“to betray the archive of violence:” Black feminist archival methods as insurgent pedagogies

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ABSTRACT

The archival imperative for recursive description of racialized violence precludes Black humanity and necessitates methodologies that attend to “black Atlantic livingness” (McKittrick, 2016, 2021, p. 104). Many Black feminist scholars have been in conversation on the question of how (and can we) curate these methodologies; yet, they are largely absent in archival scholarship, reflecting “intellectual, methodological, and racial homogeneity” that is an outcome of a sustained “privileging of whiteness” in LIS (Ramirez, 2015, p. 340).¹ As someone deeply implicated in these conditions, I ask: How can LIS/archives workers ethically engage radical, interdisciplinary, Black feminist archival methods in our pedagogies, practices, and day-to-day lives? How can we co-conspire with Black feminist scholars in and outside academia, moving towards the abolition of racial-capitalist and imperialist systems that encompass academia and our profession itself?

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

archives; pedagogy; sociology of information; political economy of information; research methods

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¹ This is a trend many Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) archivists within LIS/archives are and have been actively intervening in, and which I had also naively hoped to review in the scope of this project. Instead, this work will also be a part of the aforementioned bibliography.
SECTION 1: “WHAT ELSE HAPPENED.”

If the archive is a knowledge network that records and normalizes black subordination, how do we understand this network outside of itself? What happens to our understanding of black humanity when our analytical frames do not emerge from a broad swath of numbing racial violence but, instead, from multiple and untracked enunciations of black life? (McKittrick, 2021, p. 103)

While there is no methodological formula for developing [the] awareness and capacity to notice “Black livingness,”...[I]t is in moments of rupture that we can—and must dare to—betray the archive of violence to look, listen, and feel for “what else happened” (King, 2019, p. 103).

Across her work, Katherine McKittrick discusses the archival imperative for recursive enumeration, quantification, and description of anti-Black violence and abjection that precludes Black humanity and agency; in response, she urges the use of methodologies and practices that attend to “black Atlantic livingness” (McKittrick, 2016, 2021, p. 104). Tiffany Lethabo King and many other Black feminist scholars considered “outside” LIS discipline have been in sustained conversation on methods and analytical frameworks for engaging the question of how (and can we) “betray the archive of violence.” Yet, these scholars are largely absent in LIS scholarship, even as the field increasingly takes up questions of white supremacy and violence. This is particularly true for intellectual work generated in disciplines such as Indigenous studies, gender and feminist studies, performance, geography and Black diaspora studies. This absenting reflects a “larger trend in the archival field toward intellectual, methodological, and racial homogeneity” that is an outcome of a sustained “privileging of whiteness;” one that BIPOC scholars have long been naming and disrupting (Ramirez, 2015, p. 340). McKittrick also describes the devaluation of Black knowledge perpetuated by “disciplining, through the production of academic space and through the racial codification of scholarly rules, how race is theorized, lived, debated, departmentalized, inter-departmentalized, and mapped out in university settings” (2014, p. 4).

These gaps have provoked the following questions for me:

- How can LIS/archives workers ethically engage radical, interdisciplinary, Black feminist archival methods in our pedagogies, practices, and day-to-day lives?
- How can we do so without extracting, demanding, or placing undue labor on BIPOC scholars, and particularly Black women?
- How can we co-conspire with radical, Black feminist scholars in and outside academia, moving towards the abolition of racial-capitalism and imperialist power systems that encompass academia and our profession itself? In other words, how can we “betray the archive of violence” when the success of such a project seems to necessitate the dismantling of the spaces we are currently embedded in?

In my master’s thesis (2020, p. 2). I argued that an archival praxis informed by Black feminist anarchism could fashion methods “to restore and document the humanity [of] lives lived in spaces of impossibility” (Omowale, 2018). In my PhD work, I hope to push my thinking, and

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2 As the project Cite Black Women asserts, “acknowledging and centering [Black women] holds revolutionary possibilities as a radical praxis of Black feminist utopian imagining/marronage” (n.d.)
better engage Black feminist “radical (rogue) interdisciplinarity (method-making)” while remembering too, that this work:

is not just about reading outside our discipline, researching, and using slices and terms from people we do not normally read; it is about sharing ideas comprehensively and moving these ideas into new contexts and places… if we are to reorient our analytics and privilege black life as we practice radical interdisciplinarity, we must engage, deeply, in conversation and share ideas generously. This is to say that relationality, like a black sense of place, must be praxis—a praxis that does not assume or desire resolved outcomes. Paying close attention to, drawing out, and forging relational knowledges will provide us, as people who are invested in undoing the normalized workings of racial violence, with analytical mechanisms that allow us to do anticolonial work in a variety of university settings that, as we know, were not built to support or recognize black communities and black work (McKittrick, 2014, pp. 117–118).

Here, I describe Black feminist archival practices as insurgent pedagogies that refuse” nation-bound approaches” to these questions (King, 2019, p. 15), and draw on “Black feminism [as] a modality for understanding how the anti-black settler state is a fundamentally illegitimate construction” (Samudzi, 2017). So, with an acknowledgement that this project is inchoate, in process, and flawed, I explore a sliver of these ideas through my ongoing, ten-year experiment in prefigurative archival work with the “archive of violence” represented by the carceral state.  

SECTION 2: “(SPEAKING OF MYSELF)”

Inside Books Project (IBP) is a books-to-prisons collective founded in Austin, Texas, in 1998. In 2015 I established its archives to preserve incarcerated people’s creative works and censorship records the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) produce when they ban incoming books or mail from IBP to patrons. These records have long represented an “archive of violence” to me. Prison mail-room staff monitor all in and outgoing mail, particularly books sent from IBP. This carceral censorship works through vectors of race, gender, and sexuality, and include authors like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Malcolm X, and thousands of others who threaten the racial-capitalist, carceral technologies of the state. I have long considered this collection of prison records an “archive of violence” that, over and over, ascribes “deviant criminal sexual behavior” (see Figure 1) “criminal schemes,” “security threat” and other “objectionable” content onto books and the bodies represented therein. The records draw on histories of racial violence to produce knowledge about, constrain, and destroy Black life, “bodies that can only come into being vis-a-vis racial sexual violence…archival numerical evidence puts pressure on our present system of knowledge by affirming the knowable (black objecthood) and disguising the untold (black human being) (McKittrick, 2014, p. 17).

3 I am indebted to coursework with Christen Smith taken during my master’s program that introduced me to

3 See the categories listed in Figure 1 or “Uniform Inmate Correspondence Rules.” Each piece of banned mail is assigned one of these.
the authors I am still grappling with here, and Z Nicolazzo, who provided space for me to continue this grappling in the second year of my PhD program.

This was the focus of my undergraduate thesis in 2015, which I describe in more detail in the forthcoming volume *Transforming the Authority of the Archive: Undergraduate Pedagogy and Critical Digital Archives* published by the University of Michigan Library book-publishing imprint, Lever Press.

**Figure 1**

*Texas Department of Criminal Justice, “Publication Review / Denial Notification” for Meridian by Alice Walker, set during the civil rights movement. “Reason for denial of objectionable material: (d) a specific determination has been made that the publication is detrimental to offender's rehabilitation, because it would encourage deviant criminal sexual behavior.”*

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In enumerating instances of racial violence to ban and physically destroy Douglass’ narrative in the present, the archive of enslavement is used to replicate anti-Black, carceral confinement today (see “disposition”). Both instances are a disruption of the enslaved person’s capacity to read, learn and generate their own knowledge, which would make them “unmanageable.”

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6 In the text sent, the slurs were not “asterisked” out; these are the “remarks” referenced.

7 When the incarcerated person—none of whom are compensated for agricultural and manual labor they are
forced to perform in the Texas prison system—does not have funds to return mail, it is destroyed. I am not sure of the methods used, but I find it fascinating that instead of euphemism here, like “disposed” or “recycled,” they choose hyperbole—destroyed. The incarcerated patron themself must check the box to “destroy” the book, then sign and date with their name.

**Figure 2**  
*Texas Department of Criminal Justice, Publication Review / Denial Notification for Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave.*
What methodologies allow us to betray this archive? How could we apply these methods in archival engagement and pedagogy without reifying the violations coursing through these records? Building on McKittrick, Tiffany Lethabo King says:

While there is no methodological formula for developing [the] awareness and capacity to notice “Black livingness,”... part of the effort involves reading intertextually. [A]sembling, shoaling, and rubbing disparate texts against one another [reveals] that the archive is not a closed system that contains only one story... [I]t is in these moments of rupture that we can—and must dare to—betray the archive of violence to look, listen, and feel for “what else happened” (King, 2019, p. 103).

Through these tactics, juxtaposing sources and reading intertextually, we can first notice the “racial remark” is interrupted by Douglass, who, in each instance, arrests the enslaver’s dialogue, qualifying the supremacist appellation with “to use his own words,” “speaking of myself.” Douglass disrupts the knowledge production of white supremacy, challenging the readers’ willingness to accept this appellation as natural, accurate, or truthful. Furthermore, we can perceive echoes across sources, finding the documented instances of “racial remarks” in the primary source, we can trace attempts to curtail Black knowledge and narratives of resistance across time and space. Douglass continues:

These words...called into existence an entirely new train of thought....I now understood...the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly...I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom [and] was gladdened by the invaluable instruction [I had] gained from my master....(Douglass, 2005, p. 41)

Douglass describes an insurgent pedagogy informed by Black intellectual and creative work; an “incomplete project of freedom” that “opens up the work of imagination—iterations of black life that cannot be contained by official history” (McKittrick, 2021, pp. 141–142).

To conclude his narration, he says:

The very decided manner with which [the enslaver] spoke...served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering [and that] I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. (Douglass, 2005, p. 41)

The white supremacist settler-state seeks to curtail Black life and agency through violent apppellations, then construe these as normative truths— in TDCJ’s words, something “a reasonable person would construe” as disruptive (2012). When we draw on insurgent pedagogies to juxtapose Douglass’ narrative alongside the prison’s contemporary discourse, we begin to see

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4 This is drawing on Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in II Acts:” “For me, narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave...[A] history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a free state, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing” (2008, p. 4).
how “reason” is produced and sustained through archives of violence. Yet, as McKittrick tells us, Black feminist methods do not ascribe to this “reason;” they:

“offer methodological practices [that] pursue ways of living the world that are uncomfortably generous and provisional and practical and, as well, imprecise and unrealized [but] committed to the everlasting effort of figuring out how we might, together, fashion liberation” (McKittrick, 2021, p. 19-20).

SECTION 3: ZEPHYR

The other primary collection of the IBP Archive is incarcerated creators’ writing, ephemera, poetry, 3D cards, paintings, song lyrics, and other modalities that evidence these undisciplined practices of living. The carceral archive is disrupted through this art, poetry, song lyrics, research, testimonies, photographs, and other modalities, which I hope to animate through digital archives informed by Black feminist methodologies. Below are contributions by William Gossett, a photo with a note on the back and an essay, “I Am Me” (Figures 3-5).

Figure 3
William Gossett, “Me and Zephyr.”
Through writing and photography, William disrupts the carceral archive of the state produced through mug-shots, databases, and statistics (“mathematics of the unliving”) (McKitrick, 2014, p. 17). By drawing on Campt’s methods of “listening to images,” we can
attend to the quotidian refusals and disruptions that are not readily apparent (Campt, 2017). My listening was enhanced after looking up the definition of “Zephyr,” which includes:

a. The west wind, frequently personified; *(Greek Mythology)* the god of the west wind.

b. A gentle, mild wind or breeze.

c. A very fine, light, cotton gingham cloth. *(OED Online, n.d.)*

This image suddenly takes on a new valence; tactile, auditory, mythical. I wonder which William was referring to when naming his puppy. Then again, the ambiguity and multiplicity is more powerful than my narrow description.

I wanted to write William, to send him his copy of the photo for his scrapbook, to discuss this paper and see if he was re-united with Zephyr, but he is no longer in the TDCJ database. While I am disappointed I can not write him, I am immensely glad that his archival presence is no longer conjurable by the prison, but instead lingers through his photograph and words, “I Am Me.”

CONCLUSION

This paper has only briefly, inadequately gestured towards the scope of Black feminist, archival scholarship across disciplines that necessitates further engagement in LIS and archival studies. To be clear, I do not want to *assimilate*— in the sense of taming, de-radicalizing, or subsuming Black feminist methods into the archives profession or academia. I aspire to the abolition of all racial-capitalist systems, of which these both belong to, in exchange for more liberatory, decentralized, and reciprocal and relational pedagogical and archival landscapes. Furthermore, while I aim to forefront these scholar’s political and theoretical aims rather than extracting, using, or profiting from it, within the current systems of power, I am implicated in all of these. So I write from this place, wondering what it means to do so while aspiring to something otherwise. I do not believe that *something otherwise* is conceivable without radical Black feminist methodologies; insurgent pedagogies that show us “betraying the archive of violence” means betraying our institutions, betraying whiteness, betraying professions, disciplines, and nation-bound knowledge systems. Black feminist methods should be engaged rigorously, intentionally, and reflexively; these methods are not supplemental but *necessary* in the core of our work if we hope to build any sort of survivable futures.

References


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5 Campt focuses on photography; I am also thinking of digital surrogates of primary sources and how this could enable different types of listening practices.

6 While William gave explicit consent to publish these in a separate letter with his book request (which were for college textbooks and “US History prior to 1865”) I would have still wanted to share this for his feedback and review. This is another archival question that I have to wrestle with further (how to collaborate with incarcerated creators) and has informed the design of my consent and information forms.

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**Further reading:**


