



Jarrett M. Drake

Follow

active archivist | emancipated educator & student of insiders | liberatory memory worker | Gary rai...

Apr 22 · 8 min read

#ArchivesForBlackLives: Building a Community Archives of Police Violence in Cleveland

This is the text of my talk at the Digital Blackness conference on the panel Uploading Black History: Archiving Blacks' Lived Experiences with Dr. Meredith Evans, Bergis Jules and Holly Smith.

. . .

The irony of our panel is that its title, Archives for Black Lives, originated on Twitter as a hashtag, but if you search for it with Twitter's basic or advanced search—go ahead, do it right now—you will find just a small fraction of the tweets posted with this hashtag. I don't know what explains this erasure, but the irony is that in my preparation to give a brief account of #ArchivesForBlackLives I was unable to discover and access the full volume and variety of content that's been shared with this hashtag, which, if it isn't obvious, has been shared overwhelmingly by black archivists. Most worrisome is that the only people who would be aware of this absence are the very people who 1) shared the content in the first place, 2) remembered that they shared the content, and 3) attempted to search for the content.

This hole in Twitter's historical record is the best and worst anecdote to describe, very briefly, the purpose and impetus behind *A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*, an independent community-based archive that was established in the summer of 2015. Rather than recount a broad history of this archive, I will explore the narrow question of why this archive is independent of a traditional archival repository, and I will preface my comments with the following thesis: we need #ArchivesForBlackLives because #ArchivesSoWhite.

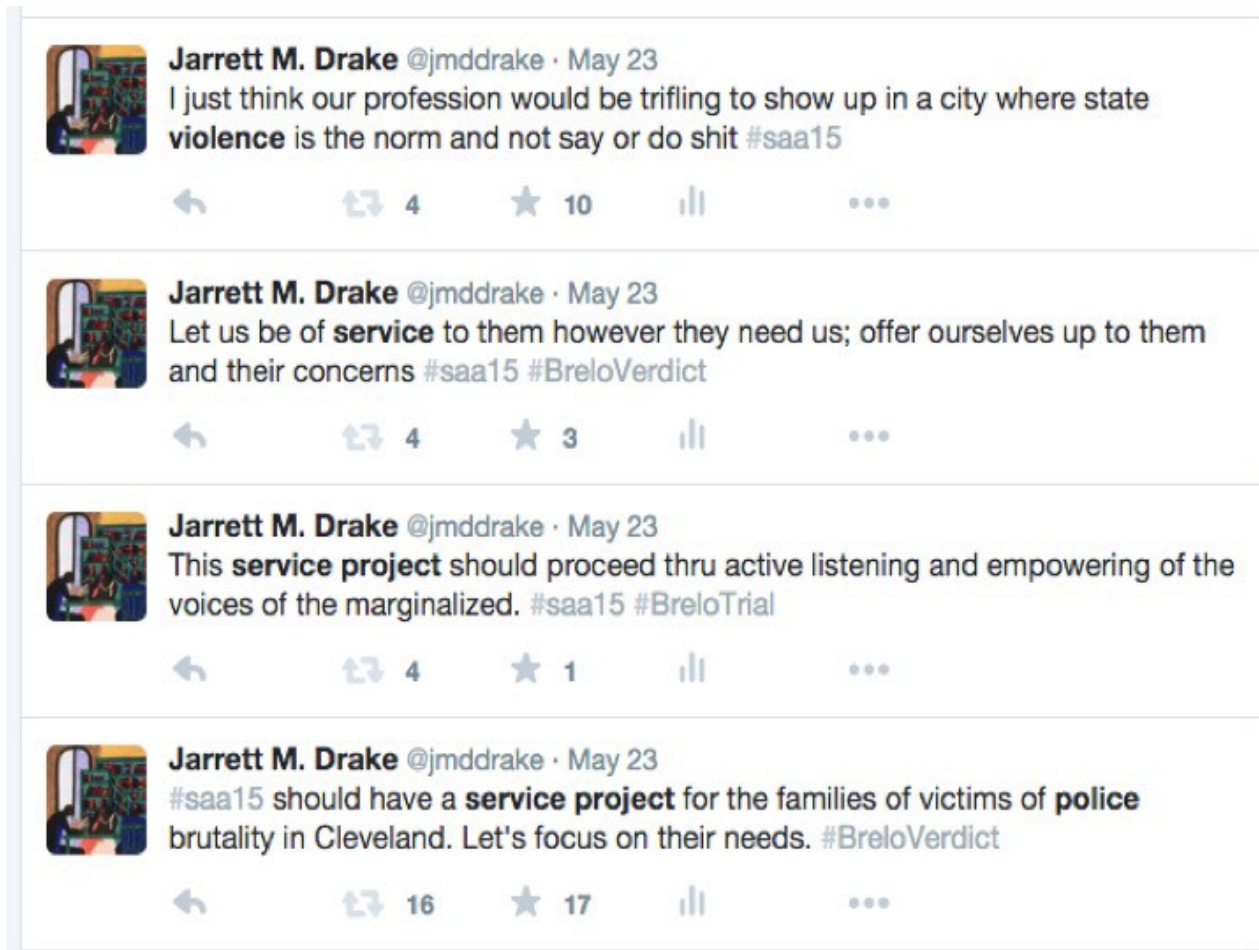


. . .

Before getting to that thesis, I must contextualize its genesis. I mentioned that our panel title originated on Twitter. So too did the immediate energy for *A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*. Last May, it was announced that Cleveland police officer Michael Brelo had been acquitted for his role in the 2012 killings of Malissa Williams and Timothy Russell. I learned of the news on Twitter, as many of us here likely did, and I began to grieve on Twitter, as many of us here likely did as well. My public grief—which stemmed not from my knowing Malissa or Timothy personally but from the stark reminder that in this society black lives *still* don't matter—turned into conflict because I suddenly remembered that the annual conference of the Society of American Archivists was scheduled to take place in Cleveland in August.

I wondered aloud on Twitter about what it meant for a *very* white profession to invade a city where anti-black state violence and racism are part of the DNA of the city. Some colleagues responded to me to suggest petitioning SAA to boycott and move its meeting elsewhere. I disagreed for a few reasons. One, my father grew up in Cleveland and I wanted to connect more with his family, so admittedly I had a self-interest to protect. Two, I thought rather than move the meeting to another American city that also likely perpetuates state violence against black bodies, archivists should *show up* and *turn up* in Cleveland. Let's put on for Malissa, for Timothy, for Tanisha, for Tamir, for Ralkina. Let's put on for their families. Let's confront the ways in which our field enables, embraces, and embodies white supremacy and anti-blackness,

and let's think about a way to do archives differently, daringly, and dauntlessly.



With this in my mind that Saturday morning last May, I also remembered that for past meetings, SAA organized service projects for which archivists could volunteer during their time in the conference's host city. So I proposed an idea—and that's really all it was then, an idea—that archivists planning to go to Cleveland in August apply our skills in the service of those families impacted by police violence. I was refreshed when over a dozen archivists—Bergis included—responded to my tweet and said let's do it.

The archivists took our conversations from Twitter to email, then from email to phone calls, from phone calls to Google Docs, from Google Docs back to email, from email back to Twitter; sort of like the communication circle of life. Within this round of communication over three months and across four time zones, we partnered with the Cleveland chapter of the Stop Mass Incarceration Network, Puncture the Silence, and we agreed to make their video recordings of a tribunal they had hosted in April available on a website for the public to view. We further agreed, at the initial suggestion of the inimitable Stacie Williams, to conduct oral histories on the streets of Cleveland with people who directly experienced, witnessed, or had been impacted by police violence.



When we arrived in Cleveland in mid-August, we managed to mobilize money and a small militia of 25 or 30 archivists to record the oral histories in five parts of the city over two days. We promoted the oral history project as “Righting the Record,” and flyer design credits go to my lady, Karina Beras. From these two days of recording, we gathered 45 first-hand accounts from citizens of Cleveland who had endured or observed police violence in the city. You can visit our website, which is still under development, at <http://archivingpoliceviolence.org> to listen to the stories or watch the tribunal videos. All of the items within the archive have been transcribed and so are keyword-searchable. You can also facet your searches by location, date of recording, and other metadata fields.

I excluded many relevant facts about the establishment of this archive, but I can’t and won’t exclude the names of the Cleveland community members who embarked on this endeavor: Trella Gardner, Bishop Chui, Marva Patterson, Genevieve Mitchell, Carol Steiner, Keith Wilson, and members of Puncture the Silence. This archive now belongs to them collectively as citizen archivists. Four of the archivists who partnered in the archive’s founding, the advisory archivists, we now function solely to support the technical needs of the repository and support the citizen archivists in a broad sense.

**RIGHTING THE RECORD:
Sharing your Narrative
about Police Violence**



Document your story. Activists and archivists are collaborating to gather the stories of Cleveland residents impacted by police violence. The stories will be recorded and deposited into *A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*, which is an archive that collects, preserves, and provides access to stories, memories, and accounts of police violence as experienced or observed by Cleveland citizens. **Right your record** at the locations listed below.

Contribute your story or documents directly to the Archive at <http://archivingpoliceviolence.omeka.net>.

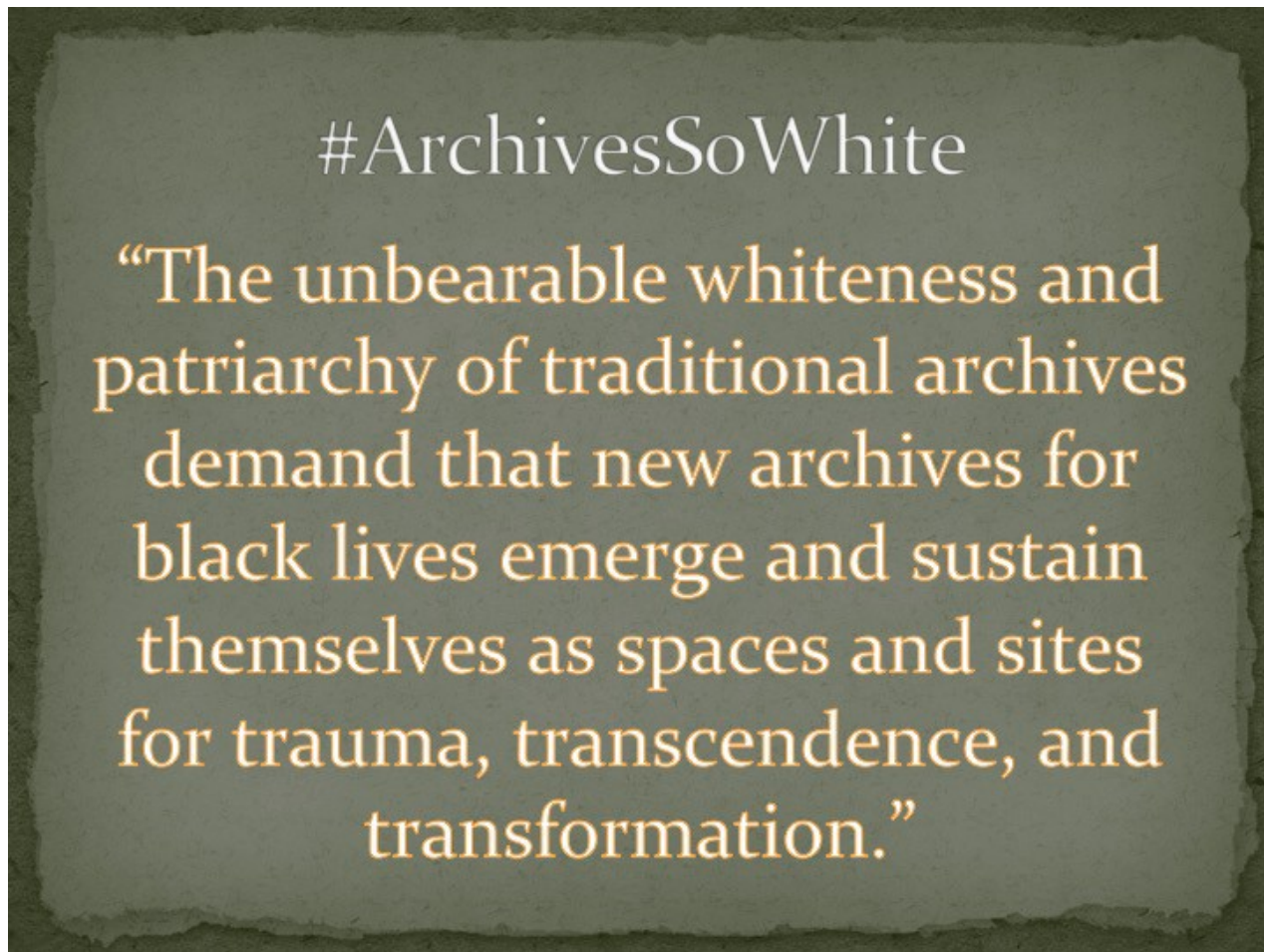
Contact Info: PunctureTheSilenceCLE@gmail.com | 216.932.3474 | 609.937.8714

| TUESDAY, 8.18 | WEDNESDAY, 8.19 |
|---|--|
| 11AM-1PM William Cosgrove Center, 1736 Superior Ave. | 11AM-1PM William Cosgrove Center, 1736 Superior Ave. |
| 1PM-3PM Virgil E. Brown Neighborhood Family Service Center, 1641 Payne Ave. | 1PM-3PM Virgil E. Brown Neighborhood Family Service Center, 1641 Payne Ave. |
| 4PM-7PM 4 LOCATIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • St. Clair & E 105th St. • Cudell Recreation Center, 1901 West Blvd. • Langston Hughes Library, 10200 Superior • Fairfax Recreation Center, 2335 E 82nd St. | 5PM-7PM 4 LOCATIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Euclid & Forest Hills Blvd. • Cudell Recreation Center, 1901 West Blvd. • Langston Hughes Library, 10200 Superior • Fairfax Recreation Center, 2335 E 82nd St. |

To return to #ArchivesForBlackLives, one question people often wonder about the Cleveland police violence archive is whether it is connected to or otherwise supported by an existing memory institution, and the answer is an emphatic *hell no*. Just earlier this week, the Issues and Advocacy Roundtable of SAA published a dialogue series on the hashtag #ArchivesSoWhite, a hashtag I patterned after April Reign's #OscarsSoWhite hashtag. **[Sidebar: see and acknowledge black women. I'm especially talking to black men, more specifically, I'm talking to cisgendered, heterosexual men who swim through privilege like fish swim through water. Brothers, when you do something that was inspired or influenced by a black woman, name her and thank her publicly. Alright, back on track; I had to say that though.]** The #OscarsSoWhite commentary resonated with me so powerfully because I felt as though I was reading commentary about my profession. That deep resonance explains why the archivists never once considered working through official SAA channels to organize this project, and that resonance further explains the courageous choice to remain free of an established archival repository.

It wouldn't be inaccurate to characterize the police violence archive as informal as opposed to formal, rogue as opposed to regulated, independent as opposed to institutional. These indeed are traits of this archive; it is informal, rogue, and independent. But on that axis of binary thought, we would do well to emphasize that this archive is also, most importantly, free. Free of what?

Well, let me first say what it is *not* free of. The web hosting and web development are not free. The time and energy that people contribute to this archive are not free. These are very real costs, and people have sacrificed greatly to bring this archive into existence. Finally, this archive is not free of reproach or critique. We have made mistakes, many we know and others we don't.



But in choosing not to associate with mainstream memory institutions, this archive is free to experiment and explore on its own terms. South African archivist Verne Harris has written emphatically about archives and their connection to power, and in our national context, that power resides, rests, and reifies around whiteness and patriarchy. 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. The state memorializes violence against black bodies through the making of archives, but communities, organizers, scholars, librarians, and archivists can partner as equals to resist this second layer of violence and provide spaces for people to be held to account and for communities to heal.

Let's we as archivists, librarians, and scholars offer our partnership, collaboration, and action to the creation of these sites in tandem with the most impacted communities. The terms on which we partner, collaborate, and act must be rooted in questioning, disruption and decolonization, lest we replicate the oppression currently reflected in traditional archival repositories,

which, through their design, have been complicit in the silence, absence, and erasure of black and brown lives, especially black and brown lives that choose not to conform to the rigid gender and sexuality binary, itself a product of the very naming processes that archivists tacitly uphold and endorse. To that end, it matters *how* we create more archives for black lives, and it's important that we don't re-traumatize communities or expose them for more white gaze, exploitation, and plunder.

We have an opportunity before us to transform archive-making, history-making, and memory-making into processes that are radically inclusive and accountable to the people most directly impacted by state violence.

#ArchivesForBlackLives is at once a call to 1) question traditional archival authority, 2) disrupt the status quo of memory, and 3) decolonize conventional and mainstream approaches to information, knowledge, records and archives.

#ArchivesForBlackLives recognizes that much in the same way that anti-blackness was and is central to Western capitalism and colonialism, anti-blackness is equally vital to archive-making and memory-making processes in the West. #ArchivesForBlackLives is firmly situated within the larger movement for black lives, itself created by three black women, and #ArchivesForBlackLives likewise should strive to document all black lives, especially the lives of black people living at the intersection of class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Much like my tweet last May, #ArchivesForBlackLives is also just an idea, but it's an idea capable of producing real, radical change in our society.

But it's going to require us to remain faithful, fearless, and free in the face of fire. In other words, be black, real black, and don't look back.

. . .

Below are three resources that I encourage readers to explore on their own.

W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Propaganda of History," in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, 711–729.

Kimberly Springer, "Radical Archives and the New Cycles of Contention," *Viewpoint Magazine*, October 31, 2015.

Shay Akil, "A Short List of Articles on the Impact of Intersectional Hegemony on the Lives of Black People in the US," *Decolonize All the Things*, February 1, 2016.

