

**“THE DAYS ARE LONG, BUT THE YEARS ARE SHORT”:  
RECORDS OF NEW PARENTHOOD IN THE PANDEMIC**

by

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## **Abstract**

New parenthood and the Covid-19 pandemic are both transformative experiences that are reflected in personal records and recordkeeping practices. The growing literature on personal archives recognizes the role of personal records in facilitating relationships and in shaping and documenting personal development; the central role of affect in the creation of records; and the importance of expanding the concept of the record. This project explores the relevancy of these insights in one specific area: recordkeeping by new parents during the pandemic. Through semi-structured interviews and autoethnography, I endeavored to determine how pandemic conditions have interacted with new parents' urges to record their pregnancies, their births, and their new babies' early lives; the nature of the records they have kept; and their recordkeeping experiences. My three main foci were maintaining connection with loved ones, seeking social recognition of parenthood, and gaining a sense of control over the passage of time.

Because the conditions surrounding both new parenthood and the pandemic tend to transform one's experience of the passage of time, these conditions create a unique window into how personal recordkeeping interacts with the temporal foundations of the archival concept of the 'record.' This project responds to recent critiques and expansions of the concept of the record, providing a detailed analysis of personal recordkeeping practices that do not conform to the clear temporal or personal distinctions that undergird archival theory. This results in a renewal of the archival concept of the record. The creation, sharing, use, and preservation of records by new parents presents a portrait of records and recordkeeping that 1) challenges clear separations between records, creators, custodians, users, and the subjects of records; 2) defies a clear distinction between primary and secondary value; 3) expands the inclusiveness of the concept of a 'record'; and 4) (by virtue of 1-3) complicates the linear view of time on which mainstream archival theory is founded. My analysis of the recordkeeping practices of new parents in the pandemic allows for both a temporal reconceptualization of the record, and its recognition as an embodied and dynamic entity that is open for reconfiguration with each new activation.

## **Lay Summary**

For this thesis, I spoke to several people who had become parents during the pandemic about how they had kept records of their experiences. I was interested in how pandemic parents had used records to stay connected to loved ones, to gain a sense of recognition as parents, and to feel in control of how time was passing. Several scholars in archival studies, especially those who study personal recordkeeping practices, have recently suggested that the concept of the ‘record’ should be redefined. I used the descriptions of personal recordkeeping practices by pandemic parents to support these calls for a redefinition of the record. The recordkeeping practices I learned about showed that personal records should be understood as embodied, responsive to how people use them, and reflecting a cyclical understanding of time.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an original intellectual product of the author, A.Z. Everly. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 2- 3 was covered by UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board Certificate number H22-01145.

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To Loki, whose records I'm honoured to keep.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In March of this year, I received an email from a graduate school acquaintance of mine who I hadn't heard from in some time. "Over the past two or so years," he wrote, "various occasions came, and went, which I thought I could write to you about (but didn't, for no reason other than that I didn't immediately, and then time passed and, well, then more time)." This—especially "the past two or so years," which comprehended almost precisely the duration of the pandemic at that point—was such a touchingly relatable way to open an email that it crinkled the corners of my eyes on contact. My friend continued, listing various points at which he had thought about writing, and finishing with, "when you posted those photographs that you entitled, if I remember correctly, 'Diary of a Plague Year' to Facebook—though it wasn't until I looked back at them, months later, that I realised that you weren't, as I initially thought (seeing only one or two pictures), pregnant at the time you posted them but that you & Michel were already parents then."

Coincidentally, I read this email the day before my son's first birthday, while I was preoccupied with my own thoughts of times past and time passing—wishing time wouldn't pass, or that I could do it all again (a bit better this time). At the same time, by way of this preoccupation, I was reflecting on the distinctive experiences of a new parent in the pandemic: the long, strange months of my pregnancy, made stranger by the pandemic-mandated removal from the familiarity of everyday life, family and friends; the ever-more-imminent arrival of our first baby accompanied by the slow realization that we wouldn't be sharing his arrival with loved ones; his birth and whole first year almost as socially cloistered as my pregnancy had been; the world, now radically transformed, the only world he had ever known or would ever know. All this had generated for me, on the first anniversary of my son's birth and the second anniversary of the pandemic, a bewildering tangle of emotions and mental states: regret and gratitude, presentiment and nostalgia.

The various temporal confusions my friend had written about, and the wistfulness of these confusions, captured my state of mind perfectly. Due in large part to my chronic misuse of the temporal scale of social media, he had learned of my pregnancy on Facebook only after I was no longer pregnant, and he had realized his mistake only months after that. Analogously, aside from my partner and a scant handful of local friends, our loved ones (who are mostly in Hawai‘i and Montréal) had not seen us during the whole course of my pregnancy—or indeed, until our son was 6 or 7 months old, beginning to crawl and eat his first solid food, not at all the liminal and ethereal being he had been as a newborn. I was both grateful for the uninterrupted time we three had been able to spend getting to know each other as a family, and regretful that my extended family knew so little of us. I simultaneously appreciated the lack of unsolicited interference during my pregnancy (no strangers’ hands on my belly!), and pined for more social recognition of myself as a parent and my son as a new social being. Most of all, at the end of the second year of the pandemic and the first year of my first child’s life, I wondered where all the time had gone.

This relation of my own experience over the pandemic may at first sound, especially in its personal details, irreducibly particular. But this project is inspired by the intuition that in these experiences lies a kernel of relatability, both with new parenting experiences and with pandemic experiences more broadly. From informal conversation and from a few pieces I’ve come across in the popular press, I’ve gleaned that my experience of becoming a parent during the pandemic was not unique. Many people find themselves removed from their everyday lives and relationships during pregnancy, and many people feel a need to actively reintegrate themselves after having a baby, especially their first. Many people have also been isolated from loved ones and other important social relationships by the pandemic. And many who have become parents during the pandemic have found that these two experiences tend to reinforce or even compound one another.

The global Covid-19 pandemic that began in early 2020, and has persisted through various incarnations into the present, has had transformational effects on many aspects of human life. Our politics, economic systems, and health infrastructure have been forever altered; and there have also been other changes closer to home. Many people have undergone a significant upheaval of their work lives, their home lives, and/or their relationships. Some relationships—especially between people living together or sharing a ‘bubble’—have deepened and intensified, while others—especially between faraway friends and family—have been tested by long separation. For many of us, the very pace and duration of daily life has changed, as commutes to the workplace have been replaced with the awkward dance between rooms of the dual-Zoom household (and then, for many, re-replaced with commutes), and as the boundaries between working at home and working at work become ever more complicated. With these developments, and notwithstanding an uneven return to in-person work and school, the temporal landmarks that once structured our experience of the passage of time have been rearranged, and it remains almost as commonplace and socially acceptable as it was two years ago to wonder aloud what day of the week it is.

New parents, like we post-pandemic folk, also live in a day-to-day temporal context that complicates the orderly passage of time. As the truism goes, “the days are long, but the years are short.” That is, the absence of one’s accustomed temporal markers—along with sleep disruptions, a lack of adult conversation, and other stressors—tend to make each day feel interminable, while the breakneck pace of infant and child development leaves one gasping for breath at the end of each year. Indeed, a recent study on the subjective experience of time in adults confirms that those with children experience a marked acceleration of the passage of time (Wittmann and Mella, 2021). Many—if not most—new parents, then, have an ambivalent relationship to time: we

simultaneously curse its slow passage and wish that we could slow it down; we look forward eagerly to each new milestone even as we wish we could pause and savour the moments we're in.

This project is inspired by a deep curiosity about how these distinctive emotional, psychological, and most of all *temporal* experiences—both those of new parenthood and those of the pandemic—motivate, and are reflected in, the keeping of records. The intent of the project was to determine how pandemic conditions such as lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing have interacted with new parents' perceived need to keep records of their pregnancies, their births, and their new babies' early lives; the nature of the records they've kept; and their experiences of recordkeeping during this time. My underlying hypothesis was that the distinctive experience of becoming a parent during the pandemic had resulted in a distinctive attitude toward, and practice of, personal recordkeeping. The goal of the project, however, is not to establish that the personal recordkeeping approach of new parents during the pandemic is indeed distinctive. Rather, it is to explore this approach in order to gain insight into the psychological and affective significance of recordkeeping practices for new parents during the pandemic—and, in turn, to generate insight into the nature of personal recordkeeping and even, more generally, the nature of records. Since my sample size is small and selective, and the evidence I have gathered through semi-structured interviews is qualitative rather than quantitative and particular rather than generalizable, this project should be clearly understood as an exploratory rather than representative study.

The three main questions guiding my research are as follows:

- How have those experiencing new parenthood during the pandemic used the creation, curation and sharing of records to document this experience and to share it with loved ones?
- How does creating and sharing records interact with the social recognition of new parents?
- How has recordkeeping during the intersection of new parenthood and the pandemic interacted with parents' perception of the passage of time?

These three main guiding questions were formulated to elicit insight into three main areas of interest—isolation from loved ones, significant life changes which may be socially unrecognized, and the strangeness of the passage of time—derived from my own experience and from the popular press pieces I’ve come across about becoming a parent in the pandemic. These kinds of experiences seem to be equally typical of both the pandemic *and* early parenting; my research evaluates the extent to which the co-occurrence of both conditions tend to magnify these effects, and how these effects were reflected in, and interacted with, recordkeeping practices. Significantly, all three kinds of experience—isolation, significant life changes, and the passage of time—are experiences that tend to motivate the creation and sharing of records. When we are far from those we care about, we share pictures, letters, and messages to keep them in our lives and thoughts. Likewise, milestones such as graduations, marriages, births, and deaths are central locus points for documentation. The passage of time is less directly documentable, but is, as I will argue, both a central practical motivator and a conceptual foundation of the recordkeeping practices.

The first two guiding questions regarding connection with loved ones and social recognition of parenthood are, like the third, influenced by my own experience of new parenthood during the pandemic, and also reflected in popular press pieces on the topic. Yet they proved to be less fruitful, in terms of their elicitation of substantive interview responses, than the third guiding question about the passage of time. In my discussion with participants about the latter issue, a rich vein of insight into the methods of and motivations for recordkeeping by new parents was revealed.

These insights, as I will go on to show, succeed in illuminating not only the dual landscapes of new parenthood and life in the pandemic, but also the nature of personal recordkeeping itself—particularly in the relatively under-explored area of records creation. This project will thus contribute to a recent and growing literature on personal records as they interact with time, affect,

and the experience of parenthood, offering insights into the motives and significance of recordkeeping practices for new parents during this important historical moment. The project adds detail and concreteness to the personal archives literature—particularly in the areas of the *creation* of records, and of recordkeeping by parents—as well as illuminating an arena of private and intimate experience during the pandemic. Moreover, the temporal experience of new parenthood during the pandemic sheds light on the more fundamental and complex question of exactly what we’re doing when we create records in the first place.

Authoritative definitions of the record since the inception of archival theory have expressed the relationship between records and activities in various ways. Muller, Feith, and Fruin define the archives as “the whole of the written documents, drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, in so far as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or official” (Muller, Feith, & Fruin 1968, 13). Sir Hilary Jenkinson defines archival records as “The pieces of writing, on whatever material made and in whatever form [...] which business offices, public or private, have tended to accumulate and preserve by way of reminder and summary of various aspects of the work of which they formed a part” (Jenkinson 2003, 115). More recently in the records management context, the record has been defined as “a document made or received in the course of a practical activity as an instrument or a by-product of such activity, and set aside for action or reference” (InterPARES 2018).

Each of these definitions (all of which, it should be noted, are intended to apply to the organizational rather than the personal context) emphasizes the essential relationship between records and the activities they document. Yet the relationship between the future, present, and past is equally central to the practice of recordkeeping. A record is, at a fundamental level, documentation of the past that is preserved for the sake of the future (see e.g. Anderson 2013;

Caswell 2021). Critical archives studies scholars such as Kimberly Anderson (2013) and Michelle Caswell (2021) point out that the above definitions thus rely on a linear model of time and a strict separation between the various roles of those who interact with records. Eric Ketelaar (2001), meanwhile, points out that records are not static but dynamically responsive to their ‘activation’ by those who encounter them. Scholars in the emerging field of personal archives research such as Jennifer Douglas (2018, 2019, 2020, 2021), Allison Mills (2018), Alexandra Alisauskas (2019, 2021) and Marika Cifor (2016a, 2016b) emphasize the centrality of relationships—relationships of affect and motivation, between records and activities and between creators, custodians, users, and subjects—in determining the value and meaning of records. Catherine Hobbs (2010, 2015), meanwhile, turns the focus toward the motivations of recordkeepers and the *creation* of records.

This project adds to these critiques and expansions, providing a detailed analysis of personal records, and recordkeeping practices, that do not conform to a linear model of time, or to clear separations between creators, custodians, users, and subjects of records. Because the conditions surrounding both new parenthood and the pandemic have tended to disrupt and transform one’s experience of the passage of time, these conditions create a unique window into how recordkeeping, as it is practiced in everyday life, interacts with and reflects the very temporal foundation of the archival concept of the record. The result of this analysis is a critical reevaluation, and ultimately a renewal, of the conceptual foundation of recordkeeping as it interacts with temporality. In addition to this temporal reconceptualization of the record, this analysis demonstrates the potentially embodied nature of records, as well as their dynamic nature as documents that are open for reconfiguration with each new activation.

## **Chapter 2: Methods and Literature Review**

### **2.1 Literature Review**

A number of articles about the distinctive experience of becoming a parent during the pandemic have cropped up in US, UK, and Canadian publications over the past year or so (e.g. Gibson 2021; Gilbert 2021; Kohn 2021; March 2021, Weeman 2021). A large-scale survey and photography project on the topic have also been brought into conversation through a UK project called Generation COVID (Kent and Lloyd-Fox 2021). Common themes touched on by each of these contributions include experiences of intensified isolation; repetitiveness, boredom, and undifferentiated time; missing milestones or not being able to share them with loved ones; a lack of social recognition of the transition into parenthood; and anxiety about the effect of pandemic conditions on infant development. These insights (apart from the last) reflect the three main areas of interest I covered in my interviews: maintaining connections with loved ones, seeking social recognition of parenthood, and gaining a sense of control over the passage of time.

These articles and other works—in particular the Generation COVID project, which combines several different expressive media in order to highlight the first-person experiences of pandemic parents—represent meaningful and significant contributions to comprehending and conveying the experience of new parents in the pandemic. Moreover, an interesting uniting feature of these projects is that the writers and researchers undertaking them are, overwhelmingly, new parents themselves. In these projects, however, parents' efforts to document their *own* experiences through their recordkeeping practices are, naturally, secondary to authors' and researchers' use of the records thus generated to tell these families' stories. This project, in contrast, places parental records at the center of an effort to make space for pandemic parents to tell their own stories.

As Catherine Hobbs puts it in her entry on Personal Records in the Encyclopedia of Archival Science, “The concepts of personal archives and personal recordkeeping hinge on the *relationship* between the documents and the activities and development of their creator” (Hobbs 2015, 266, emphasis mine). This recognition of the centrality of the relationship between documents and activities highlights one main area of similarity *and* difference between personal records and organizational records. Though the precise definition of ‘records’ is contested within mainstream archival theory, the *relationship* between documents and activities is universally emphasized as a central feature of records in general (Yeo 2015, 315).

In the case of personal records, as we have just seen, this relationship between activities and documents is explicitly recognized as formative—that is, as central to the “development of their creator.” Personal records—including journals, photographs, certificates, and even institutional records—both document the personal development of their creators, and play a crucial role in this development. Personal records not only tell, but can also *shape*, the story of who we are. This central role of records in personal development arises in part from the fact that personal records are just that—personal. But it also arises from the fact that in the context of personal records (in contrast with organizational records), creators, custodians, and users of records are often one and the same. As Hobbs goes on to outline in her entry, contributions to personal archives theory by postmodernism and digital humanities have together helped to shape the study of personal archives in a critical direction, which recognizes this blurring of the distinction between roles, while also highlighting the central importance of records *creation* (Hobbs 2015, 269).

In their advocacy article “From the Sidelines to the Center: Reconsidering the Potential of the Personal in Archives,” Jennifer Douglas and Alison Mills present an argument for considering the relationships that are supported by personal records from a different perspective.

“We should also be thinking,” they assert, “about the personal as a way in which records are experienced, or as a *type of relationship* or orientation between a record of any kind and the person who interacts with it” (Douglas & Mills 2018, 258, emphasis mine). In the context of their article, this constitutes an argument for expanding the scope of ‘personal records’ to include institutional documentation such as residential school records and medical files, which can be of great personal significance to those who encounter—or ‘activate’—them. In the context of the present discussion, however, this argument also points to another important relationship that is shaped and enabled by personal records: the relationship between records and anyone to whom they are significant, including the direct subjects of records and their loved ones and descendants. This project presents parental recordkeeping as both a kind of relationship in itself, and as a way of tending to various relationships—those between parents, their children, and their loved ones in particular.

Also providing important background to my project, and elaborating upon the role of archives in mediating relationships, is a recent turn toward affect theory in archival studies, exemplified by Marika Cifor’s “Affecting Relations” (2016a) and “Aligning Bodies” (2016b). In these articles, Cifor sketches out an affective theory of archival practice that foregrounds affect as a form of archival value, implicates archivists in a web of affective relations, and highlights the potency of affects (particularly hatred) in organizing and focusing activism and resistance. Considering affect as a form of archival value problematizes the priority that has historically been placed on the ‘objectivity’ of research and of records in the academic context. Yet Cifor argues that recognizing the affective value of archives simply acknowledges the role that archives *already* play in our lives and relationships. “Archives,” as she puts it, “are in large part about creating, documenting, maintaining, reconciling and (re)producing [affective] relations—between records and people, ideologies, institutions, systems and worlds—across bounds of time and space” (Cifor

2016a, 8). These insights into the affective dimensions of personal recordkeeping and archival practice help to explain why interviewing new parents about their recordkeeping practices in particular provides such an illuminating window into the affective dimension of early parenthood. This project reveals the affective significance of records both as a strong motivator for the *creation* of records, and as a central component of the *value* of records, for new parents.

In her summative book chapter “Reenvisioning the Personal,” Hobbs provides a history of the development of personal archives as an area of study, culminating in the provocative claim that “The *psychology* of recordkeeping is at the heart of why documents were created or kept by individuals” (Hobbs 2010, 222, emphasis mine). This focus on psychology continues to problematize the priority historically placed on ‘objectivity’ in archival science, social science, and other areas of academic research, while also highlighting the individual *motivations* for the creation of personal records. Noting that previous approaches to the incorporation of personal records within archival theory have tended to assimilate these records to the existing frameworks applying to organizational records, Hobbs sets out account for “the circumstances forming the archives and the character determining the individual’s choices. This approach is informed by how individuals have produced and lived with documentation in their lives” (ibid., 223). This project likewise seeks to elucidate not only what kinds of recordkeeping practices parents engage in, but how they live with their records, and the roles that records play in their lives and relationships.

This focus on the psychology of recordkeeping and the motivations of recordkeepers leads naturally to a focus on the creation stage of the records lifecycle. As Hobbs puts it: “Personal archives are formed because of the needs, desires, and predilections of their creators to *create* and keep documents. [...] Because individuals *create* documentation for *personal reasons* [...], they dictate the forms documents take, the genres of their writing, and the changes made during their

use” (2010, 213, emphases mine). As becomes clear in this passage, questions about motives in personal recordkeeping are, first and foremost, questions about creation. The ‘psychology’ of recordkeeping begins with one’s motives, desires, and drives in relation to the creation of records. As Hobbs points out, the creation stage is also of particular interest (and complexity) with respect to motivation, due to the fact that the creation of personal records is often unintentional or incidental—that is, “a creator may be creating a document without seeking to create a record” (ibid., 225). For these reasons, the creation of records should be of great interest to the study of archives—yet this stage has traditionally been considered as outside the purview of mainstream archivists who have regarded their role as properly beginning with acquisition. Records creation *has* emerged as an area of explicit archival concern along with the rise of digital records (see e.g. Hobbs 2010, 221). Yet the creation stage remains relatively underemphasized in archival theory in general and even in the personal archives literature. This project endeavors to fill in this lacuna.

Likewise somewhat underexplored in the archival literature thus far are the distinctive recordkeeping contexts that may be encountered by ordinary people in everyday life. Parenthood is, of course, an exemplar among such contexts—one in which, as Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas argue in their recent article, “It Feels Like a Life’s Work: Recordkeeping as an Act of Love,” recordkeeping can be considered as one of the many ways in which we care for our children, “akin to the kinds of quotidian tasks parents grow accustomed to performing, like trimming fingernails and wiping noses” (Douglas & Alisauskas 2021, 26). While the quotidian nature of parental recordkeeping may at first glance appear to render this context less worthy of scholarly scrutiny, there is a growing sense of recognition apparent in the personal archives literature that it is precisely these kinds of everyday ‘custodial’ activities that are best suited to revealing, examining, and explaining the role of recordkeeping in everyday life.

The above article continues a research project on personal recordkeeping by bereaved parents which Douglas began some years ago. In “Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists” (2019) and “Letting Grief Move Me” (2020), Douglas radically shifts our understanding of the role of recordkeeping in the most intimate and transformative aspects of our lives. The former article explores the possibility of conceiving of the creation and curation of archives as a kind of grief work, which maintains the relationship between survivors and deceased loved ones and thus allows the full work of grieving to be carried out. The latter article focuses specifically on the collection, curation, and sharing of records in online grief communities dedicated to parents who have suffered the death of a baby, either through stillbirth or neonatal loss.

Of particular relevance to the present project is the “accumulation of things associated with the baby” such as “baby clothes, blankets, and hospital ID bracelets” which, as Douglas explains citing Linda L. Layne, bereaved parents often hold onto in part to attest to the ‘realness’ of their beloved children after their death (2019, 92). Though contextually and experientially they are worlds apart, I would suggest that the parental urge to accumulate such material objects under pandemic conditions rather than bereavement is nonetheless imbued by a similar urge to maintain the realness of their babies in the absence of full social recognition—as well as, I will argue, an implicit recognition of their babies themselves as embodied records. This latter point is bolstered by a return to the idea of embodied records—“records *of the body*, records *on the body*, and records that *interact with the body*”—in Douglas’ and Alisauskas’ more recent article (2021). Here they discuss several examples of items that are not usually classified as records by conventional archival theory, including “memorial tattoos and jewellery, as well as things like trees planted in memory of a child, a child’s physical remains, and even repeated rituals performed in memory of a child” (ibid., 16). As we shall see, even in the context of recordkeeping by non-bereaved parents, such

non-traditional forms of record are common, and regarded with particular affective investment; as I will argue, this calls for a reconceptualization of the archival concept of the record in order to recognize and incorporate these and other kinds of records and recordkeeping practices.

This project takes up these various threads of scholarship from the growing literature in personal archives theory—the role of personal records in facilitating relationships; the part played by personal records in shaping and documenting personal development; the central role of affect and the significance of personal motivations in the creation of records; and the importance of expanding our concept of the record—and explores their relevancy in one specific area: recordkeeping by new parents during the pandemic. The project brings a focused lens to the creation stage of personal recordkeeping, and to the specific context of recordkeeping by parents—both of which have been underemphasized in the field thus far. This focus on a particular personal records context adds insight to each of these threads of scholarship while also revealing implications for the nature of archival records more generally.

With regard to the facilitation of relationships, this project highlights the relationships between creators, custodians, users, and subjects of records as significantly mediated, and even *co-constituted*, by the records themselves. With respect to the shaping of personal development by personal records, this project reveals this as an iterative and collaborative process occurring between creators, custodians, users, the subjects of records, and records themselves. With regard to the role of affect in the personal motivations that inspire personal recordkeeping practices, this project presents a window into what is both a unique kind of practice—keeping records of early parenthood during the pandemic—and a universally-relevant one—preserving traces of the affectively-charged past for the sake of the future. Finally, while the recordkeeping practices I cover in this study are of course not generalizable, the universal relevancy of the insights they

enable succeeds in motivating an expansion of the archival concept of the record to include a broader range of forms and account for a more expansive account of temporality.

Perhaps due to the foundational role of temporality in archival concept of the record, archival literature that engages explicitly with temporality is hard to come by. Connections between time, affect, and social media, however, *are* well explored in the existing literature. In particular, the temporal and affective affordances of social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are scrutinized in Marika Cifor's "What is Remembered Lives" (2021), Jennifer Pybus' "Accumulating Affect" (2015), Kaun and Stiernstedt's "Facebook Time" (2014) and Emily Keightley's "From Immediacy to Intermediacy" (2013). Cifor focuses on the activist potential of Instagram's capacity to make ongoing crises such as the HIV/AIDS epidemic feel more present or 'lively.' Pybus highlights the facilitation—and visualization—of affective and social relations through the curation of what Ann Cvetcovitch (2003) has called 'archives of feelings' on Facebook. Kaun and Stiernstedt develop a theory of the connection between archive, flow, and narrative that accounts for the structuration of time by Facebook. And Keightley considers the 'conceptual shift' that is necessary to understanding Facebook's 'imaginative' and 'symbolic' disruption of the experience of time.

These engagements with issues of time and affect do much to illuminate the affective and temporal affordances (and constraints) of social media platforms, thus highlighting the transformative potential of these platforms while also exposing their more insidious tendencies toward social engineering. It is beyond the purview of these inquiries, however, to probe the fundamental relationship between records and temporality itself. Kimberley Anderson's "The Footprint and the Stepping Foot: Archival Records, Evidence, and Time," as well as Michelle Caswell's recent book *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, set out to do just that.

Anderson argues that the archival concepts of ‘record’ and ‘evidence’ are based on several broadly ‘Western’ preconceptions: the linearity of time, a disconnect between records creation and use, and the removal and ‘fixing’ of a record as external to the event through which it has been generated. In Anderson’s view, moving beyond these preconceptions to comprehend more kinds of records—i.e. those that reflect cyclical or amorphous time, those that are inextricable from events and/or creators, and those that cannot be ‘fixed’ (such as “storytelling, dance, activity, or ritual that bridge past and present but may have shifting physical manifestations or embodiments” (Anderson 2013, 363))—will better “reflect the breadth and range of human experience” (ibid., 350). As we shall see, a more expansive understanding of the temporal foundation of the record and a more inclusive account of what counts as a record go hand in hand.

Caswell takes this argument further toward the promotion of social justice, asserting that “to build archival theories and systems based on one dominant yet unnamed temporality masquerading as universal is to ignore and de-legitimate countless other non-dominant ways of viewing time” (Caswell 2021, 39). Caswell examines how a unidirectional and eschatological concept of time inherited from the Abrahamic faith traditions infuses mainstream historical accounts, including those used in anti-oppression discourse, with a linear progress narrative. “In the dominant archival temporal logic,” as she puts it, “the past is singular and it is over” (ibid., 35). Caswell argues that this dominant logic, which is founded on the temporal disconnects highlighted by Anderson (between event and fixed object, creation and use), implicates archivists in the imposition of a “white temporal imaginary [which] conceives, builds, and enforces systems of racial inequity based on false notions of progress” (ibid., 32). That is, the progress narrative of history often upheld by archival institutions as a justification of their own social significance in fact obfuscates both the past and the present by obscuring the cyclicity of history—particularly

histories of oppression—and their resultant relevance in the present. As an antidote to these tendencies, Caswell proposes, with Anderson, that records be reconceptualized not as fixed documentation of a completed past, but as contested, continually unfolding, and embedded in a cyclical temporality. Only by rethinking records in this way, she insists, can their relevancy and urgency be fully realized in the present.

Finally, my own background in philosophy, and especially in the work of Henri Bergson, allows me to interpret the temporal experience of parental recordkeeping through what I call “nostalgia for the present.” Bergson’s concept of ‘duration’ highlights the quality of lived time as the simultaneous ‘interpenetration’ of present and past, in which the past is brought to bear on every present experience, and the constant passing of the present means that once we are experiencing any given event, it is always already past (Bergson 2001, 101). This impossibility of grasping hold of the present, especially in periods of rapid change—and, under my interpretation, the *nostalgia* for the present that arises when that change is occurring in a context of heightened emotion—seems to be a common experience of early parenting, which may be intensified under pandemic conditions by the sense that we are missing much of the context that would make this passage of time more meaningful. This interpenetration of past and present also sheds further light on Anderson’s conceptualization of records as situated in cyclical time, as well as Caswell’s call to activate archives *in the present*, bolstering her claim that the past is continually unfolding.

Bergson’s theory of temporality, moreover, also permits an interpretation of the living being *itself* as a kind of record. As Bergson puts it, “Wherever anything lives, there is open, somewhere, a register in which time is being inscribed” (Bergson 1998, 15-16). This is because, for Bergson, the enduring life of the living being, accompanied by memory, renders it the kind of thing in which the past always remains, “actual and acting” (ibid.). As I will go on to show, this

notion of the living being as a ‘register’ in which time is inscribed in turn suggests the possibility of interpreting infants themselves as records of their own development, thus expanding the concept of the record even further. Again, this expansion is in keeping with Anderson and Caswell’s reconceptualization of the record to include a greater range of forms in order to reflect and incorporate a broader and more culturally representative array of recordkeeping traditions.

In addition to providing further theoretical background for the temporal and ontological reconceptualization of records, Bergson also presents further resources for understanding records not as static repositories of the past, but rather as dynamic and responsive to their (re)activation in the present (Ketelaar 2001). For Bergson, by virtue of the temporal framework of duration—which recognizes the simultaneous interpenetration of past and present—the past continues to exist in the present, “actual and acting” (Bergson 1998, 15-16). As philosopher and Bergson scholar Alia Al-Saji observes, this means that the past is not closed or static, but rather remains “open [...] for future inscription.” Moreover, as she clarifies, “this inscription is not a mere addition of events to the past; rather, it is a reconfiguration of the directionality and sense of the past” (Al-Saji 2012, 3). This means that each time we encounter the past in the present, we also *reconfigure* the past, giving new sense to past events—and thus to records—as they are reactivated in shaping each new present. Thus, in participating in sharing, modifying, and curating records together with others, we give new meaning to events in our collective past and thus, reconfigure that past.

Thinking through these concepts in the context of personal recordkeeping in general, and records creation in particular, provides support for Caswell and Anderson’s proposed reconceptualization of records as continually unfolding and embedded in a cyclical temporality by demonstrating that it is already being enacted in personal recordkeeping practices. It also demonstrates that the notion of understanding living beings—in particular infants—*themselves* as

records is not (as it may at first appear) radical or far-fetched, but rather one way in which records are already conceived of, and interacted with, in everyday personal recordkeeping practice. Finally, this Bergsonian theoretical framework provides a conceptual foundation for understanding records not as static or closed, but as fundamentally dynamic and open to the reconfigurations that—as Ketelaar points out—can occur whenever records are activated or encountered anew.

## **2.2. Methods**

This qualitative research project is based on semi-structured interviews with people who have become parents during the pandemic, about the records they have kept of their pregnancies (or adoptions) and/or the early periods of their new babies' lives. In a semi-structured interview, a pre-designed list of questions is used, but the selection of questions from this list and the order in which they are posed in the interview depend to some extent upon interviewee responses, which are used to guide the interviewer in the ordering and formulation of questions during the interview. Follow-up questions can also be developed and posed during the interview, depending likewise upon previous responses (Bryman 2012, 212). Employing this semi-structured approach ensures that the interview more closely resembles a 'natural' or 'organic' conversation, and can also allow the interviewee to feel more ownership over the discussion. While such a method is not ideal for obtaining quantitative or comparative data due to its inexact nature, its open-endedness is well-suited to exploring the affective and qualitative aspects of human experience (*ibid.*, 246).

My original goal was to find out how pandemic conditions such as lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing had interacted with first-time parents' perceived need to create, collect, share, and preserve records, the nature of the records they had kept, and their experiences of recordkeeping during this time. Moreover, I was interested in determining how these

recordkeeping practices interacted with various aspects of participants' experiences with first-time parenthood during the pandemic. This initial plan formed the basis of my application for Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) approval at UBC, which was granted in May of 2022. I later submitted a post-approval revision to my application in order to include second-time parents (who, I determined, might be able to provide interesting comparative insights), which was approved in June 2022. My research plan remained substantially unchanged after this point.

The method is also semi-autoethnographic, as I too became a parent during the pandemic. Autoethnography, once viewed with suspicion in the academic research context (Ellis & Bochner 2000), has gained increasing recognition and respect in the past two decades (Forber-Pratt 2015). In their foundational entry in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Catherine Ellis and Arthur Bochner define autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing [...] connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner 2000, 39). Autoethnography could thus be interpreted, at first glance, as an uneasy combination of two distinctive modes of inquiry: (subjective) personal narrative and (objective) cultural research. Yet the method in fact represents a *synthesis* of these modes in which the empirical and theoretical rigour of academic research is implemented toward first-person observation, while the affective and experiential richness of self-disclosure adds detail, insight, and significance to qualitative inquiry (Fourie 2021, 3).

A unifying requirement of autoethnography is that the researcher be explicit and transparent with the reader about their insertion of their own perspective into the research at hand, and take a reflexive and critical perspective on their own experience which assists in rendering further insight into the experiences of others (Fourie 2021, 4-5). “In reflexive autoethnography,” a formative handbook entry explains, personal experience becomes important primarily in how it illuminates the culture under study” (Ellis & Bochner 2000, 40). The methodology of reflexive

autoethnography can take many forms, from rigorous self-study in the mode of social-scientific research (‘systematic sociological introspection’),<sup>1</sup> to simply “starting research from one’s own personal experience,” offering personal reflections to provide insight into the background motivation of a project, add detail and emotional richness to its findings, and provide a contrast in perspective with the contributions of study participants (ibid.). My project falls at the latter end of this methodological spectrum.

As ethnographers have long observed, one’s intimate familiarity with the group being studied—combined in *autoethnography* with one’s willingness, as a researcher, to turn the lens of observation on oneself—can enrich both the quantity and the quality of research findings. In this project, my insider position helped me to make contact with potential interviewees and support a sense of connection in interviews, as well as providing unique insight in the formulation of interview questions. This sympathy with participants’ concerns and experiences also rendered the interviews I conducted more meaningful and productive. A comparison with my own experiences, moreover, allowed me to add breadth and richness to my observations. Some aspects of my own experience of becoming a parent in the pandemic were reiterated, reframed, and elaborated upon by study participants over the course of the interviews I conducted, while others were *disconfirmed* by interview responses. In this way, the juxtaposition of my own experiences with others’ has proved to be a mutually enriching, critical, and clarificatory process.

While this project, as discussed thus far, embraces various methodologies associated with empirical work in the social sciences (such as qualitative, semi-structured interviewing and autoethnography), it is nonetheless properly situated within the field of archival studies. Thus, my inquiry is not generally sociological or ethnographic, but rather concerns *recordkeeping*—

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<sup>1</sup> A fine example of this approach is provided by Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills (2018).

specifically *personal* recordkeeping—as a particular kind of social practice. My inquiry focuses on the creation, dissemination, curation, and management of personal records in a social practice in which recordkeeping plays a key role—that is, new parenthood in the pandemic. Conversely, I use the insights gleaned from this inquiry to reflect back on the conceptual foundations of archival theory. In this sense, and in keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of the field of archival studies (Gilliland and McKemmish 2017), what appears as a social science project in this chapter begins to resemble a humanities paper in the following chapter, where I turn toward conceptual analysis.

### *2.2.1. Location and Study Population*

The study population is comprised of residents of Nexwlélexwm (Bowen Island),<sup>2</sup> British Columbia (a municipality of Vancouver, where I also live) who have become parents during the Covid-19 pandemic (from around March 2020 to March 2022). Bowen Island is a small community of approximately 4,000 year-round residents, a high proportion (22%) of whom are children. Due to its warm and welcoming culture, its lovely and relatively safe natural environment, and its strong sense of community, Bowen is also an idyllic locale to which many people relocate in order to start their families. Bowen Island, then, is well established as a family-friendly community in which many people choose to raise children; the Bowen population is thus both a convenient choice, and uniquely appropriate for the purposes of my project.

### *2.2.2. Recruitment and Information Security*

Recruitment was conducted via Facebook and email; a call for participants was posted (with admin approval) in several Bowen Island parenting groups, further information was shared over

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<sup>2</sup> Nexwlélexwm is in the traditional territory of the Coast Salish peoples, including the unceded homelands of the Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations.

Messenger, and interviews were arranged via secure UBC email. The interviews, which lasted from 45-75 minutes, were recorded in full on my mobile device, which was encrypted, and later transferred to my laptop, which was also encrypted. I transcribed the interviews myself and saved the transcripts on my laptop. Participants were not named either in the recorded interviews or in the transcripts, and identifying information was removed (e.g. a child's name replaced with "her child") in the course of initial transcription. Participants were identified in the transcripts by number only (i.e. Participant 1-4), and a master list was also saved on my laptop. This master list is the only location in which participant names are recorded.

### *2.2.3. Study Participants*

All four of my interviewees identify as women. All four are current Bowen Island residents of European-Canadian ancestry and originally from various regions of British Columbia. Three are first-time parents; one is a second-time parent. Three of my interviewees are biological parents; one is an adoptive parent. Two are parents of singletons; two are parents of twins. I likewise identify as a woman; I am a current Bowen Island resident of European-American ancestry, originally from Hawai'i; my son is my biological child, a singleton, and my first. I was previously acquainted with all four interviewees through parent groups, but none are close friends or family.

I endeavored to make clear to all potential participants that our acquaintanceship should in no way make them feel obligated to participate in the study, and that they could withdraw their participation at any time, at will, without explanation or consequence. All potential participants were likewise informed that they were completely free to decide whether they wished to participate in the study or not. They were also informed that should they decide to participate, they would be free to decide what to share and what not to share. It was suggested to potential participants that

they might find it therapeutic to converse with a sympathetic person had shared some of their experiences—or that alternatively, returning to the negative aspects of these experiences could be difficult; they were encouraged to consider whether participation was likelier to be a positive or negative experience for them before agreeing to participate. I received initial expressions of interest from five potential participants over Messenger, and shared further information and the consent form over email. Four of these five potential participants ultimately elected to participate in the study. I checked with participants at the beginning of each interview to ascertain whether there were any topics they preferred to avoid, and reminded them of the voluntary nature of all questions before and during all interviews.

#### *2.2.4. Anonymity and Interview Protocol*

All potential and confirmed participants were informed of all the above measures to protect their security and anonymity in initial communications and on the consent forms they signed. They were informed that interviews would only be used by me for research purposes, the results of which would be included in my MA thesis, and may also be published in later work—in which case, data may be shared with the publishing journal. They were assured, however, that their names and any other identifying details would not be included in my thesis, published work, or data shared with any journal. Potential and confirmed participants were also informed that since Bowen Island is a small community, it was likely that study participants would be acquainted with one another, and it was also possible that participants would be identifiable by one another when mentioned in written work. They were advised that though all the above measures would be taken to ensure anonymity, these considerations should be included in any decision to participate. Finally, participants were informed that direct quotes would not be used without their permission. Upon

completing the first draft of this thesis, I contacted each participant with a list of the direct quotes I wished to use in the final version and obtained permission to include them in the thesis.

I conducted a total of four in-person oral interviews. Two interviews were held in participants' homes, one was held in my own home, and one was held outdoors at a Bowen café. The interviews lasted from 45-75 minutes. Questions were divided into three main sections (including alternate versions of the second section for first-time and second-time parents, respectively), with 3-9 questions per section. The semi-structured nature of the interview design allowed me to tailor the interviews to a significant degree, in particular by circumscribing discussion of subject areas that seemed less relevant to interviewees and expanding upon areas that seemed to be of particular interest or yield additional insight.

#### *2.2.5. Data Analysis*

Once I had fully transcribed all the interviews, I began coding responses. In the first stage, I used colour-coding to identify responses that were relevant to each of the three main themes I had identified—maintaining connections with loved ones, seeking social recognition of parenthood, and gaining a sense of control over the passage of time. Though my questions were initially divided into sections based on these themes, the semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that responses relevant to these themes sometimes arose outside of their dedicated sections. Responses I had identified in this initial coding stage are, for the most part, incorporated into the Findings section, where I divide them into two further categories: *What*, which provides a *description* of the kinds of records kept by the new parents I interviewed, and *Why*, which offers a preliminary *explanation*, often in new parents' own words, their motivations for recordkeeping.

Based on several key insights that arose during this first stage of analysis, I formulated a second stage of investigation that was focused on the conceptual foundation of archival theory—in particular, the definition of a ‘record’—and the complication of this definition by way of the recordkeeping practices I had encountered. In this stage, I identified in the responses several sub-themes which, I determined, provided compelling conceptual counterpoints to mainstream archival theory. These included 1) challenges to clear separations between records, creators, custodians, users, and the subjects of records; 2) subversion of the distinction between primary and secondary value; 3) expansions of the inclusiveness of the concept of a ‘record’; and 4) (by virtue of 1-3) complications of the linear view of time on which mainstream archival theory is founded. I again colour-coded the relevant responses that I identified. These responses are, for the most part, incorporated into the Discussion section under the relevant sub-headings, and become the substantial basis of my argumentation for the redrafting of key archival concepts in those sections.

### *2.2.6. Some Preliminary Observations*

As mentioned above, of the three main areas of interest outlined—maintaining connections with loved ones, seeking social recognition of parenthood, and gaining a sense of control over the passage of time—the last proved by far the most fruitful line of discussion. The fact that the other two subject areas proved less productive in terms of their elicitation of substantive interview responses may arise from the fact that unlike me, all four of my interviewees were able to maintain a significant degree of in-person contact with family and other loved ones during their pregnancies, adoptions, and/or the early period of their new babies’ lives. Alternatively, intense but ambivalent feelings about the passage of time may simply be the most universal experience among parents of the three categories that my interview questions were intended to illuminate.

Indeed, anecdotal evidence (that is, informal discussion with parents with whom I did *not* conduct interviews, as well as articles in the popular press) indicates that this ambivalent attitude toward the passage of time on the part of new parents is so ubiquitous as to raise the question of whether this attitude is in any way distinctive of those who have become parents during the pandemic. My research cannot claim to answer this question. What my findings do provide, however, is an insight into how, and to some extent why, new parents express and address this ambivalence through their personal recordkeeping practices. As stated above, while these insights may not be properly generalizable insofar as they are not straightforwardly representative of any broader experience or practice, they nonetheless shed light on the qualitative contours of personal recordkeeping—light which is reflected back to illuminate the nature of records themselves.

The responses I received concerning the interaction between recordkeeping and the passage of time for new parents during the pandemic are rich in detail and insight. This was the area in which each of my interviewees had most to say, both about their affective, psychological, and

practical motivations for recordkeeping, and about the records themselves. Coincidentally, this is also the area in which the insights gleaned from this study may have most to offer the study of personal archives, as the question of what we're doing when we keep records, and what records are *for*, turns crucially on the issue of temporality. Records can be characterized, at a fundamental level, as documentation of the past that is preserved for the sake of the future. It is precisely because people, events, and circumstances change over time that we are motivated to preserve records in the first place. It is due, in turn, to the record's capacity to serve as an index of former circumstances that we want records to remain stable, and their contexts to be preserved along with them (see e.g. Anderson 2013, 250).

Yet, as Eric Ketelaar points out, no matter their medium or the methods undertaken to ensure their stability, alterations to the context and significance of records—if not their content—is unavoidable; indeed, such transformations occur whenever records are activated—that is, viewed, consulted, or otherwise interacted with: “Current uses of [...] records affect retrospectively all earlier meanings, or to put it differently: we can no longer read the record as our predecessors have read that record” (Ketelaar 2001, 138, quoted in Caswell 2013, 40). In this way, records are very much like the youngest human beings—formed by the past, but endlessly malleable and acutely responsive to influences in the present; always seemingly suspended at a moment in time, but in reality constantly changing. The new parents' recordkeeping dilemma, then—how to preserve the memory of our children's early lives in all their temporal and qualitative distinctiveness, especially in the context of days that are long and years that are fleeting—is also the dilemma of recordkeeping itself.

## Chapter 3 Findings and Discussion

### 3.1 Findings

In this chapter, I will focus primarily on the temporal implications of recordkeeping by new parents in the pandemic. As mentioned above, of the three main themes covered in the interviews I conducted—maintaining connections with loved ones, seeking social recognition of parenthood, and gaining a sense of control over the passage of time—the first two were somewhat less productive than the third. This is not to say, however, that interesting insights were not gleaned through my discussions with new parents of the maintenance of connections with loved ones or the cultivation of social recognition through recordkeeping. The first section, ‘*What?*,’ outlines the kinds of records parents described keeping of their pregnancies, adoptions, and/or the early period of their new babies’ lives. The second section, ‘*Why?*,’ discusses the motivations underlying these recordkeeping practices as reported by the parents I interviewed, including a brief discussion of my findings in the areas of maintaining connection with loved ones and seeking social recognition of parenthood. I will then return, in the Discussion section, to the main topic of this chapter: the relationship between recordkeeping and the passage of time.

#### 3.1.2. *What?*

The kinds of records that are created, collected, and preserved by new parents mirror, in many ways, the kinds of records that many people keep of their personal lives: photos, journals, notes on appointments and other institutional documentation, and occasional ephemera from life’s more momentous events. The main distinguishing feature of parental recordkeeping is that new parents seem to keep an especially high volume of records, and attach a high level of emotional significance to the records they keep. For example, all four of the new parents I spoke to reported

being forced to make difficult decisions about storage on their phones in order to make space for the volume of photos and videos that they didn't wish to move or delete. Making further use of this volume of audiovisual records, one parent I spoke to had used an app called 1 Second Everyday to store and edit together a compilation of one-second videos from every day of her baby's life for the first year (I will return to this example at several points in this and the following section).

All four parents reported regularly sharing photos of their babies on social media (Instagram and Facebook). "That's the thing with social media now, it's basically just like a photo-journal of my pregnancy and of [her babies]," said one parent. "Yeah," said another, "lots of kid content on Instagram. I probably post on Instagram at least once a month on the grid, and once a week on stories." Several expressed some ambivalence about this practice due to privacy concerns and/or dissatisfaction with the effect of the platforms on their own mental health. All four also made use of photo-sharing apps—e.g. shared albums in Google Photos, Family Album, or text chains—as well as social media to share photos with family and/or other loved ones. The general consensus was that this was a more private and personal way to share photos within new parents' closest relationships, especially with loved ones who they couldn't see in person.

Despite these concerns and alternatives, social media remained important to every parent I interviewed. The centrality and simplicity of social media communication was one source of appeal. As one parent explained it, "like when they were born, instead of reaching out individually, it's one place, boom. There it is." Another parent concurred with the importance of social media as a central location, which allows sharing to be somewhat more passive: "Yeah, we have a Google Share with [the part of the family living outside Vancouver]. But then I'll do stuff on Instagram and then they'll just see it." And a third parent explained that Facebook was easier to use for some

family members than sharing apps: “I have a shared album on my iPhone that’s like, close family, but some of my elderly family members don’t know how to use it, so a lot of it’s on Facebook.”

Based on these and other contributions to the discussion about photo and video records, this contemporaneous sharing of photos and videos seemed to constitute, in many cases, their ‘primary use,’ with storage for later—i.e. as ‘records’ in the usual sense—representing a secondary use (re-viewing) that may or may not eventually be realized (see Schellenberg 1988, 58-9). Of the four parents I interviewed, only one had printed out her photos and arranged them in a traditional photo book. One parent had designed and planned the layout for a printed book, but not yet printed it. The other two expressed no concrete plans to make physical copies of their photos. I will return to this discussion of primary use, secondary use, and temporality in the Discussion section.

Three out of four of the parents I interviewed reported keeping a journal both during their pregnancy (or adoption waiting period) and during their baby’s early life—though all three also reported that their entries in this journal had dropped off precipitously at some point since their baby’s birth, and the second-time parent I interviewed reported that entries were much scantier in her second child’s journal than in her firstborn’s. One parent’s journal was pre-structured as My Pregnancy Journal, while the other three were freeform. Three of the four parents I interviewed had also been recording and/or storing various milestones and other memories in a baby book. For one parent, this was a calendar with stickers for milestones that could be affixed at the proper dates. For another, this was a ‘Baby’s First Year’ book pre-populated with milestones and dedicated space for other reflections; she had been entering notes contemporaneously on her phone and then transferring them periodically into the book (though she confessed a bit ruefully that she was still filling it in after two years). For the third parent, the baby book was a ‘life book’ common in the adoption community, combining pictures, notes, and ephemera about her babies’ lives,

beginning with their adoption story. Again, all three parents who kept baby books reported struggling to find time to add to them, particularly as their babies grew older and as their families expanded. Three out of four parents had also written down additional contemporaneous observations about their babies—e.g. notes about their development, how they felt about them, or things their older child had said—either on paper, in journals, or on their phones.

Several parents reported preserving some pieces of ephemera—hospital bracelets, parking passes, newspapers and magazines from the baby’s birthdate, even umbilical cords—and keeping them as records. Interestingly, the adopted babies’ ‘life books’ seemed to encompass such non-traditional keepsakes more explicitly than the standard ‘baby books’ or freeform journals kept by the other parents I interviewed. This disparity could have been explained by the distinctive recordkeeping style of the parent in question, but it could also illustrate a somewhat more intentional ‘life writing’ tendency in the adoption community (see e.g. MacNeil 2019). All four participants also described a hybrid, ad hoc approach to organization, in which medical and other institutional records (e.g. ultrasound photos, appointment notes, and passport documentation) were often saved alongside more traditional ‘personal’ records (pictures, milestones, and journaling). Indeed, as is often the case when it comes to the storage of personal records (see e.g. McMaster 2012), sheepish admission of ‘disorganization’ was common. For example:

I’m actually not very good at keeping our records together. I think they’re all in different places. They really shouldn’t be. We just had a huge panic about finding our passports, and it turns out they’re in this like empty Amazon box that looks like garbage, but in tiny writing it says “important papers.”

Both this hybrid, ad hoc approach to arrangement, and the tendency to hold onto ephemera, are common in personal recordkeeping in general. Interview responses from new parents, though, seemed to indicate a particularly strong affective investment in preserving both institutional records and ephemera. I will return to this point in the Discussion section.

### 3.1.2. Why?

The parents I interviewed reported a variety of motivations for the creation and preservation of the records they had kept. Records are, at a fundamental level (according to the formulation offered above) documentation of the past for the sake of the future. All four parents I spoke to described returning often to review the photos and videos they had created in the time since the birth of their babies. Though this kind of use is less contemporaneous than immediately posting pictures to social media, sharing apps, or text chains, there remains a notably shorter duration between creation, primary, and secondary use than is usually recognized by mainstream archival theory. A common trope (distinctly familiar to me) was scrolling through photos and videos of one's baby during their nap, either to recall them at various stages of life or just to be with them (virtually and asynchronously) while they slept. The parent who had noted down quotes from her older child on her phone put it this way: "that Notes app, I look at it like how you're all of a sudden an hour into your photos, I'll do that often with those Notes." The parent who had used the one-second video app said she had watched the compiled video so many times that simply by listening to the audio she could visualize the sequence of images that went along with it:

[I]n this one second video, even if you just listen, the sounds, the soundscape of it is just great. It's so good. Like the first three months are like barfing, pooping, snoring, you can hear all of it. And even if I just listen I can see the images, because I've watched it so many times. I don't even know if he'll want it when he's older. I like it.

Parents reported returning less often to their institutional records, ephemera, and journals, at least by this point. Preliminarily, this seems to imply that new parents make frequent contemporaneous use of their records in general, as well as *more frequent* contemporaneous use of some records than others. I will return to this question of the contemporaneous use of records in the Discussion section.

Another significant motivation for recordkeeping reported by parents was the preservation of memories for their children to review later in life. All four parents made explicit reference to their sense of responsibility toward their children in this respect. One spoke of the importance of conveying to her babies, as future adults, what their birth had been like, and how momentous the role of motherhood had proved to be for her—“that it’s not about the work, or hours, or how physically and emotionally draining it is; this supersedes that.” The adoptive parent I spoke to emphasized the importance of keeping records for adoptees in particular. Discussing the fact that her younger child’s birth parents had stipulated a ‘no-contact’ adoption, she said “I really hope that at some point we even get like a photo for [her child], to be able to see, because that will be so important for [them]. Because in adoption you just want to remove the question marks, right?” This importance of keeping records for one’s children to review in later life was sometimes related, positively or negatively, to parents’ own experience of recordkeeping in their childhood. One parent said she was motivated in her recordkeeping by the *lack* of extensive records of her own childhood, while another was inspired by the abundance of records of hers:

One of my favourite things when I was a kid was my parents would do home videos. We have like records, stacked, like editions, like ‘September ’85.’ So I wanted to do videos, but we don’t really have the same stuff [...] [A]nd I had a photo album growing up; I want my kid to have a photo album so at least he can look at it and have a record of “this is what I looked like growing up” or whatever, [to] have something tangible, instead of just all up in the cloud somewhere.

Participants also spoke of the desire to keep records of their own experiences of parenting for themselves, and for their own later use. The parent who wrote in a pre-structured pregnancy journal said that this “was more a journal about myself, my different symptoms at different times of the pregnancy, and where I was at [...] And a little bit about them, like what colours did we paint the nursery? and things like that.” Another explained the intended audience of her journal in this way:

This first page [...] says “I don’t know who this is for.” It was originally intended for them, for them to read, but as I went along, it was more like, “this is kind of more for me now,” to be able to look back in a few years and remember, specifically my birth story, that was important for me to get down. So mostly, as a point of reflection, and also for [her babies], for them to get an idea.

The third parent had begun and continued the journals she kept for both her children as series of letters to them, but as she put it, “what’s funny is that I fluctuate between speaking or writing to them like they’re adults, and writing to them as they are right now; I kind of flip back and forth with what I share and how I share it and the tone and all of that sort of stuff. But yeah, I write to them about things that have happened in our life, but more so about how I feel about them.”

### *3.1.3. Some Preliminary Discussion*

Given that my first two guiding questions about parents’ motivations for the creation and preservation of the records they had kept concerned the maintenance of connections with loved ones and the cultivation of social recognition through parental recordkeeping with a focus on pandemic conditions, I heard about these kinds of motivations as well. A description by *Atlantic* staff writer Sophie Gilbert in an article about becoming a parent in the pandemic poignantly encapsulates the underlying context of these questions:

Every person who’s given birth during the past year, I’d guess, has experienced a version of the same thing—a sense of isolation so acute that it’s hard to process. [...] It stung bitterly from the very beginning, and every day that went by only made it more raw. Every milestone that my babies hit without anyone being around to witness it was colored with some grief (Gilbert 2021).

All four parents confirmed that taking and sharing pictures and videos—and occasionally other records, such as ultrasound images—was a crucial part of keeping in touch, even for those who had been able to see loved ones in person during their pregnancies or since their babies’ births. As outlined above, this sharing was facilitated by social media and sharing apps. As one parent put it,

“this is how I connect with my friends now. Because most of my closest people, they don’t live [nearby]. So a lot of how we keep track of each other’s lives is Instagram. [...] It’s definitely a way to stay connected, and be able to share things.” Though all four interviewees described this sharing as especially important for keeping in touch with loved ones that they couldn’t see in person, the extent to which this practice was successful in standing in for in-person interaction or in satisfying the desire to share the actual experiences of a new baby was, according to all four, frustratingly limited. When asked about this, one participant responded:

I feel like they missed it. They just totally missed it. Which is such a bummer. I shared tons of photos, I would send them little videos and stuff too, of more important moments I guess; it just wasn’t the same. You’re there in person with the babies, experiencing it, and it’s so great and amazing, and you want your parents to see that. [...] I still feel like they totally missed it, even though I sent so much stuff. [...] By the time they saw them, were they five months old? It’s just different. They’re basically like, eating solids, they’re not in the newborn stage anymore.

This experience accorded with many of those reported in the articles about pandemic parenting published in the popular press. *Washington Post* reporter Caitlin Gibson explains that one parent she interviewed:

struggles most with the memories that were never made. “It’s hard to move past the things you don’t get to have,” she says. “I’ll never have the moment where I get to see my parents hold my son as a newborn. That’s gone. He’s going to be a year old by the time they meet him” (Gibson 2021).

Interestingly, the interviews I conducted, exemplified by the one quoted above, excavated similar themes of attempting to compensate, through recordkeeping, for memories not made. Participants acknowledged taking *more* photos and videos ‘to compensate’ because they couldn’t share the experience of their babies in person. These records seem to have been intended not only to share the experience with loved ones, but to simulate actually *being with* loved ones through the experience, in whatever limited way possible. I will return to these efforts to compensate for or recoup ‘memories never made’ in the Discussion section.

With regard to my second guiding question concerning the social recognition of parenthood, participants had little to say. Extrapolating both from my own experience and from articles in the popular press, I had thought this might be a fruitful avenue of exploration. Gilbert, for example, relates an anecdote—significant, to her—about being offered a seat on the subway midway through her pregnancy, just before pandemic measures made this mundane but kind gesture an impossibility (Gilbert 2021). I likewise recall, with a level of gratitude I don't usually feel about being noticed in public, each of the few brief interactions I had with kind strangers about my pregnancy. An even more precious memory for me is taking one of our first walks as a family on Mother's Day 2021, and receiving countless small public acknowledgements of the miraculous new person in our lives. For me, the creation, sharing, and reviewing of records of my pregnancy, birth, and my son's early life were—and still are—an important reinforcement of the 'realness' of these experiences, as described by Linda L. Layne and Jennifer Douglas (Layne 2000, Douglas 2019). In particular, these interactions with my records, and in public, contributed to rendering my transition to parenthood a social rather than solitary event (Douglas 2020, 158). My interviewees, on the other hand—perhaps due in part to the fact that they did not share the same extent of geographical isolation—did not seem to feel that their social recognition as parents was in question, due to the pandemic or for any other reason.

### 3.2. Discussion

As outlined above, the most fruitful of my guiding questions in terms of eliciting substantive and insightful participant responses concerned how recordkeeping during the intersection of new parenthood and the pandemic had interacted with parents' perception of the passage of time. A parenting truism, as we've seen, is that "the days are long, but the years are short." That is, a quintessential experience of the passage of time in early parenthood is that it tends to expand as we undergo all the daily tasks, trials, triumphs, and transport of parenthood (the days are long), and then contract as we try to recall the precise quality and character of those days in the aggregate (the years are short). For many people, the pandemic seems to have generated a similar temporal experience—the relatively undifferentiated quality of the everyday has made the days seem long, yet it has also become commonplace to wonder where the years have gone. In my view, combining these two kinds of temporal experiences thus creates an ideal laboratory for a close examination of the practice of personal recordkeeping—what kinds of things constitute records in our personal lives; how we create, collect, and preserve records; what records mean to us and what they are for.

This examination shines light in two different directions at once: in one direction, it illuminates, through recordkeeping practices, an intimate corner of human experience at an important historical moment; in the other direction, it casts a more expansive light on both the experience of temporality, and the archival concept of the record. In particular, I will seek to demonstrate that the creation, sharing, and personal use of records by new parents presents a portrait of records and recordkeeping that 1) challenges clear separations between records, creators, custodians, users, and the subjects of records; 2) defies a clear distinction between primary and secondary value; 3) expands the inclusiveness of the concept of a 'record'; and 4) (by virtue of 1-3) complicates the linear view of time on which mainstream archival theory is founded.

### 3.2.1. Challenging Separations and Defying Distinctions

As Kimberley Anderson elucidates in her influential article “The Footprint and the Stepping Foot: Archival Records, Evidence, and Time,” mainstream archival theory has long been intertwined with an external and objective account of truth and evidence that relies upon two important distinctions: between records and the people that interact with them (creators, custodians, users, and the subjects of records), and between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ value (i.e. between transactional and archival use) as first theorized by Theodore Schellenberg (Anderson 2013, 354; Schellenberg 1988, 58-9). As Anderson explains, these distinctions serve to justify the custodial and evidentiary role of archivists by purportedly ensuring the objectivity of the records in their custody. According to legal standards, the most ‘objective’ records are those that are generated ‘unintentionally’ by their creators. This means that such records are created for a transactional purpose rather than a narrative or historical one (Anderson 2013, 354).

This distinction at the point of creation mirrors, for Schellenberg, a distinction during the period of use—what he identifies, respectively, as primary and secondary use. Theorizing in the context of organizational records (as most mainstream archival theorists do), Schellenberg explains that primary use pertains to the purposes for the fulfillment of which records have been created, while “records are preserved [...] because they have values that will exist long after they cease to be in current use, and because their values will be for others than the current users” (Schellenberg 1988, 58-9). This excerpt expresses, as Anderson observes, two intertwined commitments that have endured at the basis of archival theory: a *temporal* distinction between records that are valuable because they are ‘in active use’ and those that are of ‘historical’ value, and a *personal* distinction between creators, custodians, users, and subjects of records.

Extrapolating from the organizational records context to the context of private records in general and parental records in particular, this Schellenbergian account would imply several distinctions: between the *creation* and *transactional use* of records and their *historical* or *archival use*, and between parents as *creators* and *primary users* of records, other adults as *secondary users* (and/or *custodians*) of records, and children as *subjects* of records. What we saw above, however, presents a more complex picture. Particularly in the case of photos and videos, there was no strong temporal *or* personal distinction between primary and secondary use. Parents, who frequently (re)viewed the photos and videos they had created shortly after their creation, were both primary *and* secondary users of these records. Moreover, records were often created and shared explicitly *for others*—i.e. loved ones—meaning that these other adults could conceivably be counted as primary *and* secondary users and custodians as well. Finally, given that many parents’ continually interacted with the records they created *as they created them*, and that this was an important part of building a relationship with their babies and sharing their experiences within their other close relationships, the interaction between creators, users, custodians, and subjects of these records was revealed as one of mutual co-constitution rather than sharp distinction.

One parent’s use of the one-second video compilation app provides an example of this continual, creative interaction with records. By reviewing this record in its compiled form at various points during its creation (i.e. its compilation), she was able to (re)view her baby’s growth with a level of clarity not possible in everyday life. Another way to think of this is that this video compilation allows one, as a user, to ‘shift’ between time signatures, experiencing the contraction of time (“the years are short”) from within the expansiveness of the everyday (“the days are long”). Moreover, the continual, recursive creation of this record over time allows one, as creator, to take these previous viewings of the record into account while continuing to add to the record.

Finally, the recordkeeping practices described in the previous section reveal what could be identified as the ‘constructive’ nature of recordkeeping. Recall the efforts described by parents to ‘simulate’ the sharing of important experiences with loved ones, to ‘compensate’ for their inability to truly share these experiences, and even to *recoup* or *reconstruct* the shared experiences they felt they had missed (what Gibson (2021) calls “memories that were never made”). These efforts accord, though in a very different context, with some of the recordkeeping practices of bereaved parents described by Douglas (2019, 2020, 2021), Alisauskas (2019, 2021), and Mordell (2019)). The bereaved parents interviewed discussed events, such as birthdays or first days of school, that they had envisioned for their deceased children and had longed for once it transpired that they were never to be. Parents reported reconstructing these events in part through the creation of records such as photos and imagined journal entries, thus demonstrating the role that records and recordkeeping practices can play in the *construction* of events, relationships, and identities.

This constructive potential of records and recordkeeping is also reflected in the theoretically productive concept of ‘imagined records’ (and, more generally, the ‘archival imaginary’) developed by Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell in “Records and their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined” (2015). Here they demonstrate through several examples—including the call by grieving parents of unarmed Black children killed by police for the use of police body cams as recordkeeping devices—how individuals “have conjured up impossible records, never-to-materialize, but pregnant with the possibility of establishing a proof, a perspective, a justice that heretofore has remained unattainable” (Gilliland & Caswell 2015, 72). While Gilliland and Caswell focus on the kinds of imagined records that might, if real, enable the restoration of justice, they also make clear that the power of these records *as imagined* lies in their aspirational, symbolic, and affective dimensions.

As they put it, “while such records do not actually exist, their weight, as manifestations of affect, as symbols of collective grief and aspiration, as evidence of the capacity of records to imagine impossible futures, is immeasurable” (ibid.). Similarly in the case of parents attempting to reconstruct, through records creation, events that never occurred or memories that were never made, the value of these created records lies precisely in their symbolic and affective significance.

### *3.2.2. Expanding the Concept of a ‘Record’*

Alongside her espousal of the recognition of a greater range of temporal experience in archival theory and practice, Anderson also presents an argument for the incorporation of *events*—contemporaneous, continually unfolding, and inextricable from their creators, rather than fixed in the past and separated from their creators—into the archival concept of the record. “Archives have required that the concept of stability be linked to the act of separation of record from record keeper” she writes. As we saw above, this personal separation depends upon a temporal one: “While this is a pragmatic approach for textual records, many kinds of records cannot be separated from their creators because they are not texts but performances or events” (Anderson 2013, 362). Anderson goes on to argue that in attempting to capture dynamic, contemporaneous performances and events in the static, fixed format of the ‘record,’ we in fact produce ‘translations’ of these events (ibid.)—what could (in my own view) be called ‘records of records.’

As we have just seen, parental recordkeeping presents an example of records that are not fully separable from their creators (or, indeed, their custodians, users, or subjects). It may seem, however, as if the records parents create and keep provide prime examples of what Anderson calls translations and what I have just called records of records: photographs and videos are fixed translations of the events (first foods, first steps, etc.) that they portray. But reading more closely

the descriptions of records we saw above, something more complex seems to be going on. Consider, again, the use of the one-second video app: on the surface, the record thus produced may look like a simple technological trick, the editing together of a number of brief event-translations (the one-second videos taken each day for a year). Recall, however, that this record was a continuing process, a work in progress that this parent engaged in over the whole course of her baby's first year, and that her repeated viewings of the compiled record at various points during its creation were part of the context of her continuing to create the record. Given the particular way in which she created and interacted with this record (which however, as we've seen, is typical of the way parents interacted with photo and video records), the record begins to look less like a static translation of an event, and more like a dynamic and continually unfolding event in itself. This parental recordkeeping practice thus provides an example of a kind of record that is *already* recognized under a mainstream archival definition of the record, but whose true contours become more apparent under an expanded definition of the record.

Above all, in addition to challenging the notion of the personal and temporal separability of the record, the approaches to parental recordkeeping described above suggest an understanding of growing human beings *themselves* as records. As one participant put it, "having a small human to mark the passage of time is interesting too because suddenly you're like 'Oh my god. You barely fit in your car seat! And suddenly these clothes don't fit you anymore and they fit you last week!' So it's this physical experience of time, like...there's nothing you can compare it to." This observation emphasizes, again, both the expansion and the contraction of time in parenthood. Irreversible and momentous changes are constantly underway, occurring with such stealth and regularity that they can still appear 'sudden' to those most well-situated to observe them. This participant's observation, then, situates growing babies *themselves* as embodied 'records' of their

own growth—as she put it, this presents a “physical experience of time” that is unique to witnessing the transformative development of a living being.

This understanding of living beings themselves as records accords with some Indigenous perspectives on what constitutes a record, thus responding to Anderson and Caswell’s calls for a more responsive and inclusive approach to defining records. For example, Shannon Faulkhead presents one Indigenous Australian definition of a record as “any account, regardless of form, that preserves memory or knowledge of facts and events. A record can be a document, an individual’s memory, an image, or a recording. It can also be an actual person, a community, or the land itself” (Faulkhead 2009, 67, cited in Caswell 2021, 41). Moreover, this account of bodies as records, and records as embodied, coheres with a “Queer/ed Archival Methodology” proposed by Jamie Ann Lee. Drawing from queer oral histories, Lee outlines an account of “body-as-archives and archives-as-body” (Lee 2017, 1) that attempts to account for “bodies that, although marked and fixed with identity, are in states of becoming” (ibid., 3). Though the ‘state of becoming’ that is in fact common to all living beings is highlighted in Lee’s piece through the example of queer oral history, infants and children in particular present a uniquely illustrative example of embodied time.

This understanding of infants as records is also, as we’ve seen, a recurring theme in Douglas and Alisauskas’ piece “‘It Feels Like a Life’s Work: Recordkeeping as an Act of Love.’” In this piece, bereaved parents detail ‘records *of the body*’ (e.g. “items of clothing, baby blankets, handprints and footprints, locks of hair, their babies’ cremated remains”), ‘records *on the body*’ (e.g. memorial tattoos) and ‘records *that interact with the body*’ (e.g. jewelry worn by a bereaved parent) as of particular affective significance, and thus of particularly high archival value (2021, 18-19). Each of these expansions of the concept of the record can, in turn, be further elucidated by Lisa Darms’ call for a ‘reexamination’ of objects found in archives in “The Archival Object: A

Memoir of Disintegration,” in which she argues that “*all* archival objects are in fact both symbols and documents” (Darms 2009, 155, emphasis mine). This point serves as further confirmation that the expansion of the records concept called for by each of these authors *reveals* rather than alters an important underlying purpose of records: to symbolize as well as document; to generate meaning as well as facts.

This understanding of the embodied materiality of records also accords to an intriguing extent with the theory of temporality proposed by early 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Henri Bergson in his work on lived time, free will, the creativity of evolution, and the relationship between matter and life. According to Bergson, organisms are the quintessential embodiment of the passage of time. As he puts it in one of his later works, *Creative Evolution*, “the organism which lives is a thing that endures. Its past, in its entirety, is prolonged into the present, and abides there, actual and acting [...] *Wherever anything lives, there is open, somewhere, a register in which time is being inscribed*” (Bergson 1998, 15-16, emphasis in original).

In order to understand this claim, it is necessary to briefly familiarize ourselves with Bergson’s oeuvre, and in particular his concept of duration—that is, concrete, lived time. In contrast with the discrete, successive moments of ‘abstract time’ or clock time, duration is constituted by the synthesis in consciousness of (seemingly) distinct moments such as ‘the present’ and ‘the past’; that is, duration “forms both the past and the present [...] into an organic whole” (Bergson 2001, 100). The concept of duration thus highlights the quality of lived time as the simultaneous ‘interpenetration’ of present and past, in which the past is brought to bear on every present experience, and the constant passing of the present means that once we are experiencing any given event, it is always already past (Bergson 2001, 101). This interpenetration of past and

present also explains how the past is brought to bear on how the present continually unfolds: Duration is “the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future” (Bergson 1998, 4).

Despite residing in consciousness, though, duration is not immaterial; it requires something of enduring materiality to sink its teeth into. This ‘something’ is the organism. It is in *this* sense, then, that every living being constitutes “a register in which time is being inscribed.” This notion of living beings, particularly at their earliest stages of development, as ‘registers’ in which time is inscribed in turn suggests the possibility of interpreting infants themselves as records of their own development. At the same time, through the concept of duration, this understanding of the record-ness of infants also acknowledges the interpenetration of present and past that every such ‘record’ represents. It is not just the surprise and disorientation engendered by the rapidity of development that parents register through anecdotes like the one above—noticing that one’s baby no longer fits in their car seat is a *temporally interpenetrative* experience insofar as it juxtaposes the baby who (so recently) fit in the car seat with the baby before our eyes, no longer fitting. Moreover, it is an experience that parents return to again and again, reinterpreting it—or, as we shall shortly see, *reconfiguring* it—each time as our babies continue to change. I submit that this kind of temporal experience is both quintessential in parenthood, and also characteristic of the practice of recordkeeping insofar as records are material entities whose material features change over time, as well as objects of interpretation whose interpretive frames change every time they are activated.

This understanding of the record-ness of infants themselves may also, alongside parents’ overweening affective investment in any tangible trace of our offspring and their many transformations, help to explain why many parents feel compelled to save—or at least dispose reverently of—tangible physical traces of their babies (or serving as conduit between their babies and themselves), such as placentas, umbilical cords, or hair from first haircuts. One parent reflected

on the strangeness of this practice even while reiterating its importance to her: “I even have their umbilical cords still. It’s with their important stuff. I’m like, why am I keeping this? But I have it.” Holding onto these material traces of our offspring is a way, not of fixing the baby as a record in an unchanging past, but of preserving a dynamic record of their transformations over time.

This recognition of the non-static nature of records, especially as they are embodied in infants themselves, can also derive resources from a Bergsonian conceptual framework. Bergson, as we have seen, offers resources for understanding records not as static representations of the past, but rather as dynamic and responsive to their (re)activation in the present (Ketelaar 2001). For Bergson, by virtue of the temporal framework of duration, the past continues to exist in the present, “actual and acting” (Bergson 1998, 15-16). For Ketelaar and for Bergson scholar Alia Al-Saji alike, this means that the past is not closed or static, but rather remains “open [...] for future inscription” (Al-Saji 2012, 3). Each time we encounter records in the present, we also *reconfigure* those records, giving them new sense and meaning as they are reactivated in shaping each new present. Thus, in participating in sharing, modifying, and curating records together with others—as when we build on a store of photographic mementos together—we give new meaning to shared experiences and thus, reconfigure them.

As the culmination of her critique of the model of temporality assumed by mainstream archival theory, Anderson proposes a revised definition of records along the following lines: “an intentional, stable, semantic structure that moves in time” (2013, 362) In this definition, ‘stable’ is contrasted with the purportedly ‘static’ nature of records under the conventional definition. Records under this definition do not remain immobile through time, but rather *move* through time. As she points out, such a definition of the record also embraces a broader range of activities and attendant recordkeeping practices than current archival concepts allow. “Expanding the notions of

record to incorporate that which is lived, embodied, and actively present,” she holds, “will enable archivists to recognize the recordkeeping structures already in place in the world” (2013, 368-9). Whether our primary interests lie in organizational or personal records, we should all support any expansion of archival concepts that allows us to better fulfill our historical and informative obligations by presenting a more accurate and complete portrait of the world.

Moreover, Anderson’s revised definition, as she puts it, “by incorporating record forms that can support evidence of processes and living events, [...] can better support worldviews not operating on a linear, sequential time model” (2013, 369). This latter advantage is consistent with the former one, in that it permits a more inclusive and representative concept of the record. But in addition, and at a more fundamental conceptual level, this move embraces a concept of temporality that is in tension with the founding principles and motivations of mainstream archival theory and practice itself, thus raising the question: What is the purpose of recordkeeping, if not to document traces of the past for the sake of the future?

### *3.2.3 Complicating Linear Temporality*

In the first interview I conducted, the interviewee and I entered into an extended exchange about birth stories, which I’ll include at length (though heavily edited) here as an illustration of the distinctive temporal character of such experiences, and how we record them:

Participant: There are some parts of it that I just genuinely don’t remember [...] which I think was because everything was rushed, to the point that when we were in the room afterward, everything was a blur. So I’m like, I don’t know how this went...

Me: The sequence and everything...

Participant: Yeah.

Me: So when you’re recording that part...Do you think you’ll write it again? Are there things that come back, or versions you want to share with different people?

Participant: [shakes her head] That's why it was important for me to get it down early, because I knew that if I waited, the details would fade.

She then related a specific moment from the birth, which captured both the difficulty and the humor of the whole experience for both her and her husband, which she hoped to one day share with her children. She continued: "That's one of the details that I feel like ironically I would have forgotten, but because I wrote it down, I remember it and I'm talking about it now. So I know getting it down early was important because I know I'm not gonna go back and do it again. It's there."

One possible interpretation of this excerpt is as an illustration of the conventional archival account of the record: the interviewee describes how she was motivated to "get [her birth story] down early," before the details had time to fade. This resembles the familiar temporal construction of preserving a fixed documentation of the past and externalizing it for the sake of future consultation ("it's there"). Upon closer examination, though, the fragmentary nature of this record in terms of both completeness and temporality is not only explicitly acknowledged by the interviewee, but is also cited as a motivating factor for her in creating the record.

Her birth story, then, is not an impartial record of all the events that occurred, arranged in their proper sequence; rather, it is an aggregation of impressions and anecdotes that are 'unforgettable' in terms of their importance in conveying a sense of the experience, though the interviewee acknowledges that she *would* have forgotten them had she not written them down. These fragmentary moments reflect both the contracted temporality of parenthood insofar as they are discrete, non-sequential events ("the days are short") and the expansive temporality of parenthood insofar as these moments can expand to stand in for the entirety of the experience ("the years are long"). In this way, recording the birth story does not fix the story in the past but rather generates the story in the present of writing it; for this reason, the record of the birth story does

not externalize it as a static document but rather brings the creator explicitly into the story as writer and creator as well as subject.

When asked more explicitly about the passage of time during parenthood, all four interviewees (again in keeping with “the days are long, but the years are short”) described time as moving both more quickly *and* more slowly during early parenthood. A typical response to my question about this was: “Both. Absolutely both. When it’s hard it’s slow. But there’s times when I feel like it goes by really fast. Looking back at between birth and six months, it’s a blur. It was just survival mode.” Another participant concurred almost exactly, particularly with regard to the period known as the ‘fourth trimester’ (a baby’s first three months of infancy: a distinct developmental stage for both parent and baby) and went on to explain how this temporal experience and its affective significance served as a motivator for the creation of records:

In those early days as well...everything is such a vortex, everything feels so long and so short, writing stuff down is definitely a marker of time. And I think in those early days too, you’re so charged with emotion, you feel things so deeply, so when you feel something, it’s so overwhelming that I’m like, I have to write this down. It feels so profound. Yeah, the passage of time is crazy.

These accounts of the passage of time in early parenthood picture time not as a homogeneous, successive movement but as something that expands and contracts in experience and in memory, always mediated by the deep affective investments that inevitably accompany parenthood.

It is instructive to recall how significantly this temporal understanding diverges from the account of temporality on which mainstream archival theory and practice has been based. As Eric Ketelaar puts it, recordkeeping “has always been directed towards transmitting human activity and experience through time and, secondly, through space” (2002, 578, quoted in Anderson 2013, 360). This paper, too, has repeatedly characterized records as “documentation of the past that is

preserved for the sake of the future.” This temporal construction, as Ketelaar, Anderson, and Caswell have explained, has thus far been central to the justificatory structure of archives.

As Anderson puts it:

The creation of a physically bound record requires a temporal disconnect. Time has been stopped within the record. Historical evidence as a whole is also concerned with the disruption of time. Evidence in the historical context always indicates a break from some previous moment in time. The past and present blend and merge, but there is a disconnect from the present moment in order for the past to be perceived as “past” (Anderson 2013, 357).

Yet as Anderson goes on to reveal, this ‘temporal disconnect’ is not, in fact, an essential feature of records. Reinterpreted as “intentional, stable, semantic structure[s] that move in time” (2013, 362), records can be understood as ‘moving in time’ without necessarily depending upon the linear succession of distinct moments that is usually presupposed. Indeed, as Caswell proposes, building on Anderson’s redefinition of the record, it is possible—and strategically timely—to move toward a model of archival practice that neither sees the past as ‘over,’ nor consigns the activation of records to the future. Rather, she constructs a call for reconceiving of archives work in order to emphasize “the need to activate traces in the now for resistance and activism against oppressive power structures *in the present*” (Caswell 2021, 38).

The examples of parental recordkeeping reviewed above demonstrate several aspects of personal recordkeeping practice that support a temporal reconceptualization of records such as that proposed by Caswell and Anderson. First, these examples illustrate how records can be ‘used’ at their very moment of creation, and continuously (re)created over time. In this way, the presumed ‘pastness’ of records co-exists simultaneously with their use, reuse, reinterpretation, and re-creation in the present. These examples also demonstrate that records can be inseparable both from their creators—who continue to interact with them as both authors and users—and from their subjects—whose personal development is documented and shaped by these recordkeeping

practices. These examples also reveal what could be identified as the ‘constructive’ nature of recordkeeping, in which the creation of records can allow for the symbolic and affective reconstruction of events, as well as relationships and identities. Through these examples, moreover, it becomes clear that records can be interpreted not merely as static translations of events, but rather as dynamic and continually unfolding events in themselves. Finally, these examples demonstrate the potential of conceiving of records as embodied, and of living beings *themselves* as records. All of these innovative interventions into the concept of the record call for a temporal reconceptualization of the record which accounts for the expansion and contraction of time in experience and in memory, always mediated by the deep affective investments that inevitably accompany parenthood.

## Conclusion

While this project originally set out to explore the interaction between pandemic conditions and recordkeeping in early parenthood, what it uncovered was both less and more than this. My original guiding questions were about how records interacted with parents' connection with loved ones, their social recognition as parents, and their experience of the passage of time. Interview responses indicate that the creation and sharing of records was a crucial part of maintaining connections with loved ones and sharing, to the extent possible, the experience of early parenting with them. In addition, however, the particular recordkeeping practices parents engage in so as to enable these connections—such as the recursive practice of creating, reviewing, modifying, and sharing photos and videos—serve to complicate the personal and temporal distinctions that undergird the concept of the record according to conventional archival theory. These recordkeeping practices demonstrate a co-constitutive relationship between records, creators, users, and subjects that both places records at the center of an important exchange of affect and meaning, and demonstrates that records do far more than *document* these relationships; they also mediate and even construct them.

While the responses I gleaned through my second guiding question indicated that gaining social recognition was not a significant motivating factor in recordkeeping for the parents I interviewed, both my own experience and observations cited in the popular press confirm that this has been factor for others. Due to the potential of records and recordkeeping practices to (re)construct relationships, identities, and even events, they also carry a capacity to generate a sense of socially recognized 'realness' for one's child, and oneself as a parent; this is an important factor in recordkeeping—especially records *creation*—for some parents. This sense of realness is supported in particular by the accumulation of ephemera and other material traces, thus highlighting the importance of these non-traditional records in parental recordkeeping.

This importance of non-traditional records and recordkeeping practices, and thus of expanding the archival definition of the record to embrace these records and practices, was a central conclusion reached by way of my third guiding question as well. In querying new parents about recordkeeping and the passage of time—and by focusing, as Hobbs suggests, on parents’ motives for recordkeeping at the point of creation—I was able to delve into a rich vein of insight about the nature and temporal foundation of records. Responses in this area enabled another insight into the material character of records, suggesting the inclusion and recognition of even *more* nontraditional records—such as *events* and *infants themselves*—in the archival concept of the record. As Caswell and Anderson point out, this inclusion is consistent with a more culturally expansive approach to archival theory and practice. It is also necessary, as these examples show, in order to account for the recordkeeping practices that are already in our midst.

Along with this material reconceptualization, responses to this last guiding question called for a temporal reorientation of the record. As we have seen, in evaluating the mainstream archival conceptualization of the record, Anderson and Caswell expose its reliance on temporal and personal distinctions that do not necessarily hold true cross-culturally or -contextually, while Ketelaar insists that records are not temporally *or* materially static, but rather dynamically responsive to their activation. Douglas, Mills, and Cifor emphasize the centrality of relationships—relationships of affect and motivation between records and activities as well as between creators, custodians, users, and subjects—in determining the value and meaning of records. This project has added to these critiques and expansions, providing an analysis of records and recordkeeping practices that do not conform to a linear model of time, nor to the clear temporal or personal distinctions that Anderson and Caswell critique. The paradox—peculiar to parenthood and the pandemic alike—captured by the phrase “the days are long and the years are short” complicates

any simplistic account of records as documentation of the past preserved for the sake of the future. Records, in fact, both *reconstruct* and *reconfigure* the past as well as the present and future—which is made possible by their materiality, their persistence, and the cyclical and interpenetrative nature of temporality as it is already recognized by our own personal recordkeeping practices.

While this paper has focused on the temporal implications of the reconstructive and reconfigurative potential of parental recordkeeping practices, another possible focus would be the very *creative* and *constructive* capacities of these practices. Because this project turns the focus of analysis toward the creation stage of recordkeeping, and illuminates recordkeeping practices in a particular concrete context, the insights thereby generated have further concrete insights to offer archival theory with respect to the creation of personal records. My research and analysis thus far have revealed this to be a distinctly constructive activity in several respects. First, creating records is an act of construction insofar as records also mediate and co-construct relationships between creators, custodians, users, and subjects. Second, the creation of records can constitute the construction of ‘imagined’ events or memories that serve a symbolic and affective purpose even though they are merely imagined. Third (and somewhat conversely), the creation of records can generate a sense of ‘realness’ for relationships, roles, or experiences that might not otherwise be socially recognized. Finally, the creation of records can reconstruct and reconfigure the past in ways that contribute to transforming the future. These and other areas of constructive potential for personal recordkeeping practices would surely prove to be fascinating and productive avenues of future research.

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I have a photograph of my son a year ago, when he was about four months old, drooling on his carrier while we waited (ultimately unsuccessfully) in an hours-long line at the passport office in downtown Vancouver so we could obtain his passport for a trip to see my parents (which, due to a subsequent rise in covid cases in Hawai‘i, we did not take). I recall the moment vividly, less because of the (typical *and* particular) details just described than because a woman in line with us that day said to me, “I remember that age so well. Everyone has their favourite ages, and that was mine.” I took in this comment at the time with the same mixture of initiation, revelation, irritation, and camaraderie that often attends one’s encounter of advice from more experienced parents, particularly when it comes to ‘savouring the moment’ (*How exactly does one savour the moment while being repeatedly reminded that it’s fleeting?*). In retrospect, though, her comment lit up several avenues of my own experience that had previously been obscure to me. First, having barely emerged from the ‘fourth trimester’ with all its attendant absorption and exhaustion, I had only just begun to realize that my son was a fully distinct being following his own trajectory of development, which would have distinguishable stages along the way. I had not even occurred to me that one could, as a parent, prefer some of these stages over others. I can now say that I realized all this in that moment, and I also realized that it was *only in retrospect* that any of this—his stages of development, their unique flavours and features—would ever be legible to me in the present.

I have also been keeping a ‘One Line a Day’ journal in which I’ve recorded my daily reflections about my son since shortly before this picture was taken (I had intended to do so from his birth, but the fourth trimester also had its effects on this plan). The format of the journal presents each date on a single page, with separate spaces for each year—so one can look back on the previous year’s entry as one writes. Like the parents I interviewed, I find it difficult to make time,

especially at the end of a long day, for even this small recordkeeping task. And also like other parents, I'm not sure whether the journal is for me, or for my child, or for someone else; and I'm never sure that what I've recorded is what I really want to preserve. But since passing the one-year mark, I've noticed that the prospect of reviewing last year's entry—and thus savouring the memory in the context of the present—is a 'treat' I look forward to, a reward for the effort of continuing to keep this record. In particular, I've recently noticed (or recalled) that my son's particular comportment right now—constantly watching and listening so as to gobble up words, intonations, and relationships—is in many ways reminiscent of the way he was at four months old, when his attention was focused on learning about his world through observation, and not yet on developing his skills for moving *through* the world by locomotion. "Everyone has their favourite age," I repeat to myself. Both of these ages are my favourite—as well as countless others that I can't fathom yet.

Without the photograph, the journal, the slightly annoying reminder from a stranger, I would not have been able to make these connections in my own experience, and would thus be unable to indulge in the uniquely fulfilling pleasure of reminiscence in such a rich and well-informed way. The satisfaction that lies in these kinds of recordkeeping and memory-cultivation practices lies, I submit, precisely in the non-linearity, indeed the *cyclicity*, of time. Due to the interpenetration of present and past, and the cyclical return of the past *in* the present, the meaning and signification of my memory of my son at four months old can be not only reinterpreted but also *reconfigured* as I return to it through the lens of the present. This reconfiguration is only possible because this point in the past is still *present* with me now, embodied in the record that is my child himself, 'actual and acting.'

One of the questions I posed to interviewees was about whether keeping and sharing records gave them a sense of 'control' over the passage of time (in parenthood and/or in the

pandemic). The passage of time seems, for parents in general and pandemic parents in particular, often to be experienced as out of their control. There is a way in which recordkeeping (especially journaling) serves to recoup a sense of control over the passage of time. It is clear to me now, though, that this sense of control is illusory. What we experience instead, in creating, sharing, preserving, and reviewing our personal records, is a sense of *story* that renders our memories more sense-ful and significant, *despite* our lack of control. These recordkeeping and memory practices both reveal the cyclicity of time and experience as they are embodied in our children, and render the unpredictability of this non-linear movement of development meaningful to us. What we see, and what we long to—but ultimately cannot—capture when we look at our young children, is a living record of the complex interpenetration of past, present, and future; theirs and our own.

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## **Appendix: Project Materials**

### **Call for Participants - Facebook Post**

Calling all new (and new-ish) parents on Bowen!

Did you become a parent during the pandemic (between March 2020 and March 2022)? Would you be interested in talking with me about the records you've kept of your parenting journey? I'm currently a Master's student in Archival Studies at UBC, and I'm writing a thesis on this topic under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Douglas. I'd love to interview you about record-keeping as a new parent in the pandemic. Please PM me for more details. Thanks lots in advance!

A couple of notes: Some of you may know me personally, but no one should feel at all obligated, for any reason, to take part in the study. Liking or following this post won't raise any expectations of participation, though it may mean that others might associate you with the study. If you participate in the project, this kind of association might make it easier for others to identify you and may affect the confidentiality of your responses.

### **Detailed Call for Participants**

For my Master's thesis in Archival Science, under the supervision of Dr. Jennifer Douglas at UBC, I plan to conduct interviews with people who've become parents during the COVID-19 pandemic about the records they have kept of their pregnancies (or adoptions), the births of their children, and/or the early period of their new babies' lives.

My goal is to find out how pandemic conditions like lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing have interacted with new parents' urge to record events, the nature of the records they've kept, and their experiences of record-keeping during this time.

Since having my first baby in March 2021, I've thought a lot about record-keeping. In particular, I've found that I keep records as a way to feel more connected to loved ones that I can't see in person, to make my own experiences seem more 'real,' and to get a sense of control over the passage of time. This made me wonder if other new parents are having similar experiences. Through informal and open-ended interviews, I'm hoping to gain insight into the experience of new parenthood during the pandemic through the lens of record-keeping practices.

As a potential participant, you are completely free to decide whether you wish to participate in these interviews or not. If you do decide to participate, you will also be free to decide what to share and what not to share. Participation will not be compensated, but you may find that conversing with a sympathetic person who may also have shared some of your experiences has a therapeutic effect. Alternatively, returning to the negative aspects of these experiences could be difficult. I encourage you to consider whether this is likelier to be a positive or negative experience for you before agreeing to participate.

If you have any questions or you want to participate, please email me at [alice.everly@alumni.ubc.ca](mailto:alice.everly@alumni.ubc.ca).

Nostalgia for the Present:  
Keeping Records of New Parenthood in Pandemic Times

**CONSENT FORM**

***Who is conducting the study?***

**Principal Investigator** (Supervisor):  
Jennifer Douglas  
Assistant Professor  
UBC School of Information  
phone: 604-827-5905

**Co-Investigator** (Researcher):  
Alice Everly  
MA Student  
UBC School of Information  
phone: 778-751-8232

***Why are we doing this study?***

You are being invited to participate in this study as someone who became a parent during the Covid-19 pandemic. My goal is to find out how pandemic conditions like lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing have interacted with new parents' urge to record events, the nature of the records they've kept, and their experiences of record-keeping during this time. The results of the study will contribute to the growing research on personal record-keeping and will add a new focus on record-keeping by new parents.

***How will the study be done?***

I will conduct open-ended interviews of about 60-90 minutes. In the interview, I'll ask you about your experiences of pregnancy (or adoption), birth, and the early period of your baby's life. I'll ask how conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic affected these experiences, and what records you have kept of them. You will be free to decide what and what not to share.

***How will the results of the study be shared?***

Interviews will only be used by me for research purposes. The results of this study will be included in my MA thesis, and may also be published in later work. If results are published in later work, data may be shared with the journal. Your name and any other identifying details will not be included in my thesis, published work, or data shared with any journal. Direct quotes will not be used without your permission.

### ***Will being in this study carry any risks?***

Participation in this study will carry certain minimal risks:

1. Risk of exposure to disease, including COVID-19. In order to minimize this risk, Covid safety protocols will be followed, including:
  - a) Meeting in ventilated areas (outdoors or with windows open)
  - b) Physical distancing
  - c) Use of masks when necessary
2. Risk of revisiting difficult issues and experiences, including birth, parenting issues, and pandemic conditions. In order to minimize this risk, I'll support your decisions about what to share and how to share it, and make clear that we can stop the interview at any time.
3. Risk of being associated with the study. In order to minimize this risk, I'll keep your name and all associated data confidential (see below).

### ***Will being in this study have any benefits?***

Participants in this study may or may not derive some therapeutic benefit from the interview experience, as it will provide an opportunity to reflect on experiences of personal significance with a sympathetic and supportive interviewer who may share some of these experiences.

### ***How will your privacy be maintained?***

1. Interviews will be recorded on my phone and then downloaded onto my computer. All files will be password protected and encrypted, and my phone and computer will be encrypted.
2. At the end of the study, the data will be moved to a UBC server, where it will be stored for a minimum of 5 years following publication. It will be password protected and encrypted.
3. Your name and any other identifying details will not be included in any written work.
4. I will ask for consent before including any direct quote in any written work. If a direct quote is used, it will not include your name.
5. Since Bowen Island is a small community, it is likely that study participants will be acquainted with one another. It is also possible that participants will be identifiable by one another when mentioned in written work. Though all above measures will be taken to ensure anonymity, these considerations should be included in any decision to participate.

***Will you be paid for taking part in this research study?***

You will not be paid for participating in this study.

***Who can you contact if you have questions about the study?***

If you have any questions or concerns about what we are asking of you, please contact the lead investigator or co-investigator. Our names and telephone numbers are listed at the top of the first page of this form.

***Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about the study?***

If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Ethics at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

Participating in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse. If you decide to participate, you may choose to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study, and that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Print Name\_\_\_\_\_

Signature\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

## **Interview Script**

### **I. Using records to connect with loved ones/community in parenthood**

1. How and when did your baby come into your life?
2. Were you able to see loved ones during the pregnancy or after the birth?
3. Have you been able to see loved ones as your baby has grown?
4. What do you think of as records of your baby and your parenting experience?
5. What records have you shared with loved ones who were far away?
6. What records have you kept for yourself/your baby/your family of this time?
7. Has keeping and sharing records helped you feel more connected?
8. Has sharing or viewing records on, e.g., social media helped you make or deepen connections with other parents? Has it helped you feel part of a community?

### **II. Records and sense of oneself as a parent [*for first-time parents*]**

9. Has your experience of parenting in the pandemic been as you had imagined it would be?
10. How do the records you've kept of your parenting journey affect your sense of yourself as a parent? [*Possible follow-up: Do you feel like a 'real' parent? Do you feel 'seen' or 'known' as a parent?*]
11. How do the records you've kept affect your sense of being recognized by others as a parent?

### **III. Records and time perception in parenthood**

12. Since becoming a parent (or since your pregnancy) has time seemed to pass faster? Slower? Both?
13. Does record-keeping feel like a way of marking, slowing down or speeding up time?
14. Have you looked back at the records of your parenthood so far?
15. Are you happy with what you've recorded or haven't recorded?

### **IV. Comparison of record-keeping between children [*for parents of more than one*]**

16. Has your experience of parenting in the pandemic been different from your experience before the pandemic? If so, how?
17. Do you notice any differences in your record-keeping habits between your first child and subsequent children? Do you keep fewer records? More records? Different records?
18. Do you connect any of these differences to the pandemic or pandemic conditions?

