Archival Resistance to Structural Racism

A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland

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On November 22, 2014, twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was shot and killed by police officer Timothy Loehmann while playing with a toy gun outside the Cudell Recreation Center on the west side of Cleveland. Four days later, surveillance camera footage of Tamir’s last moments was released to the news media. As these facts unfolded in the public eye, multiple narratives were operationalized to explain this tragedy. Only four months earlier, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown had been shot and killed by police in Ferguson, Missouri. Local residents there responded with protests and utilized social media to express their thoughts and feelings about the incident, leading to increased media interest in the case and a national conversation about police violence and racist policing. Tamir Rice’s nationally publicized death immediately became a part of that story, often presented as disturbing evidence that police violence against Black people is worse than most white Americans had previously believed, and was part of a long history of structural racist violence. Writing for the Washington Post, Stacey Patton made a historical connection between the deaths of Black children and teenagers at the hands of police and the violent injustices of slavery and the Jim Crow era. Tamir Rice was one of several young people named in the essay, along with Emmitt Till, Jordan Davis, Darius Simmons, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Aiyana Stanley-Jones, and Renisha McBride.¹

At the same time, a parallel media narrative placed blame for Rice’s death not on racist policing, but on the boy’s background. On November 28, 2014, the Plain Dealer, Cleveland’s major daily newspaper, published a story
titled “Tamir Rice’s father has history of domestic violence.” In June 2015, the Associated Press released an article about Rice’s death titled, “Boy with pellet gun warned by friend before police shooting,” implying that Rice’s own behavior was to blame for his death. When Tamir’s mother, Samaria Rice, publicly called for Cuyahoga County prosecutor Tim McGinty to recuse himself from the investigation and prosecution of the police officers involved in Tamir’s death, McGinty responded by claiming she was “economically motivated” rather than acting out of a desire for justice.2

While these narratives played out nationally, different stories could be told in Cleveland, where many residents know that Tamir Rice’s death was not anomalous in the city but part of a long legacy of racist policing that frequently has violent and deadly consequences. In November 2014 when Tamir was killed, the Cleveland Division of Police (CDP) was already under investigation by the United States Department of Justice for improper use of force. The report on the two-year investigation described systemic excessive use of both deadly and “less lethal” force by the CDP, arguing that these practices emerged from multiple structural deficiencies within the department.3

Now we have three stories about Tamir Rice’s death. In one, he is a symbol of a nation grappling with its ongoing legacy of racist violence, police reform, and accountability. In another, he is a boy raised in violent circumstances, perhaps doomed to a violent death. In the third story, he is one of many victims of an urban police force structured to produce violence. None of these stories are really about Tamir. Many records have been used to construct the stories above. One of the most important primary sources of Tamir Rice’s death is the video of the shooting and its aftermath, in addition to official records created by the CDP and the U.S. Department of Justice. There are fact-based newspaper articles, some of which rely on firsthand reports from witnesses and family members. There are editorials appearing in every form of news media, most using one of the above stories as a frame. There are countless individual pieces of social media content created as individuals around the world publicly engaged in dialogue about Tamir’s death. Separated from the context of his life and his community, records about Tamir’s death can serve any of the larger narratives described above.
This essay is about collecting records of police violence in Cleveland, the stories those records can tell, and how archives can be deliberately constructed to enable the creation of counter-stories that serve to challenge, disrupt, or complicate dominant narratives in productive ways. I began this essay by writing about Tamir Rice because what happened to him led me, then a new Cleveland-area resident and the Head of Special Collections and Archives at Case Western Reserve University, to get involved in *A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland* (*PAPVC*). *PAPVC* is a digital archive that collects, preserves, and shares the stories, memories, and accounts of police violence as experienced or observed by Cleveland citizens. The stories of archivists and librarians matter also when we construct historical narratives from archival records. Knowing who selected, organized, described, and preserved those records, and why, helps explain their full context. Everyone who worked on *PAPVC* had two primary goals: first to support the people directly affected by police brutality in Cleveland, and ultimately, to end police violence. These goals shaped both the process we engaged in and the decisions we made as we built the archive.

**Overview of A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland**

In August of 2015, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) held its annual conference in Cleveland. Three months prior to that, archivist Jarrett Drake had issued a call on Twitter inviting those who were planning to attend the conference to join him in developing a service project that would help the communities impacted by police violence in Cleveland. Multiple archivists volunteered, and work on the project began immediately, resulting in *A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland* (*archivingpoliceviolence.org*).

The idea for the archive did not originate with the archivists involved. Instead, we decided we would do anything the community needed, including manual labor or other basic tasks. After reaching out to Cleveland community groups about their needs, we connected with an organization called Puncture the Silence (PTS), a local chapter of the national Stop Mass Incarceration Network (SMIN), which had been organizing opposition to police brutality
in Cleveland. After we explained what archivists do, PTS members suggested that we could help them create a web space for records they already possessed, in addition to serving as a repository for future oral histories and other new records of police violence in Cleveland. In addition to creating the Omeka-based website for PAPVC and populating it with existing content, archivists also partnered with PTS and other Cleveland activists to collect oral histories from individuals in neighborhoods affected by police violence, which were later added to the digital archive.

Since the original archive was created, the role of the PAPVC project as a site for community organizing and memory work in opposition to police violence has evolved. PTS members control the collection development choices, and they have focused on adding material related to local activism. Thus, the archive highlights not only the stories of those affected by police brutality, but also ongoing work opposing racism and structural violence in the criminal justice system in all its forms. While the current national narrative about resistance to police brutality often begins with mass protests held in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, that story renders invisible the grassroots work taking place in cities across the country and spanning decades. Just as those who live in Cleveland have long experienced racist policing, they have also resisted state violence by organizing primarily within those neighborhoods most affected. Viewing and listening to the records on PAPVC offers a glimpse into that longer history, contextualizing the current moment by placing it within a tradition of organized resistance that started long before national mainstream media began to engage in the recent focus on people of color victimized by the police.

The PAPVC project has also evolved to take on an educational aspect that arose from community requests. In one instance, a group of eighth grade students at a local school reached out to the PAPVC team asking for advice on how to organize against police violence as young people. In another, a teacher at the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Justice Center requested that PAPVC volunteers speak to her class of 18-year-old incarcerated students. When we met with the students, we talked to them about the project and invited them to record their stories for the archive if they wished to do so. Most declined, but
they did engage in lively conversations about the role of policing in their own lives and how they believe the criminal justice system should change. These examples demonstrate that there are no clear boundaries around PAPVC as an “archive.” It is a repository for records and a digital space for community memory, but it is also a political project that serves as one node in a web of ongoing local and regional organizing around systemic injustice. PAPVC tells many stories about the history of police violence and associated resistance, but it is also part of that story, created at a particular point in time and for particular political and personal reasons for those involved.

Dominant Narratives and Counter-Stories

The introduction to this essay was partially inspired by Richard Delgado’s “Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative Legal Storytelling.” In that essay, Delgado presented stories told from different perspectives about the same event to demonstrate that there is a “war between stories” attempting to define and describe reality. Delgado argued that when the same stories are told over and over again, they become the dominant reality. Dominant groups often employ stories that reinforce oppressive systems and absolve dominant groups of responsibility for dismantling those systems. The Cleveland Plain Dealer’s choice to focus on Tamir Rice’s parents’ history of violence, despite the fact that it was irrelevant to Tamir’s death, is an example of a dominant group story. Such framing suggests white people do not need to challenge racist police violence because Black families and communities are inherently dysfunctional, and Black male bodies are dangerous and doomed to destruction by police whose job is to keep white people safe. The author of the Plain Dealer article didn’t have to explicitly write that Black men and boys are inherently dangerous, because that story is so common in American media that white readers would make the connection without prompting.

According to Delgado, counter-stories can interrogate or challenge the dominant reality by exposing systems of oppression. The media narrative that situated Tamir Rice’s death within a pattern of excessive police violence
against Black men and boys is a counter-story. By piecing together multiple instances of unarmed Black people being shot and/or killed by police officers, and connecting those stories to the history of racist violence in America, some members of the media constructed a narrative suggesting that anti-Black racism was to blame for the violent deaths of these individuals. While this counter-story is powerful and has drawn attention to racist policing, it frequently cherrypicks incidents of police violence from around the country. By weaving a national narrative into these stories, it removes them from their local context, where solutions are most likely to be found.

In their article on *A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*, Stacie Williams and Jarrett Drake outlined the history of the relationship between the Cleveland Division of Police and the Black community, while also situating *PAPVC* within that history. By engaging directly with this local context, *PAPVC* resists both the dominant narrative that Black people are inherently violent and the counter-story that police violence is a national problem occurring in isolated incidents. Rather, the intervention highlights that police brutality is a problem that evolved locally over a long period of time in multiple locations across the country. *PAPVC* also enables the creation of multiple counter-stories. Additional records confirm racist policing and excessive use of force as longstanding structural problems in the Cleveland community, but this archive is unique in offering firsthand perspectives from those most affected by police brutality. Encountering the stories in *PAPVC* pushes those who engage with the archive to acknowledge that police violence is not an abstract problem to be solved, but rather a system that structures people’s lives in Cleveland. Listening to individuals’ accounts of their encounters with police violence allows one to develop an affective sense of the harm done by decades of racist policing that cannot be conveyed by secondary accounts.

At the same time, *PAPVC* tells stories about the history of resistance to racist policing in Cleveland, in both firsthand accounts and in records of PTS and other activist groups. Police violence received a great deal of national attention in 2014, but the story of resistance in Cleveland has changed over time, and has never disappeared, even when national media focused on other issues. Police brutality is a constant presence in the city of Cleveland, as is
resistance to racist policing. Police violence is a complex structural problem that impacts lives in many ways, and it cannot be solved with individual reform efforts aimed at specific aspects of the structure. In discourse about the problem of police brutality, it is especially important to center the views of those who have been directly impacted by the problem and who have been working to solve it for many years. *PAPVC* allows users to understand how these multiple strands of violence and resistance are woven into individuals’ lives as expressed in their stories, such as the oral histories found in the archive. *PAPVC* challenges those who seek an end to police violence to avoid the simplicity of replacing one dominant narrative with another, and instead to make room for multiple counter-stories that center on the lived experiences of those most affected. By prioritizing firsthand narratives, it avoids turning victims of police violence into symbols, and emphasizes their subjective experiences and interpretations. It also situates police violence within one particular city, acknowledging that the stories and histories told in other cities may have similarities but will not be the same. Police violence is a national problem, but if it is to be ended solutions must be local, grounded in history, and focused on justice and care for those affected.

Items from the Archive

The multimedia items included here reflect *PAPVC*’s emphasis on storytelling as an act of resistance. Many of the oral histories from the archive, like the one by Brenda Bickerstaff, weave personal narratives of repeated exposure to police violence along with expressions of a commitment to activism. Remembering lives lost is also an important theme. The image of a poster commemorating Tamir Rice is one of many such items that appear in *PAPVC*, along with commentary from activists about the lives and deaths of the people pictured. The last three items included here reflect the narrative and memory-work that Cleveland activists were doing prior to the creation of the digital archive. Those who resist structural violence and oppression have long told their stories as a way of galvanizing public support for their cause, and have also collected materials documenting the histories of their struggles as a means
of maintaining evidence of their work and its impact. Digital or digitized versions of items representing this work are included throughout the archive. These items were donated by individual activists who had been maintaining them in their personal physical and virtual spaces. By viewing them alongside the oral histories and other narrative testimonies included in PAPVC, a visitor to the archive can develop a sense of the larger narrative of the long struggle against police violence in Cleveland.

#1 Oral history interview with Brenda Bickerstaff, describing her personal history with police violence, as well as her commitment to activism. A recording of the interview can be found here: http://archivingpoliceviolence.org/items/show/7

Transcript: Okay, well first back in January 26, 2002, my brother Craig Bickerstaff was murdered by police on East 105th and Lee. July—retract that—back in 2012, March of 2012, I was wrongfully indicted by an officer, a detective by the name of Vincent Lucarelli. I have an investigation business as well. Was trying to get an individual out of jail. Apparently he was having a relationship with my client's girlfriend, and I found that out after—you know, once I got indicted. We pulled text messages and found out he was not only having, trying to have relations with her. He had been, had relations with other women. So they dismissed the case against me, and he was terminated from his job. July 26, 2015, my niece Ralkina Jones was found dead in the Cleveland Heights jail, and that is still under investigation. So unfortunately, our family has been—not, I won't say brutalized, but we've had some pretty tough experiences with the police. And it's just, it's a hard, it's a hard thing to deal with, especially me losing Ralkina now. And now she has to be on a poster like Craig because of the situation she went through. And she was arrested, however that wasn't the issue. The issue was that she died in their custody. And we're trying to find out why she died in their custody. Unanswered questions and things we went through when we were dealing with Craig. And it's just, it's just a hard thing to deal with. But I'm not going to give up on it . . . . I want people to be able to stand up. Don't be afraid. Don't be afraid to speak about it, because a lot of people are. Like today, we're right here on 105 and Saint Clair. I'm here because I've been a victim of it, my brother's been a victim of it, and now my niece has been a victim of it. And I've been a true advocate of this. And I want people to be able to be comfortable and speak about it and don't worry about any type of retaliation. I want them to come forward. Do not be afraid.
#2 Figure 2.1: Poster remembering Tamir Rice, reading “Tamir Rice. Killed November 22 by Cleveland Police.” Images of posters like this one honoring those killed by police appear alongside commentary written by longtime Cleveland activist Bill Swain in the PAPVC website.
http://archivingpoliceviolence.org/items/show/463.

#3 Figure 2.2: Palm card publicizing the People’s Tribunal on Police Brutality, organized by Puncture the Silence in 2015. The need to provide ongoing access to videos of this event was the initial catalyst for creating PAPVC.
http://archivingpoliceviolence.org/items/show/141
Demonstration Group’s focus grows with controversy

#4 Figure 2.3: Photograph from a march protesting police violence in Cleveland. http://archivingpoliceviolence.org/items/show/294

#5 Figure 2.4: Clipping of a newspaper article about Puncture the Silence from the Cleveland Plain Dealer. PAPVC documents press coverage of local activism, as well as the activists’ own perspectives. http://archivingpoliceviolence.org/items/show/307
Communities, Individuals, and Institutions: Building Archives Through Relationships of Care

_PAPVC_ was founded through a collaborative process developed by the individual archivists and activists who chose to participate, and it has never been affiliated with any university or professional organization. Working without institutional support or constraints enabled us to put building relationships of care at the center of our processes for developing _PAPVC_. Ethical considerations were often at the heart of our conversations, as we built and managed the archive in collaboration with the PTS activists and other Cleveland community members, but we did not seek guidance from particular professional or academic codes of ethics. Instead, we tried to address the needs of those most affected and hurt by the problem we were addressing, to prioritize them, and to include those who had been seeking solutions to that problem far longer than we had. There is a growing body of literature about the application of ethics of care frameworks to library and archival practice. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor wrote about the need for archivists to activate radical empathy by situating themselves within a web of relationships of affective responsibility with record creators, the subjects of records, users of records, and the larger community. Bethany Nowviskie argued that digital librarians and others engaged in digital humanities work should develop “an appreciation of context, interdependence, and vulnerability” and orient themselves toward “worldly action and response” rather than “objective evaluation and judgment.” These arguments cast the professional practitioner not as a distant, objective, unobtrusive observer, nor as a powerful expert arbiter of community needs, but as a subjective human fully embedded within and dependent upon various communities, responsible for developing relationships of care with other members of those communities.

Regardless of how an academic archivist views herself in relation to the communities she works with, she cannot control how those communities view and respond to her and to her position. Professions and academic institutions wield great power, and academic archivists often embody that power in their interactions with community members outside the profession or the university.
In the very act of describing themselves as professionals with particular skill sets, archivists and librarians assert expert power, the ability to influence people because of perceived superior knowledge and skills. Colleges and universities have a great deal of institutional power, shaping the communities in which they reside in profound ways. In community outreach work, academic professionals try to wield that power for the benefit of community members, but power can separate the professional from others in the community. It is often assumed in these relationships that the professional does not have the same needs as the “community.” Relationships between universities and their local neighborhoods are often tense, for good reason.

These power dynamics are explored in the literature on the ethics of “participatory action research,” a type of social science research that seeks to involve the subjects of research in the design, methodology, and execution of the project. Participatory action research developed as a response to ethical concerns about researchers attempting to study marginalized communities and causing harm through the use of methodologies that fail to fully account for the impact of the research on those communities. Ethical dilemmas still arise in this type of research, however, particularly around communication, trust, consent forms, and power dynamics.

We encountered all of these issues in the course of working on PAPVC. Consent forms for those who donated oral histories or other records to the archive were a particularly complex example. Consent forms required for IRB-approved research projects can be confusing to participants, actively limiting their understanding of the nature of the project and any risks involved. Although we did not undergo any IRB approval process for this project, we were particularly concerned about consent because of the potential for police retaliation against those who chose to share their stories about police violence. We also wanted people to understand their individual rights related to copyright and the legal risks associated with statements that might be considered libelous. At the same time, we wanted to clarify what the archive would and would not do with donated records, and mitigate legal risk for the volunteers who created the archive. Stacie Williams, one of the archivists most actively involved in developing PAPVC, consulted a lawyer as we drafted the
consent form, developing language to address all of those concerns. One PTS member strongly and repeatedly objected to the use of dense legal language in the form, arguing that it was confusing and so long that many were likely not to read it in full. This consideration became particularly complicated when we spoke to the incarcerated students in the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Justice Center. While all of the students were 18 and thus legally able to consent, we feared that they may have felt coerced to participate if they saw us as authority figures. We agreed to address these concerns by creating a “plain language” explanation of the consent form that we distributed along with the legal form for participants to sign. We also covered all of the issues described above in conversation, attempting to gauge participants’ understanding as we answered all of their questions. We tried to emphasize that consent was no mere formality, but an agreement between the participant and PAPVC in which both parties had rights, responsibilities, and risks. I do not believe that any of the participants I worked with felt coerced to participate, or that they did not understand the terms of participation, but of course I must accept the ethical discomfort of never knowing whether that is completely true. I am certain that our conversations about consent led some potential participants to choose not to share their stories in the archive.

While operating PAPVC independently of institutional control enabled us to put relationships of care at the center of our decision-making processes, it was also important to consider the ethical implications of deliberately choosing to create and maintain a memory project without infrastructural and institutional support. Christine Paschild has argued that community archives may reinscribe the marginalization of the communities they document by maintaining their important records within sites that have limited resources and lack professional support.13 By contrast, Bergis Jules noted that large collecting institutions such as academic library special collections are often beholden to donor interests, rendering them all but incapable of properly caring for and providing access to materials that don’t fit “clean narratives of history” preferred by the donor class.14 In writing about archives that specifically document human rights abuses perpetrated against people of color, Tonia Sutherland argued that by failing to document instances of lynching
across the United States, mainstream collecting institutions have made it nearly impossible for families of victims to seek truth and reconciliation. This suppression of historical records of injustice grants “archival amnesty” to abusers and implicitly endorses violence against Black people.15 If archivists today hope to do a better job of facilitating future investigations into abusive and racist policing and other ongoing human rights crises, we need to think carefully about the role of collecting institutions and professional archivists and librarians in building and maintaining collections related to violence.

Reflecting on my work with PAPVC, I find that engaging with community archives related to difficult or marginalized histories encourages us to think carefully about the boundaries between individual professionals, institutions, and communities. The individuals who created and maintain PAPVC, both the professional archivists and the community activists, are individually situated within multiple institutions and communities, and we brought those communities and institutions into dialogue with one another through our collaboration. In the case of PAPVC, the geographic coincidence of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) holding their annual conference in Cleveland served as the catalyst for the project. Although SAA was never formally involved as an institution, it provided justification for many professional archivists to travel to work on the project, and collecting oral histories for PAPVC became an informal activity that shaped the conference discourse. Just as professional associations helped to shape PAPVC, the archive has also shaped the profession. In 2016, I traveled with two of PAPVC’s community activists to speak at DPLAFest, a conference for the digital library and archives community. A group of PAPVC volunteers also spoke with graduate students in an Information Studies program at the University of California, Los Angeles.

In these ways, institutions provided space for productive dialogue between professional and community archivists, but in a way that reverses the typical power relationship. Community outreach projects are often developed as a way for powerful institutions to “give back” to local communities. In these cases, the community activists were offering their valuable perspectives based on lived experience to professional archivists and librarians. When we spoke at DPLAFest, the conference organizers paid for the community activists’ travel
expenses, but not for mine. In that situation, it was clear that their expertise as long-term activists grappling with issues of how to document violent and racist policing appropriately was valued by the DPLA community. They were the ones with something to offer to the institution, and the material conditions of the arrangement reflected that.

These situations can also dissolve the boundaries between overlapping communities in ways that can be productive for collaboration. Through my engagement with the activists, I learned more about the history and realities of Cleveland, which allowed me to become more embedded in the community. At the same time, they became members of the archival profession in some ways, learning new skills and contributing to professional discourse and education. Although PAPVC was developed with an ultimate goal of ending police violence, it had a secondary impact in the archival community by bringing in new voices and new ways of thinking about these kinds of memory projects.

I propose that when we think about archival custody and stewardship, we move away from the binary construction of institutional or community ownership and control toward thinking about an ecosystem of individuals, communities, and institutions that care for and use these materials. Each member of the system is connected to each other member, and all members of the system co-evolve. Just as a robust biological ecosystem has high capacity to support life in a complex web of ecological niches, a robust archival ecosystem has a high capacity to support records, documentation, and memory in a complex web of communities and institutions. In many cases, collecting institutions may not be the right niche for any particular collection. However, institutions can provide resources to community archives in the form of professional labor, funds, administrative support, and space. Archivists who work in institutions that cannot support projects like PAPVC can still resist archival amnesty for oppressors by finding ways to use their professional skills to support community initiatives. In doing so, they may serve as a bridge between the “community” and the “institution,” bringing the two into dialogue with one another about how all members of the system can support historical documentation in service of justice and care. Yuself Omowale argued that Western collecting institutions were developed as part of the colonial project, and thus
reproduce colonialism when they acquire materials from marginalized communities, inscribing colonialism into the archive and projecting it into the future. Projects like PAPVC enable us to think deeply about what values we hope to inscribe into the memory sites that we build, focusing on the futures that we hope to project forward.

Conclusion

PAPVC is an archive shaped by the community it documents, by the historical context of the subject it documents, by the personal and political motivations of those who developed and maintain it, and by the negotiated ethical frameworks used to guide decision-making as the archive came together. It is also an active site of political organizing and education in opposition to police violence and mass incarceration. As the needs of the Cleveland community and the activists maintaining PAPVC change, the archive itself will continue to change. It could not be so dynamic if the archivists and librarians involved had approached it using traditional modes of collecting to suit the needs of an institution and its primary user base. While PAPVC can serve as a historical record of police violence in Cleveland, its primary function is to participate in an active conversation that is both local and national in scope. Its independence from institutional control and standard professional practice is critical to enabling it to function this way. Institutional collecting often begins from a dominant narrative, with curators and archivists seeking records that support that narrative, or perhaps challenge it in specific ways. The goal of institutional collecting is usually to support the needs of that institution’s users. The goal of those who created PAPVC is to mitigate the harm caused by police violence in Cleveland, and ultimately to end police violence in the city. No one who worked on the archive believes that it alone can accomplish those goals, but all decisions made in the construction of the archive reflect them. The choices made in building and maintaining the archive enable it to support the construction of narratives that challenge the dominant culture to make space for the voices, perspectives, and feelings of those affected by structural racist violence. We must understand police violence before we can end it, and the
national media narratives about it are insufficient for deep understanding. *PAPVC* presents counter-stories that offer insight into the myriad ways that police violence shapes individual lives and communal spaces in Cleveland, as well as the long history of political resistance to racist policing in the city. Because it prioritizes those most affected and injured by police violence in Cleveland, and those most invested in ending it, the archive is not just a repository for records but a site of active historical narrative development, changing as necessary to support the stories that the community that created it wants to tell.

Notes


4. Stacie Williams and Jarrett Drake have written extensively on *A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*. Please read their work for more information:


Works Cited


