



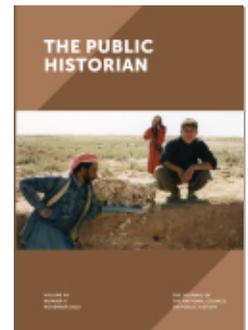
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A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland (review)

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(Review)

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Digital Reviews

A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. Bishop Chui, Jarrett Drake, Melissa Hubbard, Jasmine Jones, Carol Steiner, Stacie Williams, Keith Wilson, Volunteer Activists and Archivists. <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/>. Created 2017. Accessed May 18, 2018.

Police violence in the United States has a long history, and public responses to such brutality have often been powerful. Both law enforcement misconduct and community reactions, however, have changed significantly over time. During the last century, for example, police killings have increasingly targeted African American residents, shifting away from immigrants and political radicals. Public responses to this violence have also assumed new forms. Many of the largest riots of the twentieth century, including the Detroit Race Riot of 1943, the Watts uprising of 1965, and the South-Central Los Angeles riot of 1992, erupted in reaction to police brutality. But the 2013 shooting of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, and the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, produced especially innovative, broad-based campaigns protesting violence against African Americans, including the Black Lives Matter movement and local efforts to gather information and testimony about endemic police brutality.

In the wake of Brown's death, reformers, activists, and a broad cross section of Americans particularly focused on police killings with popular protests, grassroots organizations, and local efforts to identify and prevent such lethal attacks on African American residents. The 2015 acquittal of a local policeman for his role in the killing of Malissa Williams and Timothy Russell led Cleveland community organizers, with the help of archivists, to create *A People's Archive of Police Violence*, a website dedicated to documenting cases of brutality, memorializing the victims of police violence, and promoting healing in the city. Managed by volunteers, the archive seeks to "provide a safe and secure space to share any testimony, documents, or accounts that narrate or reflect on encounters or effects of police violence in their lives and communities."¹

Organized into nine diverse collections, *A People's Archive of Police Violence* contains a mix of protest posters and flyers, newspaper articles, photographs of

¹ A People's Archive of Police Violence, accessed July 24, 2018, <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/>.

protest marches, videos from protest conferences, audio recordings of testimony from the victims of police violence, interviews with Cleveland residents who witnessed such brutality, and other documents chronicling the widespread use of force and coercion by local law enforcers. Taken together, the archive includes nearly four hundred items. Although the collections at times cover overlapping themes, the website is searchable, allows easy, straightforward navigation, and is professionally arranged. The quality of the images, recordings, and videos is impressive.

A People's Archive of Police Violence is self-consciously pitched to the victims of police violence and the wider community. While other visitors, such as educators, will find the collections rich and informative, the website is not organized or designed for classroom or research use. This focus on sharing testimony and community engagement accounts for both the strengths and the relative shortcomings of the archive. The documents provide moving testimony exploring core themes of police brutality and overt racism from law enforcers. The interviews, for example, recount astonishingly similar instances of the rude, aggressive, and violent treatment of local people of color at the hands of Cleveland law enforcers. The testimony is raw and unadorned, and the interviewers, faithful to the goals of the archive, remain unobtrusive and largely encourage the victims to tell their own stories in their own words. Thus, the documents, recordings, and videos are shorn of the formulaic, heavily theorized framing that has come to characterize many scholarly treatments of the topic. In fact, the website creators bristle at such overviews, explaining that the "Archive is weakened through metanarratives that simply replace one form of dominant narrative with a new dominant narrative."²

Although the mission and organization of *A People's Archive of Police Violence* enhance the power of the documents, the website also has a shapeless quality. The archive, for instance, provides little context to accompany the protest posters, testimony, and interviews. Visitors get a scant sense of the geography of police violence, for the locations of brutal encounters are often unidentified, and the archive provides no maps of the city. Similarly, interviews and testimony frequently highlight the gap between victims' accounts and police reports or between forensic evidence and legal findings. Although the website's goal of managing the archive with a light hand is laudable, the testimony in the website would be doubly valuable if victims' accounts and eyewitness perspectives were occasionally paired with arrest or autopsy reports. In short, with minimal intrusion, the archive could provide fuller case histories, which would highlight the disparities between official justifications for police violence and the experiences of the victims of such brutality. Similarly, the managers could offer crucial context for visitors by providing links to studies of race relations in Cleveland or police violence in early twenty-

² "Principles," *A People's Archive of Police Violence*, <http://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/principles>.

first-century America. Such links would be useful classroom or teaching purposes and would provide visitors with suggestions for further reading or research—without substituting one “metanarrative” for another.

In sum, *A People’s Archive of Police Violence* offers a remarkable collection of primary source documents on police violence in present-day Cleveland. The volunteer-run website emphasizes sharing testimony more than providing material for students or researchers. But the testimony and interviews are extremely valuable and enlightening, and thus the archive serves an important role in documenting institutional racism in contemporary America.

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Robert Penn Warren’s Who Speaks for the Negro?: An Archival Collection. Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, Vanderbilt University. <https://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/>. Accessed May 20, 2018.

In 1964, the famous novelist and cultural commentator Robert Penn Warren traveled the country to interview men and women involved in the struggle for civil rights, people who were, in his words, “making the Negro Revolution what it is—one of the dramatic events of the American story.” His book, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, published by Random House in 1965, included excerpts from many of those conversations along with Warren’s reflections on the civil rights movement.

Warren made a point of speaking not only with well-known leaders but also with everyday people involved in the grassroots struggle, which has made his volume a useful resource for students of the movement. But a new digital archive created by the Robert Penn Warren Center at Vanderbilt University dramatically enriches and extends the project of this important book in an excellent and effective website.

Robert Penn Warren’s Who Speaks for the Negro: An Archival Collection (<https://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu>) brings together original materials relating to the book’s content, its publication, and its reception. All of the material comes from the libraries of the University of Kentucky and Yale University, but the digital archive makes them much more widely accessible and searchable in a well designed and easy-to-use website that offers a valuable resource for students and scholars of the civil rights movement.

In addition to background information on Robert Penn Warren, the site offers three main categories of materials: archival materials related to the book’s creation, writing, and publication; reviews of the work and coverage of it in the media; and original recordings of Warren’s many interviews with participants and leaders in the civil rights struggle.

The most compelling material on the site, and that which is likely to be of greatest interest to a wide audience, are the audio recordings and transcriptions of the