however, to stress that ‘community’ is an even more contentious term. As Elizabeth Crooke (2007, 27–40) has outlined ‘community’ has a number of meanings relating to several different and often competing discourses (symbolic, civic and political), whilst others have pointed out that in the UK and elsewhere ‘community’ is often a ‘euphemism for Blacks and ethnic minorities’ (Terracciano 2006, p. 24). Others (Alleyne 2002b) have cautioned against over-reliance in both policy and research on such a poorly

defined concept. Whilst the language of ‘community archives’ imposes this term upon us, we take it to encompass all manner of collective self-identifications including by locality, ethnicity, faith, sexuality, occupation, shared interest or by a combination of the earlier mentioned details. A community, in short, is any group of people who come together and present themselves as such, and a ‘community archive’ is the product of their attempts to document the history of their commonality.

Research into independent community archives

Funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), the Community Archives and Identity project seeks to study in detail over a period of nearly 2 years independent community archive activity amongst groups of African, Asian and other heritage mostly in London but also with reference to activity elsewhere in the UK. During this time, we have been working with four very different organisations as our case studies, engaging with them over the whole period of the research as well as more intensively for a 3 or 4 months period with each organisation in turn. Whilst we have made no claims as to the overall representativeness of the cases (each one is very different, facing very different individual challenges and at different stages in its life-cycle), the case studies have been chosen to give us a spread of organisations encompassing a range of communities, length of time established, resources available, relationship with mainstream organisations and independence, motivations and objectives and the nature of the collections held. Our chosen case studies are Future Histories, an archive of African, Asian and Caribbean performing arts in the UK; rukus!, an organisation set up to document the Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender experience in the UK; the Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum (MRCF), whose ‘Moroccan Memories in Britain’ project sought to constitute an oral and visual archive of Moroccan heritage in the UK and Eastside Community Heritage, which aims to ‘celebrate the cultures and heritage of East London’s diverse communities’. Whilst the project did not initially set out to focus exclusively on London, the practicalities of a London-based research team conducting participant observation with four different groups have required this. Three of these case studies are specifically focussed on aspects of the history of Britain’s culturally diverse groups, whereas the fourth, Eastside, included cultural diversity as part of a wider remit about a marginalized geographical area. In addition to the case studies, we are also collecting materials and interviewing key individuals from other organisations in London and the UK more widely.

The research project was conceived in the context of growing professional awareness of independent community archives, significant changes in manifestations of community archive and heritage activity brought about by developments in ICTs and a public policy dialogue stressing the impact of heritage and culture on issues such as identity, inclusion and community cohesion as well as more general debates regarding community relations, multiculturalism and conceptions of ‘Britishness’. For instance, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) have promoted the impact that community archives might have on key planks of government’s social policy agenda such as ‘Safer and Stronger Communities’ (by ‘building capacity in communities’ and ‘promoting a strong sense of place and identity’) and ‘Sustainable Communities’ (by contributing to community cohesion and empowerment, digital inclusion and a sense of place; MLA 2007; Jura Consultants 2009). The research questions that we have been seeking to explore and will return to in detail in our final report are therefore:

- What are the impacts of community archives in challenging mainstream marginalisations and on the construction of identities?
- How to assess the impact of these endeavours on academic history, public history and the construction (and acceptance) of collective memory?
- What is the relationship between community archives and mainstream archive and other heritage professionals, and how might possible partnerships benefit both community archives and heritage institutions?
- What are the differences between community archive projects in the physical world and in a virtual environment?

Of these questions, those relating to identities and identification, collective memories and community heritage are the most complex and vexed. Schwartz and Cook (2002), Greene (2002), Kaplan (2000, p. 151) and many others have drawn attention to the power of archives and archivists in considering the development of individual and collective memory, but such awareness is still relatively under-explored in professional archival discourse. Recognition and acknowledgement of the archivist's role and influence in shaping the archive is growing but such understanding is still not fully developed, especially at heritage policy level where the connections between heritage and community, cohesion and identity, archives and memory can be made in a somewhat crude and mechanistic fashion.

Heritage objects, including archives, are not the collective memories of nations or communities—memory, and in particular collective memory is something which is produced, perhaps using and engaging with archives and other heritage materials but that is not the same as saying the archives equate directly with memory. Archives do play a significant role in the processes of memory production—they are often the tools or building-blocks upon which memory is constructed, framed, verified and ultimately accepted (Piggott 2005). As Ketelaar (2005) and others suggest, community and collective memories relate at some level to an awareness and sharing of a history which draws upon a range of sources (including traditional documentary records as well oral accounts and shared community knowledge) for its authority, authenticity and validity within the audience that receives it. Crooke (2007, 1–2) argues that community and heritage are inextricably linked, feeding into and dependent on each other. The archives that are 'chosen' for survival, the terms in which they are described, and the processes by which these decisions are made, do ultimately impact on the collective memory and public histories that are produced from them. The interrelationship between absences and marginalisations in public heritage and national narratives, and absences and marginalisations in the archival record are complex but extremely significant and something that community archives often address directly in their work (Schwartz and Cook 2002, pp. 2–3, 7–9).

The connection between heritage, memory and the construction of identities, or perhaps identifications is equally complex and nuanced. Again, much public policy frequently offers a too simplistic and essentialised view of identity. Individual and indeed community identity is often referred to as a single, fixed set of understandings and affiliations, which will be strengthened and will benefit from engagement with heritage. Whilst not underplaying the 'political' and 'cultural' strength of the assertion of a fixed identity supported by a re-covered heritage, difficult questions about 'identity' are rarely confronted and problematised by many heritage workers and policy makers (Kaplan 2000, pp. 146–147). Much contemporary understanding about the process of identification and its engagement with a whole range of factors, including archives, heritage and an understanding of the past, recognises it as infinitely more fluid, ever-changing (becoming), multiple and

complex (Hall 2000, pp. 22–24). Recognising and better understanding the role that archives including community archives can play in constructing and evolving identities, whilst moving on from a narrow public policy and outcomes focussed agenda is an essential but difficult part of our research agenda.

A note on methodology: ethnography and heritage research

An ethnographic approach, employing an open participatory observation method to collect the ‘thick description’ data needed to answer our questions, was the obvious choice of methodology for this type of research. It was essential that we sought to get an ‘emic’ or insider, bottom-up perspective on the case studies by working with and within those community archives who had agreed to be involved in the study. Ethnographic research is now a well-established methodological approach in cultural heritage and museum studies research, but with a few exceptions, it has been less widely employed in archival research (Gracy 2004). However, this is beginning to change and archival ethnography is increasingly recognised as an important research tool. McKemmish et al. (2005, pp. 167–168), in outlining a community-centred research agenda which respected the local and the indigenous, recommended the adoption of an ethnographic approach for research of this kind.

The project was lucky enough to appoint a skilled and experienced researcher and much really significant, rich data have resulted. Such a research process is very engaging but also very time-consuming. Access requires patient negotiation and often continual re-negotiation, and relations of trust and partnership need to be built and extended at all times. The process is often stressful for the researcher and the participants and is frequently exhausting. At the heart of what we are trying to do is to understand through observation and participation the motivations, activities and meanings of the case studies and that requires great sensitivity and a commitment to equitable partnership, dialogue, negotiation and constructive engagement. Our presence in the community archives clearly alters aspects of the organisation and their activities, introducing many points of contact around ‘race’, colour, gender, sexuality, class, the academic and the non-academic. But it also allows us to participate and to understand, and in turn to offer something (volunteer labour, our skills and knowledge where useful or appropriate) in return for the organisation allowing us to observe and work with them.

The most difficult aspect of our research is with regard to how engagement with heritage, in this case community archives, supports the process of identification and identity construction. Identities are constructed, in part at least, through a process of reception and negotiation with culture and heritage. Most ethnographic studies of archives and museums, have focussed on the ‘production’ side (how the archive is created, how an exhibition is conceived and carried out), some have sought to observe how such heritage is consumed but few studies have sought to do both. For obvious reasons in terms of the methodology and the time frame required, a consumption user-focussed ethnographic approach is difficult, although Newman and McLean’s use of the ‘circuit of culture’ to understand identity construction in an exhibition environment provides a valuable model (2006). Nevertheless, we feel we have been able to make some concrete beginnings in engaging with users, not least because in community archives there are significant overlaps between the archive’s staff, its volunteers and its community of users, which will hopefully pave the way for a longer and more focussed study on the reception and impact of community archives.

At the time of writing, however, our fieldwork and data gathering are still under way. More detailed reflections about the process of setting up the research and negotiating its

progress will be provided in the final report and other forthcoming publications. This article is therefore informed by some initial observations, but most of the examples are drawn from the literature about independent archives already widely accessible in the public domain.

Some initial observations on independent community archives of African, Asian and other heritages in the UK

The extent and variety of community archives operating within an African, Asian and other heritages context in London are extensive. A 2007 mapping exercise commissioned by MLA London found traces of over 70 such organisations and initiatives, ranging from oral history projects such as African and Caribbean Voices Association from Stratford in East London to well-known and long-established organisations like the Black Cultural Archives or the Polish Library and Archive (Ander 2007). Other prominent initiatives such as the George Padmore Archive or Future Histories are not even included in the survey and there are certainly countless smaller, localised community initiatives operating out of domestic settings or community centres which do not register anywhere. The range and diversity are astonishing.

Nevertheless, amongst all this variety and diversity, there are some commonalities. Most of these archives generally reflect the founding ideals and motivations of a few key individuals. Invariably, the impetus behind the conscious decision to ‘constitute’ the archive (as opposed to a collection of materials that were produced as part of another activity) was in part a reaction to the lack of representation and visibility of the community concerned within the dominant culture and formal heritage organisations (Hall 2001). Len Garrison’s work with the African and Caribbean Educational Resource Centre in the 1970s in response to the lack of teaching of black history in London schools and alienating effect it was having on black children, eventually led him and a group of similarly concerned parents and activists to found the African People’s Historical Movement Foundation in 1981. The Foundation established the Black Cultural Archives as permanent physical space and ‘monument’ housing the education resources documenting the black experience in Britain:

We do not assume that historical data and artefacts by themselves are going to change a child’s self-image. They will, however, provide the environment and structure within which the Afro-Caribbean child can extend and build positive frames of reference, and a basis for White children to understand the Black presence in an anti-racist context (Garrison 1994, p. 239).

A similar radical educational motivation, as part of broader social movement activism aimed at the transformation of society, is apparent in the case of the George Padmore Institute and Archive (Alleyne 2002a). GPI was founded in 1991 as an extension or continuation of the activities of the International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books and campaigns such as the Supplementary Schools Movement which were organised by a leading radical and political activist John La Rose and others. The GPI was conceived as part of a whole range of cultural, political and educational activities ‘relating to the black community of Caribbean, African and Asian descent in Britain and continental Europe’. The archival dimension of the GPI grew (partly through the deposit of the personal collections of La Rose and others involved with the Institute) and developed until by the late 1990s it had become an integral part of the Institute’s vision, providing access to

its materials for the purpose of documenting and revealing the ‘different moments of intellectual, political and cultural ferment which people from Britain’s former colonies brought to this county in the post-war period’ (MLA London 2006) For the founders of rukus! the Black LGBT archive, the archive represents an assertion of visibility and an ongoing challenge to dominant narratives but also to the black press and the gay press which often ‘ignored the black LGBT presence and still see it as a minority interest’.⁴

In some cases, particular books or musicians were important in stimulating the desire to know more about black history, and thus inspiring individuals to work with or establish community heritage organisations. Several people have mentioned the impact of the publication of Peter Fryer’s *Staying Power* in 1984 and his subsequent lectures on the topic as significant moments in galvanising interest and activity in the recovery of black British history. A younger generation also found empowerment and an interest in black history, heritage and education stimulated by the lyrical urgings of Public Enemy’s Chuck D and other hip hop artists.⁵

The collections held by these archives include a much broader range of materials than would be traditionally be collected and preserved in a mainstream archive. Alongside the more conventional organisational records, personal letters and oral histories, there are books, pamphlets, leaflets, posters, objects and art works as well what is usually described as ephemeral but is in fact absolutely crucial:

Len’s BCA collection is thus a unique record of black migrant life at the moment when the identity of the Black community was beginning to emerge...there are handbills, flyers, posters, programmes for a wide range of events, including political meetings, art exhibitions, concerts, plays, community meetings about education, welfare and politics... and may be not only the only surviving record of transient organizations, but the only way of understanding whole movements and trends, like the ‘self-help’ movement, or the rise of African nationalism in the black community.’ (Phillips 2003, p. 297)

The rukus! archive contains a similar range of materials, with the nightclub ephemera (flyers, leaflets) from 1980s representing perhaps the only traces left of the emergence of a black gay scene in London. The personal and individual dimension of many of these collections is also an important and common factor. Although there are often organisational papers in the archives, particularly where as in the case of La Rose, the individual was a leading member and activist in the organisations concerned, a significant proportion of these materials frequently arise from the personal collecting of one or two central individuals. As with Ruth and Eddie Frow’s collections in the Working Class Movement Library, the point at which the personal becomes institutional is not always entirely clear.

With many community archives, this personal dimension is often crucial to the dynamism and continuing functioning of these endeavours. They are often assisted by others (volunteers, supporters, visitors) from within their families and the wider community that the archive seeks to represent, but the organisation’s dedication and dynamism often tends to come from a small number of key activists who embody the vision and commitments of the archive. This individual dimension has significant consequences—it means on one hand that these organisations can draw upon immense dedication, enthusiasm and personal energy, but on the other in the longer term the responsibility and effort can be exhausting

⁴ Founding member of rukus!, Topher Campbell quoted on rukus! Black LGBT Archive Project website at <http://www.rukus.co.uk/content/view/12/27/>.

⁵ FHFN080611.

and ultimately draining. Developing the archive to meet new challenges and new contexts can appear daunting or even unwelcome. Trying to find a mechanism and a structure which can sustain the organisation beyond the participation of the key founding individuals is a very important and challenging responsibility.⁶ It appears that one of the most dangerous times for the long-term sustainability of a community archive is in the period after its original driving force moves away or passes on.

Reflections on issues of sustainability also highlight issues around relations between independent community archives and mainstream heritage organisations, and the importance of autonomy and independence within the sector. The relationship between sustainability and autonomy is one of the most important dilemmas that our research has highlighted for community archives. Whilst there is no predetermined correlation between the two, they do appear to have a complex relationship and interaction, one which shifts and evolves during the course of the life of a community archive. If achieving sustainable resources means accessing public funds, there is almost certainly a trade-off in terms of a loss of autonomy and independence. In particular, if that funding is largely or wholly short-term project funding, then some organisations find that the costs to their independence and long-term stability are not always worth the effort. Public funding therefore whilst often essential and sought after can also bring its own challenges. A recent large Heritage Lottery Fund award and the appointment of some professional (and largely white) heritage staff offer the BCA the opportunity to firmly establish itself as a national centre for black culture and heritage, but it also provides the organisation and its trustees with a delicate balancing act. The organisation must fulfil all the demands of the funders and operate along the lines of a mainstream heritage organisation whilst retaining its close community ties and roots.

Whilst there is not the hostility to working with mainstream organisations that there was in earlier periods (1970s and 1980s for instance), it is still a tricky area. Working relations between community archivists and heritage professionals can (sometimes, not always) be subject to a number of pressures ranging from mutual misconceptions about roles and activities, differences over professional/non-professional practices, perceived lack of respect or acknowledgement of the others' skills and expertise, lack of cultural sensitivities or even racism. Many community archives are keen to explore partnerships with mainstream organisations, seeking to engage with and insert their stories, perspectives and expertise into the heritage mainstream and thereby gain greater recognition for their 'community'. However, many archives are also very clear that they wish to retain their autonomy and independence in any relationship and participate in partnerships and project work very much on their own terms. Independence may derive from the nature of the challenge of the archive, 'you should not depend on an establishment with which you are times in conflict for the validation of your culture and history' (La Rose, quoted in Alleyne 2002a, 124) but it also offers an important 'safe space' to develop 'without hindrance by those hostile to our goals or by those with good intentions who don't share our priorities' (Small 1997, p. 61). Despite these reservations, our research has found clear examples of good and innovative practice, sustained relationships and equitable working. Whilst much of this partnership working is still reliant on particular individuals forging good personal relations, there are other examples such as the London Metropolitan Archive and its exploration with the Eric and Jessica Huntley collection of shared ownership and

⁶ The testimonies of both Glenn Jordan (Butetown History and Arts Centre, BUTIN090731) and Eve Hostettler (the Island History Trust, IHT090721) are striking in this regard.

community participation where the process and good practice seem to be becoming much more institutionalised.

Custody and ownership remains a key area for some, though not all. There are many independent community archives who while interested in working in a range of partnerships with mainstream heritage organisations, also wish to ensure that they retain custody of their collections ‘on behalf of the community’. One activist has likened the attitude of some heritage institutions to black collections to colonialism which needed to be resisted, and some formal archives are very keen to avoid their behaviour attracting those sorts of accusations. Custody and control over the collections allow the community to exert some influence to ensure that ‘our history is written correctly’. Whilst there are legitimate epistemological concerns associated with the suggestion that control of the documentary record will generate necessarily ‘better’ or ‘correct’ histories, it remains the case that supporting community archives in their efforts to fill gaps in this record and hence the possibility of a more inclusive historical narrative is in the broader interest of society at large. This broader self-interest helps to explain a new willingness by some archive professionals to see their duties as including supporting collections held in the community via advice and partnership, and not just insisting on their deposit in formal archive institutions before that support is offered or made available.⁷

Some international perspectives

Although this article is concerned with independent community archives and heritage groups in the UK, and our research largely focuses on groups in London in particular, it is abundantly clear that there are independent archives, community archives and heritage initiatives all over the world, including but not only in Ireland, France, Canada, South Africa, the United States and Australia, representing a variety of different groups and communities and inspired by a wide range of different motivations.⁸ There would be great value in a comparative study of these initiatives and organisations which looks not only at the similarities but also the differences which might arise from nationality, culture, community as well as a range of other factors. This article will not attempt anything like a comprehensive survey of these but will highlight merely a few examples in terms of their particular interest or broader influence.

The Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Culture and located on Malcolm X Boulevard in New York describes itself as ‘a national research library devoted to collecting, preserving and providing access to resources documenting the history and

⁷ FHFN080611; LMIN090717.

⁸ For instance Ireland, ‘Living history Ireland’ at <http://www.iol.ie/~plugin/history.htm> and in the north, Dúchas Sound Archive (Crooke 2007, 125–128); France, see work of Generiques project <http://www.generiques.org/images/pdf/DP-Generiques-2-Anglais.pdf>; Canada, see references to community archives in Miller (1998, pp. 131–132), the list of community heritage centres in the *Aboriginal Archives Guide* (ACA 2007) and the Canadian Women’s Movement Archives and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives described in Carter (2006, p. 232); South Africa, the District Six Museum (Crooke 2007) and the Gay and Lesbian Archives (Reid 2002); US, many examples including for instance the Schomburg Centre <http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/about/history.html> and the Lesbian Herstory Archives (Reid 2002) in New York, the Tribal PEACE online Native American heritage site, Asian and Hispanic community museum initiatives in California (Shilton and Srinivasan 2007); Australia, community heritage centres or ‘Keeping Places’ supported under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resources Network Protocols http://www.l.aitsis.gov.au/atsilirn/protocols.atsilirn.asn.au/index0c51.html?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1.

experiences of peoples of African descent throughout the world'. Its example and reputation are very influential amongst those black archives and libraries in the UK looking to what might be possible or what they might aim for. However, its size, length of existence and position within the New York Public Library system mean that the scale of its success is probably hard to emulate.

Also in New York, the principles of 'radical archiving' adhered to by the Lesbian Herstory Archives touch many issues that most independent and radical community archives have considered and debated at one time or another (Reid 2002, p. 201; Nestle 1990). After stating that the archives must be open to all and reflect the lives of all regardless of status or profile, the principles go on to assert that the archives should be 'housed within the community', that 'archival skills shall be taught, one generation of lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives' and finally that 'funding shall be sought from within the communities the Archives serves, not from the government or mainstream financial institutions'. Not many community archives would perhaps aspire to this level of complete autonomy but many will have sought to achieve several of these principles at different points within their development.

In particular, the radical archiving principles of some independent community archives draw attention to the questions of custody, repatriation, disputed and shared ownership of archives and cultural heritage which Bastian (2002, 2003) has explored in her work, and which are embedded in the Keeping Places for Aboriginal and Maori peoples and in First Nation community archives in North America. These are of course different from the concerns faced by independent archives of communities of African and Asian heritage in the UK, but perhaps not as distinct as it might first appear. Certainly, on the question of ownership, custody and representation, the concerns over who has the authority to hold such heritage and speak for a community are similarly expressed in the discourse about independent community archive and heritage spaces. It is perhaps by re-thinking some elements of traditional professional practice and seeking post-custodial approaches, maybe following the distributed 'Mandela model' described by Sassoon (2007) where some archive collections are held in their communities but their care is supported by the archive profession, that a solution to these dilemmas might be found (Carter 2006, p. 232; Flinn 2007, pp. 168–169).

Independent community archives, 'our memories, our archives'

In conclusion, this article will offer a few thoughts connecting thinking about independent community archives in the UK, and specifically the research that we at UCL are engaged in, with the broader themes and international perspectives embodied in the ICHORA 4 'Minority Voices' conference in Perth 2008, and in particular with the representation of indigenous and community voices in the archives and the disputed nature of local, national and indeed international heritages.

Some of the connections are of course obvious. Whilst not seeking to equate too superficially the experiences of Aboriginal, Indigenous or First Nation peoples with those of African, Asian and other heritage in the UK, there appear to be strong similarities in terms of absences, misrepresentations and marginalisations from the formal archives and from the partial national histories that are written in part from those same archives. Many communities around the world have responded to such marginalisations and exclusions by creating and constituting a variety of independent archives, community archives, community museums and keeping places. These all differ enormously, reflecting the culture,

the motivations and the objectives of the communities they seek to represent as well as the priorities of individuals who provide the main impetus for their activity. However, they are all united by the desire to tell their own stories, if not always entirely independently from mainstream heritage organisations, then at least on their own terms. A community's custody over its archives and cultural heritage means power over what is to be preserved and what is to be destroyed, how it is to be described and on what terms it is to be accessed. This allows the community to exercise some control over its representation and the construction of its collective and public memory. Whilst acknowledging that this control can lead to further exclusions (for instance the treatment of behaviours and cultures which the 'community' deems unacceptable) and even offensive and inflammatory characterisations of 'others', this can neither be predicted nor is inevitable (Crooke 2007, pp. 9, 29; Kaplan 2000, p. 151). Rather, most community archives offer an important and empowering assertion of community resistance to otherwise exclusionary and (often) marginalising dominant narratives. They offer mainstream heritage institutions not only a reminder of their obligation to diversify and transform collections and narratives but also perhaps the opportunity through equitable and mutually beneficial partnership to achieve some of that transformation.

However, consideration of the transformative potential of community archives begs harder questions about why this is important, indeed necessary. Why are archives and heritage important and how do they connect with individual and collective identities? Heritage and identity are not automatically 'good' unencumbered ideas or realities, as has already been noted they can be constructed in narrow ways which exclude, which seek to reflect some rather than all. Gilroy (2004) has written of an influential strand in the discourse about 'Britishness', and English heritage and identity which embodies a powerful 'post-imperial melancholia' in British culture and finds refuge in reassuring reminiscence of the 'uncomplicated' bravery and imagined 'whiteness' of pre-Windrush Second World War British society. Set against this backwards-looking and discontented culture, Gilroy (2004, 2008), Hall (2005, p. 35) and others suggest the possibility of a transformed and democratised heritage reflecting the reality of a convivial, hybridised multi-cultured society such as London or indeed the whole of Britain as a "post-nation" ... re-imagined, reinvented to include us'. Independent community archives and the challenges they can represent to narrow, backwards looking heritage may be a significant foundation for democratising local and national histories. Such new histories may not in themselves represent any fundamental re-ordering of social or power relations in society but they might be an important tool in motivating and informing such transformations.

Clearly histories, in particular public histories, are spaces of challenge and often bitter contestation. Accounts such as Stuart McIntyre's (2004) of the 'History Wars' in Australia, the US and to a lesser extent the UK demonstrate the contemporary political importance and significance of these arguments about history, and in particular the public representations and acknowledgements of those histories, and the roles that archives, museums and heritage play in these contestations. Such controversies indicate not only the importance of 'minority voices' being heard and included within the historical record, but also of enabling that inclusion by the recognition that many more things (oral testimony, art, landscapes and the built environment) need to be included and understood within the archival heritage. Often, those resisting the critical revision of colonial and other histories do so by seeking to delegitimise and exclude non-traditional, non-official archival records.

The past experiences of colonised, enslaved, marginalized and oppressed peoples are not only of academic relevance, or locked away safely in the past, the consequences of those experiences and histories remain often profoundly relevant today. A more cohesive

and perhaps more convivial society must be founded on principles of social justice, of which one element must be a heritage which honestly represents and acknowledges the past experiences of all in society. The connections of heritage and memory to well-being, like too simplistic notions of the relationship between heritage and identity, are ones worthy of the current critical debate (for instance Butler 2007) that is now occurring but the possibility of historical wounds beginning to be healed via their acknowledgement in the democratised heritage offered either by the mainstream or by the representations of community-based initiatives remains at the very least an appealing and intriguing one (Chakrabarty 2007).

Returning to the very beginning of this article to Len Garrison, and to Ruth and Eddie Frow and to the many others responsible for independent and community heritage projects in the UK and elsewhere, it is clear as Croke (2007, pp. 8–11, 109–130) argues that many of these archival activists aim to use community archives and heritage for community empowerment and social change. These projects are not politically neutral but frequently arise from and are part of social movements with broad political, cultural and social agendas of transformatory change which fundamentally challenge mainstream society, and we would do well to recognise and celebrate them as such.

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