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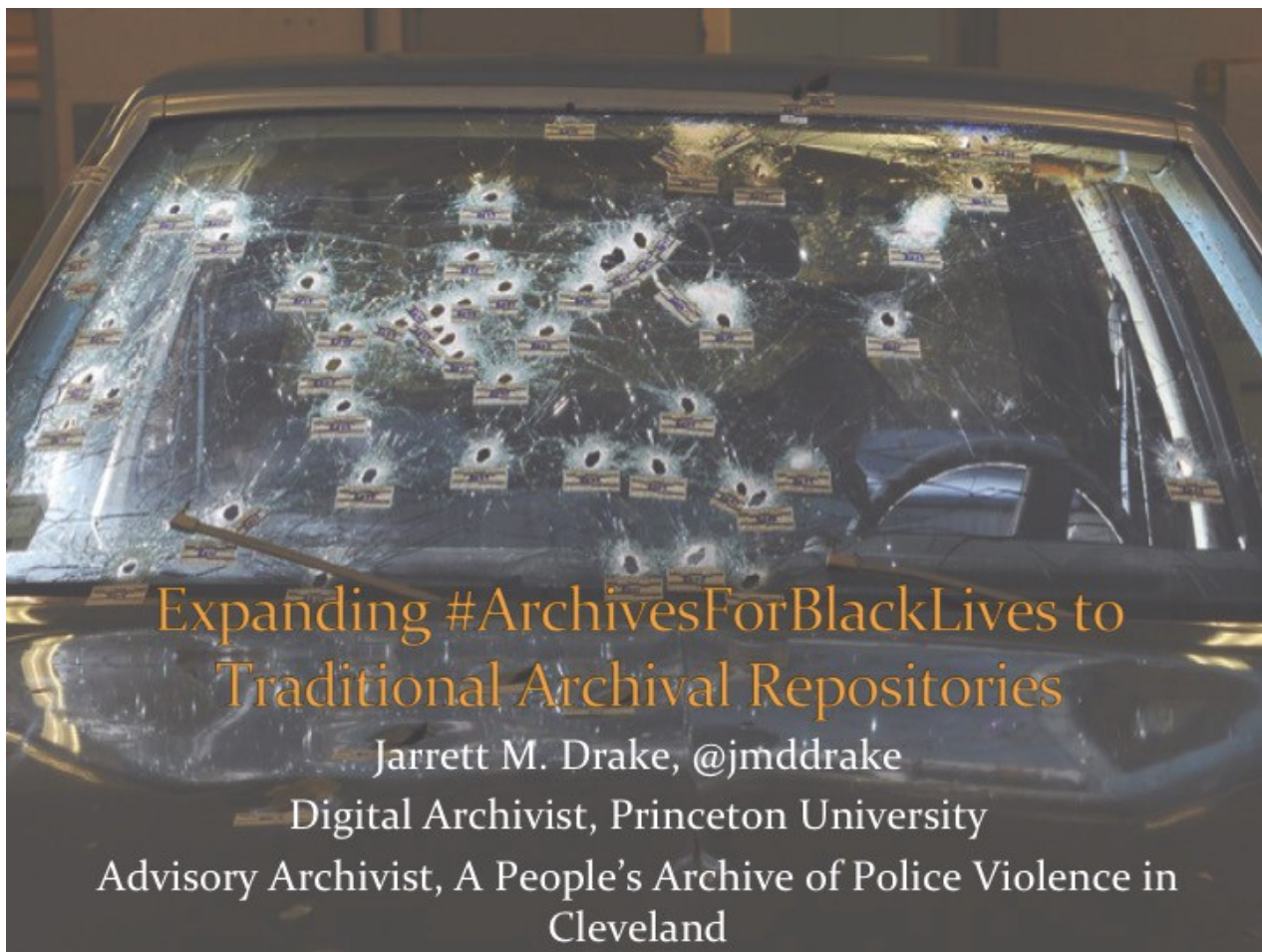
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## Expanding #ArchivesForBlackLives to Traditional Archival Repositories

*This is the text of my talk at the 2016 American Library Association Conference in Orlando, FL. The panel, entitled #BlackLivesMatter: Documenting a Digital Protest Movement, was moderated by Dr. Meredith Evans and also featured Makiba Foster and Dr. Charlton McIlwain.*

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Two months ago I gave a [talk](#) that sought to define a hashtag I created on Twitter, #ArchivesForBlackLives. If the text of that talk wasn't available online, I'd definitely just give it again here today, but here we are. In the talk, I argued:

*The unbearable whiteness and patriarchy of traditional archives demand that new archives for black lives emerge and sustain themselves as spaces and sites for trauma, transcendence, and transformation.*

Based on my experience as one of the *many* people responsible for creating *A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland* and based on my role as the Digital Archivist at the Princeton University Archives, I advocated for the creation of more independent, community-based archives to exist separately from traditional archival repositories.

I still believe that we need to birth and support more of these community-based archives, but today I want to expand the concept of #ArchivesForBlackLives and speak to the special collections librarians and archivists working in those same traditional archives that two months ago I said should avoid attempting to document the Black Lives Matter movement. This expansion of the concept doesn't emerge from an increased faith in these repositories; it's not like our field got any less whiter or patriarchal in the last two months since my original exploration of this concept. Rather, this expansion of #ArchivesForBlackLives reflects the likelihood that many of your libraries and archives will simply discard my initial argument and attempt to document the movement anyway. So if you're going to do that, I want you to engage this work critically and anti-oppressively.

So today I have two tasks. First, I'll recount the origins of *A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*. After recounting the origins of this community-based archive, I'll offer a provocation, which is: in order to document the Black Lives Matter movement responsibly, special collections libraries and archives must first do the following two things. First, they must confront their complicity in upholding patriarchy, white supremacy, and other structural inequalities. Second, they must build trust with the people, communities, and organizations around whose lives the movement is centered, a trust they should pursue not under the guise of collection development but under the practice of allyship.

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Before I delve into my provocation, I need to recount the creation of *A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*. First, a definition: the archive is an *independent* community-based archive established last summer with the stated mission to collect, preserve, and provide access to the stories, memories, and accounts of police violence as experienced or observed by Cleveland citizens. By independent, I mean that the archive is not managed, funded, or otherwise influenced by a larger cultural heritage institution or traditional archival repository.

Two questions merit responses: why Cleveland and why police violence? The answers to both are quite simple, actually. To answer the first, the Society of American Archivists hosted its 2015 annual conference in Cleveland. To answer the second, on May 23, 2015, news broke that a Cuyahoga County judge acquitted Cleveland Police Department officer Michael Brelo of all criminal charges for his role in the shooting deaths of Malissa Williams and Timothy Russell, a shooting in which 13 police officers fired a combined 137 gunshots at Russell's fleeing car on the late evening of November 29, 2012.

Brelo was the only officer charged for his role because after the chase concluded and the other officers ceased firing, Brelo climbed onto the hood of Russell's car and shot at the pair 15 times through the front windshield. Brelo's acquittal was and remains unremarkable, if for no other reason than the sobering statistic that since 2013 in the US state prosecutors have convicted less than 1 percent of police officers for the combined 4,000 lives they stole.

Brelo's acquittal fits firmly within that 99.9%, but despite the numerical normalcy of police impunity, the verdict signaled that in fact black lives do not matter in the city of Cleveland. After all, just six months prior to the Brelo verdict the world watched on video as another Cleveland Police Department officer, Timothy Loehmann, shot and killed 12-year-old Tamir Rice in a public park, a case that also later resulted in no criminal convictions. Given the lack of police accountability there and elsewhere in the country, on the day of Brelo's acquittal I published a series of tweets asking whether archivists planning to attend SAA's annual meeting gave a damn enough to *do* anything about police violence in Cleveland.

Amazingly, more than a dozen archivists affirmed their interest in this yet-to-be-planned project in which we simply hoped to lend our skills as archivists in the service of those families and communities impacted by police violence. One of the archivists who responded to my initial tweet lives in the Cleveland area and so reached out to local organizations that had been organizing against police violence in the city to inquire which of them might be interested in the skills of a dozen or so professional archivists from across the US. One organization, Puncture the Silence, *was* in need of the services of archivists, though prior to our contact I'm not sure they realized archivists could meet their particular challenges.

The organization hosted a People's Tribunal on Police Brutality in April of 2015 and recorded the proceedings of the tribunal in high-definition digital video. The problem wasn't in creating the videos but in making them available for the public to see. With a firm grasp of the problem, the archivists spent the summer months of 2015 organizing a plan of action *with* Puncture the Silence and we agreed to find a way to make their videos available for the world to view. At the behest of Stacie Williams, we also committed ourselves to conducting oral histories on the streets of Cleveland with people who directly experienced, witnessed, or had been impacted by police violence.



**HAVE YOU,  
YOUR FRIENDS, FAMILY  
SUFFERED BRUTALITY  
FROM THE POLICE?**

*Puncture the Silence*  
is calling for

## **A PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL ON POLICE BRUTALITY**

building toward **NO BUSINESS AS USUAL** nationwide  
Tuesday, April 14, 2015 #ShutDownA14

**COME TELL YOUR STORY** TO A PANEL OF  
*RESPECTED COMMUNITY MEMBERS, INCLUDING:*

Oscar Grant's Uncle Bobby,  
Dr. Ed McKinney, CSU Prof. Emeritus,  
Ed Little, Public Policy Consultant

**12-4, SATURDAY, APRIL 11**  
**Room 201, Main Classroom Bldg.**  
**Cleveland State University**  
E. 22nd St. Between Chester and Euclid Aves.

**LET YOUR VOICE HELP ADVANCE THE STRUGGLE  
FOR JUSTICE AROUND POLICE MURDER AND BRUTALITY!!!!**

National website: [stopmassincarceration.net](http://stopmassincarceration.net)

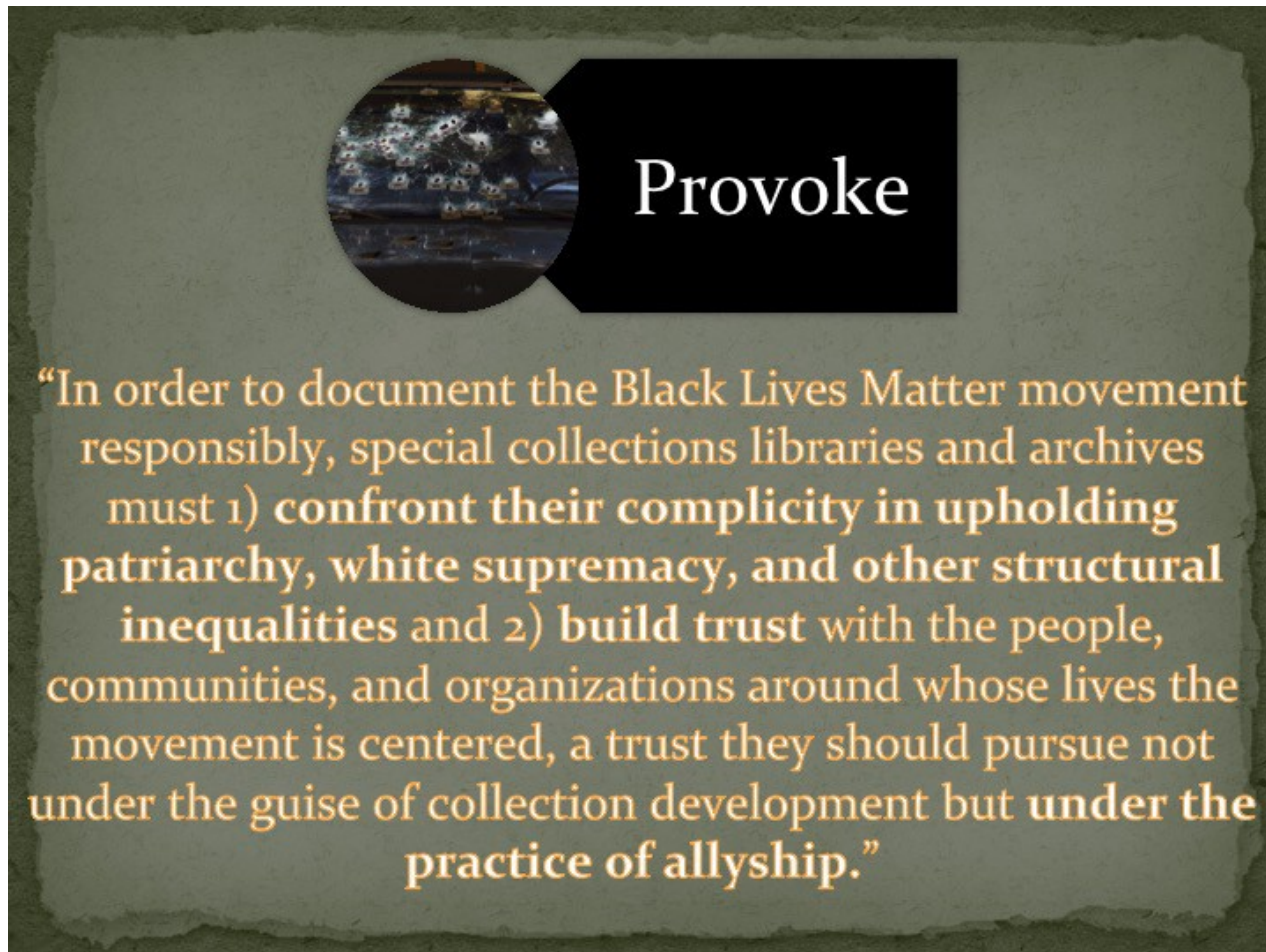


Upon arriving to Cleveland in mid-August of 2015, the archivists used Twitter both to raise funds for an Omeka website and to assemble a volunteer team of 25 or 30 archivists to record the oral histories in five parts of the city over two days. We advertised the oral history project as "Righting the Record," and flyer design credits go to my lady, Karina Beras, who is here today. In two days, the organizers and archivists recorded 45 first-hand accounts from Cleveland citizens who endured or observed police violence in the city. Their accounts, transcribed thanks to *more* volunteers solicited via Twitter, are available at <http://archivingpoliceviolence.org>. The tribunal videos recorded by Puncture the Silence in April of 2015 are also available here.

Constant retelling of a familiar story inevitably produces silences. If you ask the other archivists involved to recount the creation of this archive, they'd cer-

tainly tell the story differently. This archive now belongs to a team of local citizen archivists theirs to maintain and keep. Four of the archivists who partnered in the archive's formation, the advisory archivists, now function to support the technical needs of the website (at which I am failing currently) and support the goals of the archive as set by the citizen archivists.

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Now that I've told you *my* version of the history behind *A People Archive's of Police Violence in Cleveland*, I want to return to my initial provocation that in order to document the Black Lives Matter movement responsibly, special collections libraries and archives must 1) confront their complicity in upholding patriarchy, white supremacy, and other structural inequalities and 2) build trust with the people, communities, and organizations around whose lives the movement is centered, a trust they should pursue not under the guise of collection development but under the practice of allyship.

To the first task of confronting complicity, special collections libraries and archives cannot responsibly document the Black Lives Matter movement without first realizing that you and your repository are part of the problem the movement is highlighting. *I* am part of the problem. Our country could not have gotten to this point in its history without the able assistance of the memory workers employed in universities, governments, and libraries. Two con-

cepts, which are a combination of complex processes, show this quite clearly: the location of the archive and the language of the archive.

By location of the archive, I mean not only the physical location of the archive, which is typically on a private college's campus that itself is protected by armed private police forces. But if we expand location of the archive to mean, "what does one have to do in order to reach the archive?" then we see it's much more entrenched than a physical location. To get collections of papers or records to archives, it helps if record creators either *require money* or *give money* to facilitate the acquisition of archival materials. If they require money—i.e., they're selling their collection—that signals to librarians and archivists that the materials have historical value because they have financial value. If record creators give money—i.e., they're donating funds to the library or institution for the processing of their archives or for other reasons—that prompts librarians and archivists to accept archival materials that they otherwise wouldn't but do so purely for the funding. This quid pro quo capitalism and neoliberalism exemplifies one of the core criticisms Black Lives Matter movement organizers continue to raise.

Another example of how the location of the archive fuels white supremacy and patriarchy, upon arrival to our libraries and archives—many of which are only open during business hours from Monday through Friday—patrons must produce photo identification, depart with their personal belongings, and submit to constant surveillance in reading rooms. These three things—photo

identification, personal property, and surveillance—represent another set of core issues around which movement activists have organized, as all these issues relate directly to voter rights, sexual violence, and the carceral state. The location of the archive, which manifests itself through acquisition customs and the barriers to access that we erect with our reading room policies and procedures, leads to what we all observe most days in our home libraries and archives: in a reading room with portraits hung of only white men, only white men view the papers of only white men.

Remember, I said there were two concepts that highlight the complicity of special collections libraries and archives in the very white supremacy and patriarchy that the Black Lives Matter movement is challenging. I just described the first concept, the location of the archive, and now I want to touch briefly on the other concept, the language of the archive. By language of the archive, I mean the communication tool that most of us here use to advertise new archival collections: the finding aid.

Before even *thinking* about whether to document the Black Lives Matter movement, look at your existing holdings and see whether or not black lives matter there. And while doing so, see whether all black lives matter there. Black women's lives. Black queer lives. Black poor lives. One of the least well understood aspects of the movement is its embrace of intersectionality, or the notion that black people are at once *people* and thus have many complex identities that extend beyond the cisgendered, heterosexual middle-class man. In



fact, most black people are *not* cisgendered, heterosexual, middle-class men. How does your institution's existing finding aids represent the lives of those people living at the intersections of the margins? You may say: "we don't have any such finding aids, which is why we want to document the Black Lives Matter movement!" To that I respond: look harder. They're there. They've always been.

The very first task for any special collections library or archive hoping to document the Black Lives Matter movement would be to confront its complicity in white supremacy, patriarchy, and other structural inequalities that the movement is seeking to eradicate. I've offered two concepts—the location of the archive and the language of the archive—but surely there are others for you to discover and discuss within your own archive's own ivory-covered walls. This confrontation might happen over a series of dialogues, both internal and external, in which the librarians and archives examine their current practices and make concrete plans to amend or abolish them where needed. This confrontation extends beyond a deep look in the mirror to the tangible actions that accompany this deep look and the impact of those tangible actions.

The second task for special collections libraries and archives embarking to document the Black Lives Matter movement is to build trust with the people around whose lives this movement is centered. And as you may gather from my earlier comments, this isn't a movement by or for black, heterosexual, cisgendered middle-class men. It's a movement started, in fact, by three queer

black women, and many of the most stalwart organizers on the ground are young queer black women engaging this work not from a profession or place of privilege but from lived experiences in the realities of a state that is openly hostile to black women's bodies, minds, and spirits, especially those black women who don't conform to respectability politics or the politics of white feminism that pervade the library and archival worlds. So, the trust you all need to build—that I need to build—is with these people.

The path to building that trust mustn't be rooted in the veneer of trust with the hidden agenda to grow your repository's collections. This trust is not trust for the goal of collection development. Doing that would be trickery, not trust. If your repository seeks to document the Black Lives Matter movement, I encourage you to develop and demonstrate your trust with the communities, organizers, and organizations through the concept of allyship. The Anti-  
Oppression Network offers a definition of allyship worth your while to consider:

*an active, consistent, and arduous practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person of privilege seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group of people...allyship is not an identity [but] a lifelong process of building relationships based on trust...allyship is not self-defined [but] must be recognized by the people we seek to ally ourselves with.*

I give credit to a black woman, Paury Flowers, for pointing out this definition to me. This webpage contains more descriptions and definitions that any repositories seeking to document the movement should consult.

If you want a succinct reminder of what allyship is, look to another black woman, Kayla Reed, for guidance:

I love Twitter for ideas like this and people like Kayla. Her instructions are clear and concise.

So before you begin documenting the movement at your home library or archive, consider how Kayla's and the Anti-Oppression Network's definitions of allyship might manifest in your repository. Again, this allyship needn't begin or end with collection development. Alternative ways for librarians and archivists to practice allyship with the movement might be to: 1) partner with organizations and communities to identify the short-term and medium-term preservation, access, and security needs for records they create and offer free instruction sessions that empower the organizations and communities to meet their own needs; 2) use your existing collections to host dialogues, programs, and exhibits around the many issues the movement is illuminating, including but not limited to the carceral state, the school-to-prison-pipeline, racial and gender violence towards queer black women, and environmental justice; 3) offer your institution's information and building resources to movement communities, organizers, and organizations, including but not limited to instruction on how or where to search for more publicly-available information regarding the movement's core issues and safe, non-surveilled meeting spaces with proximity to gender-neutral bathrooms.

Fomenting trust via allyship to organizers is the second method for librarians and archivists to pursue should they wish to document the movement. It should be obvious, but perhaps it isn't, that one absolutely cannot practice allyship without comprehending the problems the movement addresses. This is critical. You're all librarians and archivists, thus are able to use your information literacy skills to do your own research to find reliable sources about the various goals of the people organizing on the ground, so invest the time to grasp fully and firmly what it is you are allying yourself and your repository with.

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Surely, if your special collections library or archive follows the recommendations I've offered today then someone will approach you with concerns about politicizing your collection and your institution. This concern is hysterical if not awfully ahistorical. Libraries and archives in the Jim Crow South happily upheld segregation. In fact, speak to enough older black people who grew up in the south and you'll hear horror stories of childhood experiences at white libraries that denied them access and services. This is the legacy we inherit: one that's far from apolitical and actually embedded within the purview of political power. Just point your critics to this quotation of the late historian and educator Howard Zinn.

Moreover, the movement for black lives, I'd argue, is not a political movement as much as it is a human rights and social movement. It is an articulation of a reality that in our world black communities and black bodies are disposable, as evidenced by the fact that police officers face more prison time for killing ANIMALS than for killing black people. The movement counters these realities by declaring that *all* black lives matter and are as worthy of life and dignity just like every other human life; not a single iota more, and not a single iota less.

If you have a problem believing that all black lives matter, then please do movement organizers the favor of staying far, far away from their efforts. You are not needed. Their stories will endure regardless of whether you do anything. Although you nor your repository will rescue the memory of the Black Lives Matter movement, the choice is yours to decide on which side of history you want to stand and in which version of the future you wish to live. These choices require resolve. You can act or you can pass. You can do or you can die. You can subvert or you can submit. Are you ready?

