Archival Science (2023) 23:381–410
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-023-09413-x

ORIGINAL PAPER

# Origin stories and the shaping of the community-based archives

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Accepted: 15 February 2023 / Published online: 2 March 2023


## Abstract

This paper centers a three-year research project into community-based archives and the power of their naming practices. Expanding the idea of naming practices to further consider how the archives itself is defined and understood by the creators, donors, and communities that are represented therein, the co-authors consider the emergent focus on origin stories told about the founding of community-based archives. The lead author attends to the community/institution dichotomy to consider how such relationality insists on a both/and understanding wherein the language of the origin story is centered in relations and informs how archives continue to become. Through auto-ethnographic and intimate theorizing and analysis, the lead author offers a self-critique on naming practices and self-identification to account for the shape of the archives over time.

**Keywords** Community-Based Archives · Founders; Initiators · Creators · Origin Stories · Storytelling · Radical Openness

## A note on writing

*In this article, I write from the first-person perspective to elucidate my experiences as both a critical archival studies scholar and as the creator and co-creator of a community archives to share what I consider its origin stories. As principal investigator and especially in my role as co-author with graduate student researchers, I am modeling a way of writing that is at once personal and that still offers a clear tracing of our scholarly inquiry. I have, therefore, respectfully*

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*asked my co-writers for their permission to express myself in these reflective ways while also honoring our collaborative thinking, critical analyses, and scholarly endeavors. Our approach reveals the sometimes poignant and consistently powerful practices and productions of individual and collective memory that give form and function—life—to the archives.*

## Introduction

When I sat down to begin writing this article, I asked myself how it was that I started a community archives, what Michelle Caswell has clearly defined ("emphasis on the 's'" as "collections of records, material and immaterial, analog, and digital…the institutions that steward them, the places where they are physically located, and the processes that designated them 'archival.'" (Caswell 2016a, b, p 3). I was not then an archivist and, in retrospect, I realize I had little idea what an archives was. I wrote five paragraphs, each starting with the phrase "I founded the Arizona Queer Archives…." Upon reflection, I realize how important, even urgent, it felt to me that a queer archives in the State of Arizona exists. In the face of anti-LGBTQI sentiments and legislation, it was improbable then and feels improbable anew.

I established the Arizona Queer Archives, AQA. In reflecting on the two decades I have spent building the archives, I can better see how the early and ongoing processes of creating and, importantly, co-creating a community-based archives continues to shape it. How members of a community participate, access, and understand their own community histories as worthy of being archived reflects the early moments of an archives' creation in sometimes messy and non-archival ways. I went from not being an archivist to becoming one through this undertaking that taught me about the urgencies people can feel to name, identify, and document themselves, and to recognize themselves and one another as relevant, real, and consequential. I am an archival scholar and archivist who is both credentialed and who continues to question credentialing so as to hold space for the different ways archives get created, done, and undone and, in the process, how memories are honored and chronicled. These interests have moved me to center the ways memories and archival matter are talked about and named and by whom.

This article reflects a three-year research project into community-based archives and the power of their naming practices. This project centers its data collection around focus groups and interviews with archives creators, donors, and users. This inquiry has further led me to an emergent focus that I have shared with graduate students on the form and function of origin stories especially as these are implicated in community-based archival practices. I dove into this research looking at community-based archives and at their naming practices. In my inquiry, I asked:

> How are naming practices—those related to archival appraisal and description—understood, deployed, and, importantly, differently consequential for

distinct communities? How can archival description practices be re-imagined to account for the incommensurable ontologies and epistemologies within and among communities? And how might re-imagined practices be applicable across the spectrum of community-based archives to be relevant, to empower, and to respectfully establish new historical narratives from and about under-represented communities?[1]

During the data collection and interview process, I greatly expanded my idea of naming practices to further consider how the archives itself is defined and understood by the creators, donors, and communities that are represented therein. In my early research, I understood and deployed naming practices as flexible, as practices of (un)becoming, and, therefore, as always changing. Naming is a powerful practice that constrains and enables particular ways of describing and understanding an archives (Duff & Harris 2002, p 269). Naming practices can embody past, present, and/or future understandings of a community's many and sometimes contradictory or competing histories and also the context through which the archives is developed. Terms used to name and describe the archives influence mission and vision statements, collection and preservation policies, promotion, outreach, and how individual records and collections are understood and through which (standardized and/or not standardized) thesauri and lexicons. Naming practices, here, encompass much more than archival practices of description; these deliberately selected terms are chosen for (a) reason/s.

In this research, because of the precarity that is so often a part of the production, establishment, and sustainability of community archives (including the one I established), I became especially interested in the relationships that participating partner archives have with and in institutional archival contexts to emphasize the distinct ways that records and collections are named, described, and dealt with across and between such contexts (Jules 2018). As I will describe in the next section, the very naming of a community and institutional archives has reinforced a dichotomous and distinct separation between the two. For example, institutional archives—considered larger mainstream archives connected to organizations and institutions that are not community archives, community-based archives, and do not focus on communities—are historically understood as strident adherents to traditional archival theory and practices that have often done incredible harm to non-dominant and marginalized communities through colonization and extractive measures. In effect, institutional archival contexts have held the records and identities of marginalized and non-dominant communities captive (O'Neal 2015; Duarte & Belarde-Lewis 2015; Littletree & Metoyer 2015). Such captures often render a people as passive and their histories static. I have, however, come to understand that change in archival theory and practice is happening—even at the institutional level—so that communities are insisting on autonomy in their archival and historical representation within certain institutional archival contexts and, importantly, in community archives that

[1] Research questions that have guided this research project: IMLS Early Career Grant, LB21, RE-18-19-0049-19.

directly attend to community's strengths, needs, and desires. New relational models are being built and nurtured in these spaces. Such relationality moves beyond the delimiting dichotomy to insist on a *both/and* understanding of community and institutional archival contexts.

I turn my attention to the language of the origin story of community archives in relation to institutional archives to better understand how archives continue to become. To help frame my reflections and analyses, I engage with Jennifer Douglas' 2016 article "Toward More Honest Description" in which she takes a closer look at the rooting, the radical foundations, and relationships that archival founders have with community-based archives, archival practices and collections, and to communities of storytellers. Through my inquiry into how community-based archives are created and, importantly, sustained, I hold these concepts close. In this article, I will discuss this research project, our processes, and offer initial analyses from three of our four partner archives to, then, lead into a more in-depth and self-reflexive case study into the fourth partner archives—the community-based archives that I founded. The first-hand experiences that I reflect upon demonstrate the urgent need for relational contexts to be central in archiving work in and with communities. I argue that it is through a kind of relational and radical openness (Hooks 2000) that we can better understand and account for the shape and perhaps even the sustainability of archives over time. This radical openness allows for, even invites, engagement with archival origin stories and the words that constitute them. This argument recognizes the power of language especially in practices and assertions of self-identification and definition.

## Grounding this research

### Archiving in/with/for communities

The Community-Based Archives: Considering the Power of Naming Practices research project centers the term *community-based archives*, (CBA), which encompasses the spectrum of community-centered archival projects ranging from autonomous and independent community archives to those that have emerged from within institutional contexts. At its core, this research project is grounded in the communities along with their stories to highlight how and why CBAs are created. Though often situated as oppositional, my approach to this research recognizes a continuum on which community archives and institutional archives exist, even if tenuously, and across which they understand themselves. Working from this continuum of community-based archival contexts allows for an understanding that, in these contexts, knowledge and expertise can flow multi-directionally to name, describe, inform, enable, and constrain both contexts. This approach accounts for the ways knowledges, histories, and also resources comingle to create a much more generative framework through which to consider the ways CBAs are established, named, and sustained. It is in this context that a relational possibility can take root.

Archival studies scholars and community members alike are recognizing the roles that community-centered and community-produced archives play in and for

marginalized and non-dominant communities (Caswell 2014a, b; Lee 2016a, b; Sheffield 2015; Daniel 2010). CBAs are composed of some of the most valuable records documenting the living histories and contributions of non-dominant peoples and their home communities. Reading extensively about community archives starting from research done at University College London—the Community Archives and Identities Project—one is reminded that the community/institution dichotomy is not new and has been established around notions of control over records, collections, and collective memory (Stevens et al 2010). This control is exercised through uni-directional naming and description that has traditionally eschewed self-definition. Acknowledging the distinctions between public and institutional archival contexts, Mary Stevens, Andrew Flinn, and Elizabeth Shepherd use the term "community archive" to refer to "collections of materials gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control" (Stevens et al. 2010, p 59). The tension around control centers the origin story of the "archive" itself and the theory and practices that have been standardized through centuries of bureaucratic recordkeeping and taught through archives and recordkeeping graduate programs (Cook 2000). As Stevens, Flinn, and Shepherd note, "organisations committed to documenting, preserving, and promoting public understanding of their history exist wherever struggles over identity and the right to self-definition are a feature of public life…" (2009, p 60). They emphasize that once communities hand over their collections to a public repository (read: institution), communities surrender not only control over their collections but also over their "ownership and exploitation" (2010, p 61). Building on this research, Rebecka Sheffield expands the focus into North American contexts noting that the.

> "upsurge in independent community archives has produced tensions concerned with the intellectual, legal, and physical control of records in formal archival networks. Whether community archives identify themselves as cultural or political endeavors, the very act of taking control over the documentation and storytelling about one's own community calls attention to issues of power and politics manifest in our traditional approaches to creating and maintaining archives" (Sheffield 2017, 352).

Sheffield studies community archives as related to social movement trajectories, so her research is especially important to my efforts to center origin stories. This centering is a rooting and relational practice that challenges institutions to care about and to learn about early and/or emergent naming practices so that those lessons remain relevant to what and how archives become. When working with CBAs that are developed in/with/and for non-dominant and marginalized communities, the why and how the CBA is built often animates connections to social movements. Key elements to understanding the significance of community archives point to the work of community archiving being "not just about collecting the records of a community but also a political project to both legitimize the experiences of this group and as a creative endeavor that reflects the values of this group" (Sheffield 2017, p 358). Emotionally and affectively, community archives can be "reparative spaces, where marginalized people can create shared heritage to resist everyday traumas of sexism and homophobia and to strengthen community and individual identities" (Sheffield,

p 358). Considering origin stories, then, I am interested in the affective, self-defined needs, and also strengths being expressed early on by archival creators that, I argue, can and should shape/re-shape the archives over time and across contexts.

## From inquiry to analyses

In this research project, I identified participating CBA as "partner archives" because of the relationships that I had built with them during the preparation of the grant materials. One key contact at each partner archives agreed to work closely with me and my research team that included graduate research assistants, Samantha Montes, Kristen Suagee-Beauduy, aems emswiler, and Bianca Finley Alper, throughout the research process. Grant funding was used to establish a more flattened hierarchy about the research process and its intended outcomes by providing archival stipends of $5000 paid to each partner archives to support this ongoing collaboration and for the production of community-centered research briefs aimed at each archives' communities. This research project shifts scholarly productions and resources back to the community for their input to make this inquiry most relevant and to share findings across community and institutional archival contexts. The four partner archives that I convened for this project represent a broad range of CBAs including: 1) the Arizona Queer Archives, Tucson, AZ, a community-based LGBTQI archives; 2) South Asian American Digital Archive, SAADA, Philadelphia, PA, an autonomous, post-custodial, digital archives; 3) Chicano[2] Research Collection's Community-Driven Archives Initiative, CDA, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, a Mellon Foundation-funded project aimed at building relationships with historically marginalized communities (Latinx, Black, Asian and Pacific Islander, Indigenous, and LGBTQ) to work with community archivists and advocate for equal ownership and shared stewardship of community archival collections; and 4) Houston Area Rainbow Collective History, Houston ARCH, Houston, TX, a coalition of Houston archivists dedicated to preserving and documenting Houston's LGBTQ history. I selected these partner archives because of their commitments to documenting and making accessible the histories of underrepresented communities. Each is differently situated with regards to institutional archival contexts and each has distinct origin stories.

In centering origin stories, our inquiry attends to the productive force and function of both early and established vocabularies that are produced and called upon to describe processes, records, and collections. In this research, the research team looks at the ways naming practices have historically reflected universalized standards developed and often used without full regard for diverse community perspectives, histories, and contributions. Through iterative rounds of coding, my own

[2] Chicano is a name for people of Mexican descent born in the United States. Chicano is also a political self-identification that goes beyond the scope of this paper but is described and demonstrated in this Los Angeles Times (1993) article: Gripe: 'We're Chicanos–Not Latinos or Hispanics.' See also Blackwell (2016) and the History & background of the UCLA César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies [n.d.] for a clearer picture of the term, its histories, and its ongoing understandings.

inquiry led me to an analysis of how naming practices in the founding of an archives continue to shape its policies and practices over time. While naming practices from all four of the partner archives are central to our larger research project and reflected in key excerpts in this article, I focus here on the origin stories and (the lessons of) the naming practices of the AQA as a distinct case study. With my co-researchers, I have undertaken a critical, collaborative scholarly analysis and paired it with an intimate and personal analysis as a deliberate method of attending to the embodied and emotional expressions within the individual and the collective body of interviews. With relationships at its core, this research project enables and, therefore, can demonstrate the nuanced understandings that archival founders have of the communities they are coming from and/or working closely with in the creation of their CBAs. Many founders self-identify as a part of these communities while others may have developed meaningful relationships in these communities, playing strong supporting roles therein. Overall, the many voices that come together in this research tell important stories about the relational aspects that are always integral in building CBAs especially as these can attend to non-dominant communities that have often been left out of their constructions. These origin stories tell of the thought and practice that serve to create a CBA. Each storyteller offers glimpses into steps and processes. The selected excerpts of research interviews demonstrate the myriad ways discourse shapes the structures, practices, and policies of CBAs.

## Whose voices, whose stories?

### Origin stories as research data

As part of the research design, I worked closely with key contacts at each partner archives and I stressed that we should actively develop a relational connection with those considered responsible for initially developing their archives and also, when possible, with those people who have been identified as part of the archives' history. In regular meetings with key contacts, we discussed who they've identified and why. Each participant had their own perspective and own stories to tell. This sort of inquiry brought the relational nodal points that connected storytellers to each other allowing us to further connect storytellers to points in history and to locations. The people our initial contacts identified for individual one-on-one interviews and for focus group participation offered fuller stories of the foundings of the partner archives to include the fleshy parts of the stories that address the community strengths, needs, struggles, and desires as well as the affective and emotional consequences of developing these CBAs. The research team—emswiler, Alper, and I—recorded focus groups and individual interviews virtually through Zoom and then transcribed the recordings. The research team carefully reviewed transcripts and uploaded them into Dedoose, a mixed-methods research analysis application that is relatively easy to use in a virtual research team capacity and allows for extensive coding and visualizations. As creator of one of the partner archives myself, I decided to code the research through an emergent experiential, embodied, even emotional framework that I discussed with the graduate student researchers also involved in

this project. The personal and subjective in this case, then, helped to shape the ways I came to look at and listen to the language spoken and the relationships that are emphasized in the storytelling processes. I then turned to the transcripts of the individual and focus group interviews with renewed care and attention to the language used in describing CBAs as founders first imagined and developed them. I wanted to analyze the language used when talking about the beginnings of the archives. It took time to think about what this sort of origin story analysis might say about CBAs more broadly as well as their relationships with institutional archival contexts. While reviewing and coding the research data, I asked:

> *How do people describe the founding of the archives? What do the founders tell? How do the founders describe their new roles as archivists? How do the founders describe how they understand the power of the archives they've created? If and how do first stories continue to structure and shape the archives? Upon reflection, what do the origin stories tell of the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts of the time of the founding?*

In the sections that follow, the origin stories of the partner archives included in our research are traced through the words of the creators themselves to identify early imaginings together with key relationships across community and institutional archival contexts. Conversations included initial understandings of the role of archivists along with expressions of early work to define and understand what an archives is and what it does or might do especially for non-dominant communities. The nuances in the storytelling about the initial developments of the partner archives offer glimpses into the distinct ways archives take shape, the ways that relationships are formed, and how the archives are poised to respond to community needs and desires thoughtfully. After introducing our partner archives, I then turn to the archives I founded to offer as an explicated case study that further demonstrates the power that the origin stories have on the overall ethos and long-term functioning of the archives.

## Partner archives and their beginnings

### South Asian American Digital Archive, SAADA

SAADA was founded in 2008 and is today a "community-based culture change organization ensuring that South Asian Americans are included in the American story: past, present, and future" (SAADA n.d.). The co-founders of SAADA participated in their focus group with eight other stakeholders including early and current board members, Archival Creators Fellows (grant-funded community archivists to help highlight the diversity of South Asian American experiences), users of the archives, and volunteers. When I asked how SAADA was started, Michelle Caswell, one of SAADA's co-founders and critical archival studies scholar, responded.

> …the story I tell is that Samip and I were both working at the University of Chicago. And we were going through a collection of materials from a South

> Asian American faculty member who had passed away decades before. The collection hadn't been processed, but they gave Samip and me access to the collection...and we found a lot of, like, really juicy gossip in that collection. A lot of salacious details that probably shouldn't have been in there. I was an MLIS student at that point in time, so, Samip and I had these conversations about archives. Samip had asked me, 'who's collecting materials related to South Asian Americans?' I had done an independent study focusing on that question and the answer was 'no one.' Samip is such a force of nature and go-getter and he was, like, 'let's do it.'[3]

In response to Michelle's story, Samip Mallick, SAADA's co-founder, said that that was how he remembered it too. He went on to say,

> I think it just seemed natural once Michelle and I started having those conversations that we would do this. It's something in some way I think I'd wanted to do for much longer than even that, but didn't have an avenue for me to pursue it because I didn't know what archives were at that point. And then eventually, obviously, it's now determined the course of my career.[4]

The stories that Michelle and Samip shared in the focus group acknowledged a distinct and yet common question of what an archives was. One co-founder was working on their Master of Library Science, what is commonly known as the MLS or MLIS degree and is considered a terminal professional degree, and the other co-founder returned to earn his Master of Library Science as well. Together they questioned their own experiences with archives and personal and community histories. Importantly, their questioning of what an archives was made urgent the need for a deeper understanding of how to do the work of archiving and of earning South Asian American communities' trust. To build on their burgeoning understandings of what an archives was, Michelle's telling of the materials they identified within the institutional archives as "juicy gossip" and "salacious" demonstrated an appreciation for the story and the word. It also pointed to the need for an archives that would be most attentive to the communities' interest in not only collecting and preserving records that they identified as relevant but also attending to the communities' needs and requests for some records to remain private. After having worked together in a large university archives, Michelle and Samip came to understand the ethics around limited openness and community autonomy in their archival strategies. These early efforts continue to shape SAADA's programming and collecting strategies so that records creators have a greater say about their own collections being accessible and to whom. I recognize this careful and critical work as integral to SAADA's growth with new and relevant programming that supports distinct South Asian American communities and their histories.

[3] Michelle Caswell, South Asian American Digital Archive, SAADA, focus group recorded 16 August 2020.

[4] Samip Mallick, SAADA, focus group recorded 16 August 2020.

One of SAADA's board members who wishes to remain anonymous described how they introduce SAADA and especially its post-custodial practices through everyday explanation:

> I say something like 'it's the digital collection of South Asian American materials that are typically like the physical materials are housed in a library or an archive, or in someone's basement even. But it's digitized and it's categorized and it's online, free for access for anyone' Then I kind of paraphrase Michelle when I say, 'a community needs to have its archives to be the owner of its own history, right? If you don't have access to your own archives, then how well can you create your own narrative of your own background?' It's not just the archives, it's increasingly about programming to bring the archive, make the archive, come to life through, you know, artwork, through music through other forms of engagement, programs, lectures, and the like.[5]

Shebani Roa, policy researcher and illustrator, worked closely with Samip, Maryam, and other SAADA volunteers to create the Revolution Remix Walking Tour in Philadelphia, PA. She described how she talks to people about SAADA:

> I tend to explain SAADA in terms of the impact it's had on me and just in terms of making me aware of all of these stories and histories that I've always yearned for growing up. You know, having a history to cling to that was my own and that felt like I could see myself in. So, when I'm explaining SAADA, I explain that that's what it's done for me and really given me that sense of history and the opportunity to learn. It's also given me that sense of having a home as a South Asian artist.[6]

Words and phrases that stand out from the segments of interviews shared here speak to the origins of SAADA and point out that community archives often begin rather spontaneously, enthusiastically, and in a must-do kind of sentiment, "let's do it." They often include a non-professional archivist in the mix and they are informed both by a desire to see members of their community, and their contributions, as visible and relevant historically. There is a clear understanding that an archives can shape a "sense of oneself." There is an expressed desire revealed in origin stories to be "the owner[s]" and the tellers of collective stories, and to "make the archives come to life" for visitors through educational and entertaining programs. They are often intended to make up for or otherwise contribute to what was missing in dominant historic records that are used in schools and other public contexts that too often erase the presence and contributions of those who populate and animate a given CBA. CBAs are archives that are not only meant to be visited; they are meant to teach, to show, to tell, and to generate relational bonds.

Importantly, the educational value of the Master of Library Science professional degree coupled with the in-depth commitment to and relationship with the South Asian American communities meant that Michelle and Samip understood the

[5] Anonymous Board Member, SAADA, focus group recorded 16 August 2020.

[6] Shebani Roa, SAADA, focus group recorded 16 August 2020.

foundations required to build an archives, but also the ways that they might re-imagine practices alongside their communities to be most relevant to the communities that they would archive and also invite to use the archives. SAADA became one of the first post-custodial digital community archives, which means that their holdings are not the original and they work with communities to digitize records—documents, photos, multimedia—make them broadly accessible with owners' permission and then return originals back to the owners (Pearce-Moses 2005). SAADA's post-custodial practices disrupt the traditional (read: colonial and capitalist) archival requirements of possessing and owning the records and collections. SAADA, as a digital archives, then, exists in a meaningful way with virtual archival access made possible for their myriad communities not just in the US but also globally. In her 2014 article "Seeing yourself in history: community archives and the fight against symbolic annihilation," Caswell describes SAADA's post-custodial model that "reflects the diversity and dispersal of South Asian American communities" and goes on to argue that "a diasporic community demands dispersed archives. Making digital copies of records and returning the originals prevents us from cutting off these records from their provenances, allowing source communities to continue to make use of them locally even as we provide broad access to digital surrogates" (Caswell 2014a, b, p 33). The post-custodial framework allows for SAADA to operate in a de-centralized mode with the active, relational work being done in and across academic and community contexts and then uploaded into their digital repository.

Importantly for this research project, SAADA demonstrates exponential growth through their centering of relationships across and among South Asian American communities to better understand the ways communities are distinct and the ways they come together in one archival context. The founders' stories tell of their experiences in institutional archives and their commitments to working closely with communities for adequate and relevant representation. SAADA focus group participants, too, share these commitments and their creative programming strategies and outreach practices embody such a focus on representation in ways that is always open to change, expansion, and re-imagining.

*Houston Area Rainbow Collective History, Houston ARCH*

Another partner archives was founded through a process of identifying who in the Houston area was collecting materials related to LGBTQ lives. The Houston ARCH was founded in 2008 and is a coalition that brings together the different collecting and archival projects that are working with LGBTQ histories. They started with an idea to write grants and raise funds to support relevant archives with digitization and ways to make smaller collections as accessible as larger collections. Houston ARCH connects archival collections across community archives, personal archives, and institutional archives. In his individual interview, Brian Riedel, former director of Houston ARCH and university professor, said,

> The person to blame/give credit to is Jo Collier, who at the time, and still is working for the Houston Public Library. And she had been in touch with this wide array of people who collect stuff.[7]

Jo Collier, Houston ARCH founder and local librarian, explained

> A call went out to write the history of the parade [local Houston Pride Parade] and I started working on that and became more aware of the different collections that were in town. And the different projects that were going on. So, with Brian Riedel, I helped put together a big meeting for everybody to meet and talk in 2008 and this conversation eventually led to the creation of ARCH.[8]

And Brian noted

> We realized, in conversation…that none of these people had ever been in a room together before, all together... And that was how Houston ARCH started from that… There were a lot of different kinds of archives present in the room. So, everything from, you know, I've got my shoebox full of videotapes that I've made at events to the Botts Collection, which was in the old locker room of a gym at a church at the time that this thing came together. To GCAM [Gulf Coast Archive and Museum of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender history, Inc.], which was in warehouses, and you had to make an appointment to go and get it. So, who knows what that was organized as? And then something like, you know, University of Houston. All of them were visible in the room. So, to say, "here's what an archive is," we made visible to each other that there were lots of different kinds of archives. So, that was really valuable.[9]

These interview segments reveal the importance of the originators as key connectors of community contributors. They offer insights into how to build and collect in an inclusive way. The originators, in this case, include those who were connected to "a wide array of people who collected stuff" and those capable of cultivating a "big meeting for everybody." These insights reveal the importance of community members responding to one another through established and/or known relations.

Vince Lee, University of Houston archivist who is now in charge of the Houston ARCH collections in Special Collections, explained his position from the institutional archival context and as an active member of Houston ARCH,

> I think that's what Houston ARCH was initially founded upon is the sharing of knowledges between academic archivists or professional archivists and also community archivists. ARCH was always set up as more of a flat structure; there is no hierarchical structure; everyone had a voice and could contribute to the discussion. We (University of Houston) don't want to be colonizers or appropriators; we want to give opportunities to explore this post-custodial

[7] Brian Riedel, Houston Area Rainbow Collective History, Houston ARCH, individual interview recorded 24 August 2020.

[8] Jo Collier, Houston ARCH, focus group recorded 5 August 2020.

[9] Brian Riedel, Houston ARCH, individual interview recorded 24 August 2020.

> model for those that don't want to necessarily give up original material. So, if that means we set up a digital website to host the materials after we digitize it, we can return those materials back to folks within the community.[10]

In a way, Houston ARCH set out to democratize archival practices so that digitization can be accessible to all kinds of archival contexts in the community and so that, together, they might expand the collecting and preserving of LGBTQ histories in the Houston area. Houston ARCH's members—while diversely situated within the community/institutional spectrum and with different access to archival resources—are committed to being in relation with one another, connecting across LGBTQ historical contexts, and creating new possibilities to expand these local archival histories. Houston ARCH and their members, like SAADA, are poised to build new relationships across their local LGBTQ communities and constituencies to ensure that local histories are collected and preserved. Although there are tensions and fractures across the community archives that are members of the Houston ARCH coalition, their goals remain centered in the community. More on these sorts of complicated relationships across archival contexts are not fully documented and are outside of the scope of this research project.

Overall, the stories told as part of the Houston ARCH focus group and individual interviews demonstrated a heightened level of attention and acknowledgment of the distinct community archives and collections that had been undertaken over the past four decades in the Houston area. From personal collections in shoe boxes to warehouses that were difficult to access to creative arts and activism projects to ways that communities came together to be visible, to be heard, and to come together to share these experiences and memories, Houston ARCH highlighted the many different "archives" and records LGBTQ communities create and collect as meaningful to living their lives as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. Houston ARCH actively puts these communities in conversations, in relationships, and in historical contexts to practice archiving in a bigger and bolder way.

*Community-Driven Archives Initiative, CDA, of the Chicano Research Collection, CRC*

The Community-Driven Archives Initiative, CDA, of the Chicano Research Collection, CRC, was established in 2017 through funding from the Mellon Foundation through Arizona State University's Hayden Library. CDA traces its history to the founding of the CRC in 1970 by Bill Axford, Hayden Library Director, and Manuel Servin, Professor of History, who were concerned with building a Chicano Collection that would serve their Chicano faculty, students, and communities. Christine Marín, first archivist and director of the CRC explained how and why this came about on the ASU campus:

[10] Vince Lee, Houston ARCH, focus group recorded 5 August 2020.

> Dr. Servin had collected bibliographies…they were calling these "Chicano Studies bibliographies" that showed and bragged to others what UC Berkeley had, what UCLA had, what UC Santa Cruz had, what Cal State Long Beach had in Chicano Studies. So, why can't we do this at ASU? I heard that 'Dr. Axford has an idea. We can pull all these books and periodicals and newspapers that we own already because they're listed in this bibliography. We can pull them out of their Library of Congress classifications where they're shelved and put them all together in one section and we can call it Chicano Studies Collection. You see what I'm saying?' The historian and the library director figured it out while all of this activism was exploding everywhere. If one studies the history of the Chicano student movement, or Chicano student activism, or the Chicano students who were so important in calling to the attention of what was wrong in terms of racism and discrimination against Mexicanos or Mexican Americans or Chicanos or Latinos, today, or Dreamers today. That movement is still occurring.[11]

Today Hayden Library is home to the CDA that emerged from the CRC after the library acquired the BJ Bud Collection, a local LGBT collection. Nancy Godoy, archivist and founder of the CDA, described how her work at the Hayden Library and as archivist of the CRC supported the expansion more fully into the local Latino and LGBT communities that she initiated:

> When I started nine years ago, I was the first trained archivist to basically serve and take care of the Chicano Research Collection. Even though Dr. Marín collected for over 40 years, we were still seeing huge gaps in the archival record. So, I really focused on building relationships with local communities, community relationships that were mutually beneficial, and grassroots programming. In 2015, my work as the archivist started evolving. And it wasn't just a Latino community that I was working with. Eventually, I helped process the BJ Bud Memorial Archives (LGBTQ archives). The work evolved into something bigger that is more intersectional and intergenerational.[12]

Nancy explained that after being awarded a three-year Mellon Foundation grant, she was given more freedom to establish the CDA while accessing ASU's resources in ways that centered community-based pedagogy around archival practices rather than only collecting from these non-dominant communities. Nancy's work deliberately disrupted the institutional policies of on ownership and collecting from the community. She explained the changes that she implemented:

> Unlike traditional repositories, we're not measuring our success just by how many collections we bring in. We're measuring our success by how many relationships we're building, how many communities we help create their own archive. As we make collections accessible online, how many people are

[11] Christine Marín, Chicano Research Collection, individual interview recorded on 5 November 2020.

[12] Nancy Godoy, Community-Driven Archives Initiative of the Chicano Research Collection, individual interview recorded on 10 November 2020.

> accessing those collections, those resources. Thanks to that Mellon grant, I was able to change the language and the rhetoric that was being used within my department and the university. I'll be honest, and there's some language that I use on our website that says we believe in equal ownership and stewardship responsibilities. And it was brought to my attention that they (ASU) didn't like that language. I would say that, depending on who is leading us within the university, depending on who's in that role, I think there's always going to be some progress and some backlash. I'm used to it. I'm used to playing politics, maneuvering my way through the system to make sure that the community has the resources and knowledge that they need.[13]

These interviews reinforce the role of relationships in originating an archives but also suggest the role of CBAs is not only to sustain relations but to actively build new ones. As a CBA that emerged from within the institutional archival context, the CDA, through Nancy's leadership, has refused the university's metrics to measure success and transformed the basic ideas of success to distinctly connect with and in their communities. Relationships remain central to the CDA as well as the Chicano Research Collection as its longstanding foundation.

For the CDA, their origins center the connection between a historian and a library director in the 1970s while activism was exploding elsewhere. Their work created waves that are still in motion today with Nancy at the helm. Nancy discussed relationships as the core of her work and how she and the CDA were measuring their success. The distinct roles of institution and community created challenges that Nancy was able to maneuver through using language that expressed equal ownership and stewardship responsibilities which also resonate across the origin stories of both SAADA and Houston ARCH. Starting with language and putting that language into practice demonstrates the ways that each partner archives interfaces with their communities and constituencies while also continuing to do the important work of collecting and preserving their community histories. Their origin stories continue to resonate within their archival practices today as each archives unbecomes and becomes again and again as they exist in interconnected ways with their communities.

In the next section, I introduce the Arizona Queer Archives, AQA, the fourth partner archives in this research. As the creator of the AQA, I expand on this particular origin story alongside the focus group and interview data to offer a more in-depth analysis. I share naming practices and offer self-critique as an emergent research method through what I understand as archival praxis. In analyzing the details of my own archival origin story, its relationship with others' perspectives on the AQA, and the material consequences of these origin stories for ongoing archival critique in community archival contexts, archival praxis is central.

[13] Nancy Godoy, Community-Driven Archives Initiative of the Chicano Research Collection, individual interview recorded on 10 November 2020.

## Arizona Queer Archives as case study

### Arizona Queer Archives & its origin stories

The Arizona Queer Archives was founded in 2008, first, as an oral history archives. Later, in 2011, it expanded into both a digital and physical archives and a research initiative through the Institute for LGBT Studies at the University of Arizona. I was a doctoral student at the time and was given physical archival space. There I worked with students as well as community folks to process physical collections and also facilitate oral history training workshops and interviews throughout the community. This space became an archival laboratory that I continue to work in today as part of the *participatory ethos* that I founded the AQA through and that the AQA continues to expand, embody, and enact so that community members are participants in the building of our collective and individual histories. A participatory ethos, to me, is the archival commitment to listen to community, to work on staying relevant and to remaining present to emergent community needs, desires, and histories.

The story I tell about the founding of the AQA is one that starts with my move to Tucson, AZ and my urgent need to find and cultivate queer and LGBT communities. In my recorded individual interview as part of this research project, I shared.

> When my partner, her mom and kids, and I moved to Tucson in June of 2007, we hadn't really met any queer people. I found Wingspan, which was Southern Arizona's LGBT Community Center. They had this annual event in September of that year, so I called them and asked to volunteer at this event. While I was volunteering as a door greeter with MJ Talbot, I learned that he and his partner had been in San Francisco for years and, now in Tucson, they were getting up there in age. We talked the whole night. And at one point he said, "Oh, so you're a filmmaker. We have a lot of elders dying in our community and you should really collect their stories before they die because we won't have a record of them." So, that was kind of the seed that was planted. I wrote a grant that we got in January 2008 and that was the start of it.[14]

The insights from this origin story suggest, again, that people want to see themselves and their communities in the historic record as visible and relevant and to recognize the contributions, large and small, of community members that animated the community, its histories, and that can go on to animate the archives. It demonstrates the urgency of being lost and erased if non-dominant peoples are not given the space and time to document their stories and to archive them for long-term accessibility. Again, as a non-archivist, I drew on my passion for LGBTQ histories and storytelling as well as my experiences and expertise in media (broadcast TV, multimedia production, and social justice documentary filmmaking) to initiate the archives.

[14] Jamie A. Lee, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 27 January 2021.

My story centers the founding of the oral history project as Arizona's first LGBTQ archives. My life partner Adela Licona recalled her observations about how the archives were first developed:

> I remember sitting at the kitchen table talking with you and recognized that there were no queer archives in Arizona. I remember the work that you did to meet the community, to volunteer at that Wingspan event, something [that would have overwhelmed me]. You said, "I'll make one." I have just a deep respect and admiration and thrill and that's what connects me and keeps me in these archives.[15]

Again, like the originators at the Houston ARCH, the AQA was established by a person who can convene communities to imagine the archives they could build together.

In keeping with my commitment to the principles of social justice media making, I spent three years working with communities to train them how to set up and operate the digital video equipment and how to facilitate an oral history interview for the archives. I worked with the filmmakers from Pan Left Productions to train each other as well as their networks of friends to participate in this oral history project as trained oral historians.

In fall 2011, I began my doctoral studies under the mentorship of Susan Stryker, Director of the Institute for LGBT Studies and Professor of Gender & Women's Studies. She had been the archivist for the GLBT Historical Society and Museum in San Francisco, CA, so had a lot to teach me about community archives and LGBTQ histories. She suggested that I expand the archives to also include physical collections and offered to give me a small room in the Institute's offices. I was thrilled at this possibility as a new doctoral student studying archives, media studies, LGBTQ Studies, and Queer Theory. This is when and where the AQA—physical and digital archives together—started.

In developing a community archives that I understood as distinct from institutional archives, I wondered how the community could be involved. While working on my graduate degrees and studying archives—archival theory and practice—I returned to the principles of social justice media making and to my commitment to put the tools of media production (and in this case, archival production) into the hands of everyday people. Such practices support communities to have autonomy in producing their own archives and in shaping the stories that constitute their histories (Lee 2019, 12). In the research interview, I explained how I understood the archival relationship with communities:

> When I started this expanded AQA, I started to realize the importance of having the community involved in creating mission, vision, and collection policies because so much relied on a traditional idea of an archives and their paper-based records. But what does an LGBTQ community produce? A lot of different things. I organized a community meeting, which was not only great fun,

[15] Adela C. Licona, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 29 January 2021.

> it became a place to think about the things that we collect and those things that we don't even think about, like, love letters and cards. People talked about boas and outfits. And, you know, right now, in the next room, I have three-piece suits from someone from when they were transitioning. The AQA as both digital and physical, then, became this big shift into understanding the queer material culture that we produce, that connects to our identities in ways that goes beyond what an institutional archives can collect and preserve.[16]

Hands-on oral history workshops and archival processing through The Box Project—a grant-funded project to train communities on how to begin to build their own archival collections and give them the acid free boxes to do so—in the local communities were key to the expansion of the AQA. The AQA's work with community activists and oral historians demonstrate the ways that CBAs are constantly in process and being built even in peoples' closets and behind the scenes. Oral history productions, too, are in process and storytelling becomes a key pedagogical opportunity for community members and the interviewers alike. Adela explained.

> I just don't think the Arizona Queer Archives *represents* community exactly... I remember when people were first going out and interviewing one another for the archives and there was that one interview that stays with me. It was someone who was asking, with some pretty heterosexual assumptions, about pleasure and love and sex. They asked this question that assumes certain things about monogamy, jealousy, and emotional relationship.[17]

I continued telling the story:

> I was training a cis straight man who wanted to do oral history. This was a very pivotal moment for me. I was getting my masters, preparing materials to apply to a doctoral program, and thinking about the ways people can represent themselves in an oral history and how this has to align with the questions that I ask, too. So, thinking about the questions, you know, like "when did you first come out?" I asked myself, why does it have to be a coming out story that becomes one of the first questions asked of LGBTQ people. That really started making me think through LGBTQ Studies scholarship and that on Queer Theory… So, we are sitting on Les Krambeal's patio and he is describing his relationship with his partner, Gordon, and then also his other partner, Juan. He was just talking about his relationship and then it's quiet. The man I'm training says, "Well, how do you negotiate this?" And Les says, "Negotiate what?" The interviewer says, "jealousy, like to have two partners? Like, how do you negotiate jealousy?"[18]

Adela exclaimed what she loved about this pivotal moment:

[16] Jamie A. Lee, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 27 January 2021.
[17] Adela C. Licona, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 29 January 2021.
[18] Jamie A. Lee, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 27 January 2021.

> The respondent kind of refused the premise. But what I loved about how you moved in that moment was you left the questioner's voice present (in the oral history interview in the digital archives). That is what so often the formal structures ask us to erase or make invisible, the hand of the questioner or the question itself, so that the answer is rooted in some kind of capital-T truth. In this one, you can see the relationship of one's own positioning to how a question gets asked and to recognize that how a question gets asked is how a question gets answered unless it's refused. And so those are relational moves that I think make the archives part of the community rather than merely representing one.[19]

I reflected on what this moment meant for them as an oral historian and an archivist:

> That was a huge turning point for me in the archives. I asked myself, "how do I make sure that Les Krambeal's story can be of equal importance on the front page of the digital repository? Here is the Queer Theory at play with Archival Theory. Here is where the AQA holds onto the differences within our community. That's why I wanted to use "queer" through Queer Theory and not as an umbrella term. How do we hold on to that difference and not get it ironed out? I want it wrinkly![20]

## Archival praxis

### Praxis as reflection and flexibility

Archival praxis—informed and reflected upon archival practice—for the AQA means openly and transparently representing the multiplicities and messiness of the communities that are a part of the archives and its production (Krebs 2010). For founders, especially, it means developing and holding a self-aware and self-critical capacity. It also means recognizing how the archives is shaped at its inception and over time. Starting with origin stories can reveal how archival founders become leading actors in the archives' earliest iterations and how they may be related to its continued growth and shaping. Communities lend their hands, heads, hearts, and guts to the processes and help to shape the archives through their stories and histories too. Self-reflection and remaining open to change become key ingredients to understanding what archival sustainability might look like. As part of this research project's findings, our research team started coding and structuring our analysis around the community/institutional dichotomy and realized that the two are incommensurate. Together we shifted the discourse around sustainability to refuse this community/institutional dichotomy to recognize that such incommensurate and yet relational archival entities must be attended to in ways that are significant and

[19] Adela C. Licona, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 29 January 2021.
[20] Jamie A. Lee, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 27 January 2021.

meaningful to their structuring bodies and also relationships. Archival origin stories figure strongly in this flexible sort of structuring. Considering such an argument for this article, I emphasize the ways many people, founders and non-founding contributors, have shaped the AQA since its inception and continue to do so. Importantly, though, I questioned the process of training as an archivist and emphasized the need for archival praxis in the field:

> It's interesting to think that, if we're trained to be archivists, what does our training do? Does it let you be your full self when you think of ideas of praxis, and, you know, you're bringing the theory and practice and right action in this work? And then how do you even benefit from it? What are you learning from it? That's not just transactional, but it becomes something that makes it possible that, in the next time you process, you're even a better person and paying attention. What is the role of nuance in our lives? It's so important in the archives, we'll never be able to capture that unless we start to make changes. There are just so many different pathways and different ways we live our lives and to be able to recognize and preserve the nuances is so important.[21]

As a queer archives, the AQA is constantly (un)becoming—simultaneously becoming and unbecoming—that is "indicative of transdisciplinary logics that challenge universalizing archival standardizations in order to potentially reimagine archival approaches" (Lee 2016a, b, p 35). In CBAs, these distinctions are blurry and overlap, but explicitly so. I see all three of Douglas' shaping as distinct and the radical rootings and foundations of the archives. I carefully and critically look at origin stories and their connections—affective and emotional—to communities and their pluralistic histories. I return to Douglas' article to consider, then, how archives are shaped even in queer ways that challenge the traditional archival status quo. CBAs are often established in a very deliberate and also messy manner that disrupts how traditional and mainstream archives are more objectively and 'naturally' created through layers of hierarchy and record keeping structures. Douglas eschews the notion of archives being "natural by-products of activity" (Lee 2016a, b, p 29) and argues that there are three different types of archival shaping—shaping by the creator of the archives, shaping by the archivist, and shaping by other interested parties (Lee 2016a, b, p 27). The archives, then, is a body of records that often tells a dominant and recognizable or legitimate history. For the AQA, the archival productions are transparent and messy and may not be considered a part of any authorized processes of institutional archiving. I find joy and meaning in this messiness. My aim, as a CBA founder and critical archival scholar, is for visitors and contributors to be able to do that same.

Naming the Arizona Queer Archives.

Importantly, as I work through self-reflection, a vital function of archival praxis, I turn to auto-ethnographic storytelling methods to shape my critical analysis of my own archival origin story in relation to other participants' stories about the development of the AQA. What stood out to me as incredibly important about the expansion

[21] Jamie A. Lee, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 27 January 2021.

and founding of what I called the Arizona Queer Archives was how I intended the concept of queer to work not as an umbrella term of LGBTQI identities but as a methodological move to bring queer theory into conversation with archival theory. The *queer*, for me, was determined to be theoretical and methodological. Adela, described this process in her individual interview:

> I've just been privy to the many times Jamie has been sort of regaled with "Why do you call it a queer archives? That's so offensive." Or "that word was used to hurt me in my history." Jamie just very thoughtfully talks about why they named the archives that way. I know enough about the archives to know perhaps they'll have a different name at another time, but right now, that's it. So that's been a kind of almost exclusively a generational conversation and the way it's been had has held people in the conversation.[22]

Lavina Tomer, local activist and self-identified lesbian feminist, shared her experience around the naming of the AQA through her lesbian feminist perspective:

> Just the name of the archives, you know, Arizona Queer Archives, that in and of itself was pretty radical for a lot of us. I haven't heard anybody say, I don't want to have anything to do with it because of the term 'queer.' But I do know that it turns some people off because it was such a derogatory word for us in earlier times. I think that it's clear to me the world is changing and has changed when it comes to identity and language and culture. I feel like I'm part of it all, you know, I really worked hard to keep my heart and my mind open so that I'm not stuck somewhere and I'm moving along with the rest of the world. I think we just need to keep doing what we're doing, but not leave anybody out.[23]

I continued to explain how the language of "queer" and "Arizona" came together to offer a critique as separate terms and then as an archival entity:

> Hopefully, we can offer like a framework to be critical when you're looking at this. I want people to see all the nasty, all the nitty gritty, and they can determine themselves. I want to be there to ask the questions like: What did you think? How could we have made this collection better? More accessible for you? I think it does offer a bit of a history. One gay 80-year-old man wrote that he hated the word 'queer' and he didn't want to donate his stuff to something that's queer. I responded to him that I will accept his letter and put it in this collection called the "Politics of the Production of the Archive." He submitted his letter and so did another elder gay man. I think that that's why using Queer as in Queer Theory and not as an umbrella term changes the conversations. How do we understand the use of queer as a word? And also, just how nasty is Arizona? You know, racist, xenophobic, and transphobic. So, State is problematic, too. So, putting them together—Arizona and Queer—is interesting,

[22] Adela C. Licona, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 29 January 2021.

[23] Lavina Tomer, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 29 January 2021.

> like third space, you know, an in-between and generative conversation to have about naming.[24]

Lavina responded

> As our language changes, like the word 'queer,' we would have never thought of using the word queer in anything. And now, people in Senior Pride are using queer all the time. I've only had one person through Senior Pride, who wrote in and said, "I will not have anything to do with your organization because you use the term queer." That's coming out of pain and we understand that.[25]

I named the AQA myself and regrettably without community input. I reflect on this time when I was taking classes and becoming enamored by what I was reading in Queer Theory and LGBTQ Studies—scholars like Jasbir Puar, Elizabeth Freeman, Avery Gordon, José Estaban Muñoz, Sara Ahmed, and Heather Love. At that early time in my doctoral studies, I didn't adequately reflect on the elitism of queer studies and its terminologies. I saw in queer theory the possibility for an archival framework for an inter-generational and participatory ethos that corresponded to the way I wanted to and tried to build the archives. I saw movement, flexibility, and dynamism in queer theory. I pulled queer theory into the archive to disrupt traditional archival elite and powerful practices that did harm to non-dominant communities and their relations.

In reflecting, I recognize that my use of queer and queer theory was more about my research and political stance than a reflection of listening to the community and adequately enacting the participatory ethos I was imagining and aiming for. Following the work of Matt Brim (2020) in "poor queer studies: confronting elitism in the university", I considered queer theory an "antinormative, disruptive cog within the system rather than producer of 'palace discourses'" (Brim 2020, p 9) which meant that working on the AQA through queer theory became an imagined way to rock the system from within; however, I realize now I did not go far enough in my own self-critique around the term and these processes of establishing the AQA.

In sum, my insistence, in fall 2011, to build the AQA with queer theory at its core was a resistance to elitist knowledge practices that reflects my own situatedness in the academy as a doctoral student and researcher as well as in the community as a queer archivist and activist. Heather Love argues.

> "Queer theory was a revolt against scholarly expertise in the name of deviance, yet it resonated in many ways with academic norms. Queer academics might also be activist, organic intellectuals, radical experimenters in their personal, professional, and political lives, but they are also superordinate in the context of the university: professional knowledge workers, teachers, and administrators" (Love 2007, p 87).

[24] Jamie A. Lee, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 27 January 2021.

[25] Lavina Tomer, Arizona Queer Archives, individual interview recorded on 29 January 2021.

At this time, I thought I was managing both spaces—institution and community—with a liberatory ethos (Caswell 2017; Drake 2016). However, upon reflection, I see the entrenched power of the institution at play. I prioritized my studies and research in the naming of the archives and also in the methodological development of archival practices. While I see this as a misstep, I also know I did this work understanding the archives as theoretical productions in their own right and with social justice at the heart of my thinking and hands-on work. I believe the distance between CBAs and institutions can be fertile ground for learning. I understand this learning experience as reflecting a kind of critical compromise, what Brim describes as a queer methodology of being both a part of and apart from our institutions. I existed and still exist in this middle space between what I understand as a home community and the academy. Critical compromise "both isolates and dramatizes a problem and promotes a mode of relative questioning" (Brim 2020, p 10). It also provides a space for praxis as reflected-upon practice—a space for learning and for teaching. I am moved to ask, can queer theory exist in both spaces to support a mode of relative questioning? Because queer theory was founded in and emerged from elite institutional (academic) spaces, Erica Rand argues that we must look for queer theory elsewhere. If we look outside of the elite institution and see queer theory emerging and doing its work to disrupt and intervene, queer theory, then, is relevant to community and everyday spaces. With this framework, I believe queer theory can be further developed from these quotidian spaces through what Brim considers "poor" contexts so that it can do and enable differently important things "to theorize our queer/raced/gendered (dis)connections" (Brim 2020, p 12). Existing across *both* institutional *and* community contexts suggests a both/and, third space theory that offers a flexible framework for thinking about queerness, memory, archival contexts, and communities in ways that can be generative (Cantú 2013; Licona 2012; Bernal and Elenes 2011; Pérez 1999). The AQA, then, as a third space can be liberated from binary thinking to be understood as queer, participatory, socially just, normative, and radical. Queer theory for the AQA means that it can be complex, contestatory, and contradictory. I believe that it can be meaningful in its contradictions and all of its complexity. I have a renewed commitment to transparency in sharing these contradictions and complexities with communities.

Decentering and re/distributing the Arizona Queer Archives

Today the AQA is a de-centralized and distributed archives with active archiving presences at the: University of Arizona's Institute for LGBT Studies as a central research initiative; University of Arizona's Special Collections as a major collecting area; and Blacklidge Community Collective as a distinct community-focused and participatory hands-on archiving and oral history training and community engagement space. By *de-centralized* I mean to recognize the different archival contexts where archiving takes place and where the archives are housed. While I continue to direct the AQA, control is effectively dispersed and spread across the three archival contexts with organic feedback loops and networks in place to continue to support its growth, continuity, and access over time. These changes came about through ongoing conversations with community members and university archivists about access and the importance of multiple ways communities can access their own materials whether through the original space on campus or through the community-centered

collective or in the traditional university archives. Through informal conversations, community members told me that they wanted more ways to access the archives and its collections.

This deliberately developed distributed approach for the AQA means that archivists—community and institutional alike—can share their expertise on collecting, organizing, processing, making accessible, and animating the collections. While d*istributed* is much like de-centralized, the distributed AQA suggests that there are different forms of control over archival materials. According to the Society of American Archivists Glossary, "distributed custody" arose out of the need to manage electronic records through which "the originating creator retains physical custody of the records while the archives or another entity is responsible for access to the same records" (Dictionary of Archives Terminology n.d.). While the AQA is not a post-custodial archives (as described above in the SAADA section), its collections are held at one of the three distinct locations and controlled under their guidelines along with the specific protocols as spelled out in the formal shared stewardship agreement between the AQA (and its founder and director) and the University of Arizona's Special Collections. Olliff and Dill applied 'distributed custody' in a community archives context, also discussed as non-custodial arrangement, but one that is more politically motivated with a focus on shared authority and appraisal:

> [A] distributed archives model envisions one-on-one partnerships between institutional archives and community partners to share authority over appraisal and selection while leaving custody of community collections with their creators. Institutional partners provide leadership, mentoring, and support, while community partners appraise, select, process, arrange, and describe (Olliff and Dill 2021, p 7).

Shared authority, while leaving custody with their creators, reveals how a *both/and* approach I introduced above can function in a way that respects the origins and the origin(s) stories of CBAs while also lending much needed institutional resources to the community archives with implications for their sustainability and accessibility. The distributed archives model offered by Olliff and Dill centers the control at the institutional level with community partners providing the labor; this way of framing the distributed model, to me, means that there is a uni-directional flow of knowledge from those in control to the community. My work with the AQA aims for multi-directional flow and control in the hands of communities. For the AQA, the distributed archival approach centers the community archives and means that specific physical collections (identified by community archivists) are preserved and made accessible through Special Collections because of the expertise and ability of the university archivists in managing large paper-based document collections. The AQA benefits from this multi-directional flow of expertise and ability across its many and diverse collections from organizational to personal to oral history to handmade kites to eyeglass collections that represent queer and LGBTQI material histories.

Collections are shared across the three archival contexts without prioritizing one site or space as the AQA's center. Power structures shift and take new shapes as community members, scholars, and students come and go as part of the hands-on

archival work and as collections emerge as of interest at any given site. Such concepts are integral in the AQA's embodiment of its participatory ethos following Shilton's and Srinivasan's (2008) participatory archiving model and Huvila's (2008) participatory archive that involve "the communities where records originate" (Huvila 2008, p 30). The participatory ethos that the AQA is committed to invites communities to be a part of records creation, the multiple archival contexts, and the archiving processes as well as circulation of and access to the collections without already being or belonging to the communities in the archives itself. A participatory ethos opens up the ways communities are formed in the process of, drawing on the AQA's tagline, "Building our histories together." Community participation, then, can center an 'archival imaginary, what Michelle Caswell considers the "dynamic way in which communities creatively and collectively re-envision the future through archival interventions in representations of the shared past" (Caswell 2014a, b, p 49). Identifying distinct and multiple histories is not enough but calls archivists to recognize the various lenses as also structuring logics of past and future continually co-create one another through time (Lee 2017, p 10). The shape of the archives is determined by its mission and vision policies and its open-structured practices. For example, distributed suggests that there are many points of access for records and collections; distribution furthers the AQA's commitment to the myriad access points including a focus on vocabulary that is relevant across local LGBTQI communities and archival contexts. This means that the AQA is reoriented to its records creators and users all the time and with each engagement; this runs through all of the distributed archival contexts as an agreed upon commitment. This also presents challenges in solidifying and codifying best practices internally as the AQA is always in the state of becoming. De-centralization and distribution are processes and practices of enacting the participatory ethos through each of its independent archival contexts but it also implies a relationship across those contexts. It is through a radical design that opens up possibilities through these relationships for new users and communities without delimiting such possibilities because of the archival labels of community or institution. The AQA's shared stewardship agreement with Special Collections and its efforts to build traction through community participation means that the archives, collections and records, and the practices that are being tried and revised and tried again provide added value to the collections themselves.

I have collaboratively worked on creating a shared stewardship agreement with the University of Arizona's Special Collections where they have created a major collecting area for the Arizona Queer Archives along with an archives team to support the transfer of collections that fit their collection policy and the interpretation of finding aids produced by students and community members. The AQA still fully lives in its designation as a CBA through this shared stewardship agreement that attends to community in the same ways and through the same connections that I have established as the archives founder. The AQA also has a workspace in the community at the Blacklidge Community Collective, a shared autonomous space for various justice-based projects, where graduate students facilitate processing, digitization, community engagement, and participation in archival practices. This relationship is relatively new and we are co-creating new policies—appraisal, collection development, description, volunteering/interning, and, importantly, the deed of gift.

The development of the AQA as a de-centralized and distributed archives continues to root the archives' origin stories through its emphasis on: 1) an explicated queer theory as a core integral element to ensure the AQA's ongoing flexibility in form and function; 2) the principles of social justice media as means to support and train community participation in the short and long term; 3) the framework of a participatory ethos to ensure ways to be inclusive throughout archival practice and not just in archival discourse; and 4) the centering of difference (and not sameness) of experiences and lived/living histories to open the AQA to multiple histories.

Returning to Douglas' "Toward more honest description" one can better understand the ways that archival records and collections are not one-size-fits-all when it comes to description. Rather, each collection is complex and requires time and attention to identifying these differences. Douglas argues that the conventions in archival theory and practice constrict the archivists doing this work of describing records and collections by reinforcing a false need for a "more perfect picture of *fonds,* one that is consistent with traditional notions of archives as impartial and natural and of archivists as objective and neutral" (Douglas 2016, p 50). The "more perfect" archival framework limits and delimits what an archives can be and do. In this research into CBAs and the power of naming practices, the findings indicate that CBAs, in their both/and existence across and among both community and institutional archival contexts, directly challenge and disrupt this "more perfect picture." Douglas suggests possible ways that description could be made more representative of the processes by which an archives forms (Douglas 2016, p 49). I add, *by whom* an archives is formed. The founders of the partner archives who participated in this research project shared the distinct ways that they defined and understood archives, came together collaboratively, connected with their communities, and continued to shape and re-shape their archival understandings to continue to exist and become. Each has a story to tell.

## Conclusion

While I have reflected on my process of naming of the AQA, I recognize my own shortcomings and also acknowledge the relational context through which I considered the terms and their greater theoretical implications and consequence. What this self-reflective essay has further taught me is that there is generative potential here in bringing this self-critical finding to the surface as it is relevant and important historic data that both roots the archives and can inspire new conversations. Through this transparency, the archives are illuminated as relational sites for learning. These are the AQA's origin stories. The research data—interviews and focus groups and their transcripts and distinct coding and analyses—tells these things and points to relationships as key to effective and long-term archiving. The stories told from each of the partner archives demonstrate the need to be malleable in the face of shifting social, political, historical, and technological contexts. SAADA continues to imagine and reimagine new and exciting programming that centers the diversity of the South Asian American experiences. Houston ARCH acknowledges and centers the many community folks who collect

local LGBTQ + histories and who may not be credentialed archivists. Houston ARCH remains committed to connecting the historical dots across their communities. The Community-Driven Archives Initiative at Arizona State University, too, continues to grow and expand their programming to connect with more and more diverse and marginalized communities. Like SAADA and Houston ARCH, CDA recognizes the myriad ways that archives are created and honors the people who collect and connect their communities to greater historical contexts that have traditionally obscured and erased their own histories. All four of these partner archives are doing the important work of archiving their communities. Their origin stories illuminate their legacies of resistance and social justice.

Archival origin stories are telling, especially for CBAs. They tell of those who wanted to see themselves and their community members as historic actors. They tell of first moves and of the importance and role of relational networks. They tell of the dreams for the archives to be experiential, educational, informative, and even rebellious. They also tell of the dreams of the archives to continue to do new work and continue to become. They tell of shortcomings, of missteps, and of emergent opportunities to be ever more responsive and relational. They tell of lingering needs. At those times when CBAs need or want to be connected to institutions and the often more resourced contexts that institutions offer, institutions would do well to be not only mindful and respectful of these origin stories but to ensure that anytime they acquire any degree of archival authority, they work with community to co-create ways to leave custody with their creators and use shared stories to honor communities in the ways that are rooted in those communities. This is a call for self-reflection, for transparency, and for taking the time and space for communities to participate meaningfully in the creation, preservation, and sharing of their own histories.

Through this research project, I learned again the importance of self-reflection, what I refer to here as archival praxis, in our teaching about the archives, and in our hands-on archival work especially as it can inform archival practices and relations intended to build and sustain CBAs. Drawing from my early work to develop the Queer/ed Archival Methodology as "an internal and reflexive inventory-taking of archival practices and procedures," this archival praxis helps to reveal how origin stories and the ideas of archival shaping that Douglas introduces as integral for understanding CBAs can be returned to and generatively engaged as part of a dynamic and complex archival history with implications for ongoing archival relations and archival sustainability (Lee 2017, p 13). As a self-reflexive framework, the Queer/ed Archival Methodology to include archival praxis moves archivists through efforts to investigate their own practices and methods, especially those that are part of what might be considered an invisiblized repertoire, those everyday practices that have become habitual. The interviews conducted throughout this research project demonstrate that origin stories are vibrant matter for the archives, for archivists, contributors, visitors, and students. Coming together in conversation to tell and to listen to origin stories and to discuss the archives as they were once imagined offers opportunities to learn from early work as it has been (and is still being) accomplished through established, new, and renewed relationships. Such an approach, especially attended to through archival praxis, can acknowledge the community/institutional archival continuum as relational rather than as always only oppositional; one that

might support new ways of respectfully attending to and understanding non-dominant lived and living histories as these are embodied in CBAs.

**Acknowledgements** This research was made possible by support from an Institute of Museum and Library Services, IMLS, Early Career Grant, RE-18-19-0049-19. The authors would like to thank Samip Mallick, Vince Lee, and Nancy Godoy for their help connecting us with their communities. Special thanks to the focus group participants and interviewees for their time and intellectual contributions. The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current research project are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Author contributions** All authors contributed to this study through material preparation, data collection, and analysis. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Jamie A. Lee and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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