

## **Keep Running Towards the Danger: The Transformative Potential of Archival Care**

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To begin I want to acknowledge that I'm speaking with you from the traditional, ancestral and occupied territory of the hən̓q̓əmiṇəm speaking Musqueam people. As an occupier of this land, I know it's my responsibility to think about my obligations on and toward this land, its stewards and other occupants, and about how to make sure that a land acknowledgment is not just a box I tick at the start of each talk I give or class I teach. This need to protect against thinking we've checked the box and can move on, when the real work is so much *more work*, is one of the things I want to focus on today in this talk.

Before I really get into things, I want to say thank you to the Archives Society of Alberta and to Rene Georgapolous for inviting me to speak with you today and for making it possible for me to do some from my office here at the University of British Columbia. While I had originally intended to be with you in person, I've had to remain in Vancouver for medical reasons. It's really lovely to be able to be with you on Zoom, and lovely, too, that the use of Zoom can open up this conference to broader participation for other folks who aren't able to get to Edmonton in person.

When Rene first approached me to give this talk and told me the conference theme would be caring for people in the archives, I was equal parts thrilled and amazed, and my talk

today is based on this amazement, sort of tracing how far this field has come in a short time from treating many of the topics we'll be discussing over the next few days as at best fringe and at worst pretty much taboo to organizing a whole conference around the recognition that archives – and archival work – can be difficult and emotional. I really want to commend Rene and the program committee for committing to this theme and then for building such an excellent program. Thank you.

As I wrote in the abstract for this talk, my title borrows unabashedly from Canadian writer and film director Sarah Polley's recent memoir, *Run Towards the Danger: Confrontations With a Body of Memory* (2022). In one of the essays in the book, Polley describes an injury resulting in a terrible concussion that impacts her health and life for several years. Her first efforts to treat this traumatic head injury involved – under the advice of several doctors – different versions of gently testing her limits – with noise, light, and activity – and then retreating and resting when she started to experience significant discomfort. However, she recounts how that doctor who finally helped her overcome her injury advised her that in order to regain her strength and health, she had to change this mindset: instead of gently pushing toward and then retreating from discomfort, she had to learn to run towards the danger, to push herself into and through the very activities that caused her pain and anxiety. Though she is wary of this advice at first, and though it is hard advice to follow, she is astonished to find that it works, and throughout the book of essays, in which she addresses other forms of trauma, including the death of her mother when she was a young girl, experiences of sexual assault, and traumatic childbirth, Polley engages this advice in different ways but to the same end: to run

towards the danger is to find a way through. Running towards the danger is in direct opposition to what one CBC reviewer of Polley's book called "living in a protective crouch."<sup>1</sup>

In my talk today, I want to think about this idea of running towards the danger and I want to think, too, about the dangers of the "protective crouch." I'm going to consider what running towards the danger means in two parts: in the first part, I reflect a little bit on how my own experience of running (or at least moving; a lot of the times I definitely was not running) toward what felt hard and dangerous helped me to ask new questions about what archives are, what they do in peoples' lives, and how they should be cared for. In the second part, I introduce Victoria Hoyle's concept of "authorized archival discourse" to call attention to how we can – as a discipline and as a profession – tend to cling on to that protective crouch in ways that impede, and sometimes make completely impossible, the potential for care to transform archival workplaces and practices.

Before I go any further, please know that during this talk, I will be mentioning stillbirth and other types of pregnancy loss, not in any detailed way but I do refer to these kinds of losses and their effects, and I will also be talking more generally about death and grief – again, not in a lot of depth. I know these topics impact people differently and I want to encourage anyone who feels this talk might be difficult for them today to do what they need to take care of themselves – please feel free to step away at any time, and also please feel free to reach out to me after the talk if there is anything you'd like to talk about further.

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<sup>1</sup> CBC Books, "Run Towards the Danger by Sarah Polley," December 14, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/books/run-towards-the-danger-by-sarah-polley-1.6279502>

### ***Running Towards the Danger: Part 1***

As I've already said, I was both thrilled and amazed to learn that there would be an entire conference dedicated to the topic of care for people in the archives. The description of the conference theme that has been circulated includes the recognition that at the heart of archival work are the people impacted by the work. It acknowledges that these people – whether they are the people who create and donate records, people who access and use records, or people who acquire, process, arrange, describe and make accessible records – these people experience different emotions and feelings, and some of these emotions and feelings are difficult. Donors may be grieving the loss of a loved one. Researchers may be connecting with an event from their past that has caused them trauma. Archivists may be experiencing secondary trauma or compassion fatigue as they work with records documenting difficult experiences and with the people who make and use them. A glance through the program confirms that over the next few days, presenters will be talking about: content warnings, care for donors and users and for other archivists, and trauma-informed practices in different settings and contexts.

Not very long ago it was inconceivable that an entire conference could be organized around this theme of care for people in archives or that an archival conference could so purposefully centre trauma, difficult emotions, or emotions of any kind. It was almost inconceivable that a single session, even a single paper, would address these topics. I won't ever forget the first time I gave a conference talk on the theme of grief and archives. It was at the 2013 ACA Conference in Winnipeg, where the conference theme was community archives. At the time, I had just finished my PhD and at that point in my career, when I didn't yet have a job as a professor but was looking for one, it was very important that I be quite active in

presenting and publishing. The problem for me at the time was that I was also grieving deeply. My second daughter was stillborn early in 2012 and at the time I wrote my proposal for the conference I really didn't care about provenance and original order and the things I'd written about them in my dissertation. All I could think and care about was the love and grief I felt for my baby.

I *had* started to think about the different ways that recordkeeping was part of my own grieving process. I noticed how I was accumulating, and then arranging and preserving bits and pieces of what I thought of as evidence that she had been with me, that she mattered, that she was loved and missed: ultrasound images; a list of potential names; a hospital bracelet; her footprints, stamped in ink by a nurse as a keepsake; a pink and white striped onesie; the photos we have of her; journals I kept while pregnant, and after. These – I realized – were the beginnings of an archive.

I had found a community of other grieving mothers online, where we shared stories on blogs and in community forums and came to know each other, and to know each other's babies, in some profound ways I was grappling to understand, and I thought about how a kind of community archives was forming in these spaces. This was the topic of the paper I presented at that ACA conference. In it, I proposed the idea of an aspirational archive of grief, borrowing the term aspirational archive from cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai<sup>2</sup> to describe how the record-making activities of bereaved parents was both commemorative in nature – making memorials to their children – and at the same time was creating a kind of imaginary present

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<sup>2</sup> See Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, ed. Joke Brouwer, Arjen Mulder, and Susan Charlton (Rotterdam: V2\_Publishing/NAI Publishers, 2003).

and future. I struggled mightily to write that paper. This was before Michelle Caswell and Anne Gilliland began to publish their work on imaginary records and archival imaginaries and before the 2016 special issue of *Archival Science* on affect and archives. There was no language yet available to me – at least, no disciplinary language. No model of how to do this kind of work in our field. And it was scary! It was terrifying to stand up in front of colleagues and mentors and friends and try to articulate this new idea that also required me to talk about how I’d got to it – to describe my loss and trauma to show how it had led me to new ways of thinking about records and recordkeeping.<sup>3</sup>

For me, this was a kind of running towards the danger. I *knew* there was something there; I knew there was some kind of profound connection, worth exploring, between grief and love and records and recordkeeping, and I knew, even if I didn’t know *how*, that articulating this connection could lead to different – better – ways of doing archival work, but it was *hard* to start this conversation. Because we never talked about grief in archives (publicly at least), I had to start by explaining why *I* was talking about grief in archives. I had to (or felt I had to) tell the story of my baby’s death and of the ways I started to see records and archives bound up in my own grieving process and how this set me thinking about these connections more broadly; how personal experience led me to find new scholarly and disciplinary ways of thinking and working. I had to make myself very vulnerable to start this conversation at that conference. Many, many

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<sup>3</sup> At this point I want to be clear that I do not think any archivist or archival scholar is required to share their loss and trauma or even to “use” their loss and trauma to help move archival theory and practice along. Just as Eira Tansey has pointed out that no donor or researcher owes archivists their trauma, no archivist owes the profession or discipline their trauma either. My choice to talk about my experiences didn’t honestly feel like a choice at the time and in the ensuing years I have many times wondered whether I would do so again if given the chance. See Eira Tansey, “No One Owes Their Trauma to Archivists, Or, the Commodification of Contemporaneous Collecting,” blog post, June 5, 2002, <https://eiratansey.com/2020/06/05/no-one-owes-their-trauma-to-archivists-or-the-commodification-of-contemporaneous-collecting/>

times I asked myself what on earth I was doing and wanted to retreat – to assume a protective crouch, talk about something safe. Like original order. Ok, that was actually kind of a joke, because *is* original order really a safe topic? I'm not so sure. At any rate, it is – and definitely was in 2013 – a lot safer than talking about grief.

I felt compelled though. Compelled to talk about these new ideas, to put them out into the world somehow, to keep exploring them. When I gave that talk in Winnipeg, it was to the quietest conference room I'd ever encountered. There was none of the usual distracted shuffling, the small noises people make when they are trying to sit still and pay attention. Over the next few years of giving talks on grief and archives I came to know that particular silence well. To some extent it's an uncomfortable silence: the audience is uncomfortable with the subject matter, with being confronted by death or grief or feelings, with me talking about my personal life in a professional or scholarly venue. It's also usually a listening silence. A respectful silence. For me, it has been, especially in the beginning, also a lonely silence.

I read an article by Denise Turner, a lecturer in Social Work and Social Care at the University of Sussex, about "research you cannot talk about"<sup>4</sup> and felt seen. For a long time, this was research that many people did not want to talk about. But. *But*. Some people did want to talk. Invariably, after giving these presentations, at least one person from the audience would seek me out, often later, when I was alone, to share their own experience and to thank me for making it possible to do so, for demonstrating that there was room in our field to talk about these things. Often, I wanted to give up this line of inquiry, to stop talking about grief – it

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<sup>4</sup> Denise Turner, "'Research You Cannot Talk About': A Personal Account of Researching Sudden, Unexpected Child Death," *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, 24, no. 2 (2016): 73-87.

was sad; it felt self-indulgent sometimes to be talking so much about my own experience, even it was to find a way to make connections to archival studies more broadly; I worried that my work wasn't rigorous (some people told me it wasn't), that people would think I was taking advantage of my own trauma (some people told me I was). But then I would remember these people who came to talk to me, and the urgency with which they told me their stories, the need they had to speak with someone else who understood – and I knew there was something there. I kept running towards the danger.

I built a research project around figuring out what that something was. The Conceptualizing Recordkeeping as Grief Work: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice project was awarded funding by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in 2018, for a multi-year project exploring the relationships between recordkeeping and grief. The project was exploratory in nature, with a broad focus on three lines of inquiry: I would look at grief and recordkeeping first by working with bereaved records creators,<sup>5</sup> second by talking to working archivists and other records professionals,<sup>6</sup> and third, by studying what I was calling bereavement collections, or archives that were created or accumulated as the result of a grieving process.<sup>7</sup> The idea, for me, was that if we understood more about how grief was implicated in the making, keeping and use of records, we could devise more sensitive and

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<sup>5</sup> For more information, see Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas, "It Feels Like a Life's Work": Recordkeeping As an Act of Love," *Archivaria* 91 (Spring 2021): 6-37.

<sup>6</sup> See Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas, Elizabeth Bassett, Noah Duranseaude, Ted Lee and Christina Mantey, "These Are Not Just Pieces of Paper": Acknowledging Grief and Other Emotions in Pursuit of Person-Centred Archives," *Archives & Manuscripts* 50, no. 1 (2022): 5-29.

<sup>7</sup> See Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas and Devon Mordell, "Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists': Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives," *Archivaria* 83 (Fall 2019): 84-120.



caring ways of working with records and, especially, with the people who are connected to them.

One thing I really learned, though, as the research got underway, was how urgent it was even just to start talking about grief and other emotions as part of recordkeeping. Before devising new ways of working with records, I came to realize, there is a huge amount of work to do to even *acknowledge* that grief and emotions are part of archival work and need to be talked about. In the first part of the project, working with bereaved records creators, I quickly learned that my impulse to gather things together, to keep records of my daughter's brief life, of her death, and of my grief and continuing love for her was not an isolated impulse. The other parents I spoke with were doing the same things and for the same reasons: they were compiling the evidence of their baby's existence, their baby's importance, their baby's place in the world and of the love they felt – and continued to feel – as parents. And they needed this recordkeeping to be acknowledged, just as they needed their love and loss to be acknowledged.

The archivists I interviewed spoke a great deal about acknowledgment, too; how sometimes a donor really needed an archivist to see how much they loved and missed their mother or partner or friend, or even to acknowledge their own life and work and loves as they prepared for their death. The archivists spoke, too, about how their own grief and feelings needed to be acknowledged. They spoke about feeling as if they weren't supposed to have feelings at work, that having feelings made them what one archivist I interviewed referred to as "a hashtag-bad-archivist." And they spoke about the urgent need for this to change in the profession.

This research was hard: exhausting, sad, sometimes a heavy weight to carry, always with a sense of deep responsibility to do right by the participants and the stories they'd shared with me. But I do think it was worth it, that the work has suggested important new ways of thinking about recordkeeping as an act of love, that it has brought to the foreground the incredible need that existed in the archival community to talk about emotions and feelings and trauma and care, both for ourselves and for others we work with and for. The work helps to demonstrate – I think – why running towards the danger can lead us to important insights, to powerful places. I like to imagine that it has – at least in some small way – helped to move others into the space, or keep them there, let them know there was company, as more and more archival scholars, educators and practitioners begin to grapple with the increasingly unavoidable truth that some records work is difficult, some can be traumatic, and that the people who this work need care.

In the time since I gave that presentation at ACA and started my research on grief and recordkeeping, the discourse has expanded dramatically. The room is no longer silent. In 2016, at the annual conference of the Archives Association of Ontario, Anna St. Onge, Julia Holland and Danielle Robichaud presented a panel with the title, "It's Nothing: I'm Fine; Acknowledging Emotion and Affect in Archival Practice," and then a month later, in another panel at the ACA conference, Anna St. Onge, Melanie Delva and Rebecca Sheffield provided perspectives on emotional labour in archives. Australian archivists Michaela Hart, Nicola Laurent and Kirsten Wright were giving presentations in multiple venues on vicarious trauma experienced by archivists, archivists' emotional labour and on broader perspectives of trauma-informed

archival work.<sup>8</sup> In 2014, a symposium on archives and affect was held at UCLA and in 2016 a special issue of *Archival Science* with origins in the symposium was published, exploring ideas about the affective value and impacts of archival materials, institutions and practices.<sup>9</sup> That same year, two students, Jenny Vanderfluit and Katie Sloan, approached me to supervise a directed research project that involved a cross-Canada survey of archivists' knowledge of and experiences with secondary trauma.<sup>10</sup> Last year, Nicola Laurent and Kirsten Wright, in partnership with the Section for Education and Training of the International Council on Archives, carried out another survey, this one much larger in scope, to understand the international landscape of trauma and archives. Courses have been developed to prepare archivists to work with difficult records and to work in a trauma-informed way; again, Laurent and Wright are leading the way on this, having created a professional workshop for the Australian Society of Archivists introducing "A Trauma-Informed Approach to Managing Archives." At the University of Toronto, Henria Aton and Christa Sato have created a six-week workshop for students in the Faculty of Information on trauma-informed approaches to information. Wendy Duff and Cheryl Regehr, also at the University of Toronto, are working on a project similar to some of the Conceptualizing Archives as Grief Work project, investigating archivists' emotional responses to archival records and considering how archival institutions

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<sup>8</sup> On their work in this regard, see for example: Kirsten Wright and Nicola Laurent, "Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 91 (Spring 2021): 38-73; Nicola Laurent and Michaela Hart, "Emotional Labour and Archival Practice – Reflection," *Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists* 15 (2018); Nicola Laurent and Michaela Hart, "Building a Trauma-Informed Community of Practice," 2019, available at: IOS Press Content Library, <https://content.iospress.com/articles/education-for-information/efi190363>

<sup>9</sup> See *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016).

<sup>10</sup> Findings from this survey were published in Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit and Jennifer Douglas, "Not 'Just My Problem to Handle': Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* (2019), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol6/iss1/20/>

can support archivists experiencing these responses.<sup>11</sup> The room is – decidedly – no longer silent.

### ***Running Towards the Danger – Part 2***

This is good, right? There are lots of articles written, and there is lots of work being done, guidelines being developed and workshops presented. We have this whole conference about archives and people, trauma and care. *It is good*. It is so important that all this work is happening and I'm so grateful to everyone who is contributing to it. But. There's always a but. The but in this case is connected to my concern that we not only start running towards the danger, but that we *keep* running towards the danger. It's easy, for example, to approach issues like this with what's known as a tick-box mentality. Like, ok, we've included a mention of secondary trauma in our onboarding manual, so we're good, right? Our employees have access to counselling through their benefits program, so we've taken care of that problem, right?

It can also be far too easy for individuals and organizations to creep back into their protective crouches, or to never come out of theirs because they think someone else is doing the work and they don't have to. Conversations about grief, other emotions, trauma, vicarious trauma may not be taboo anymore, but that doesn't mean they are easy. And it is easy – as it always is with difficult conversations – to brush them off, to leave them to another time, to hope someone else will deal with them. Maybe, some of us might think, if we wait a while, this trend will blow over and we won't have to deal with it. Some of us might even think, if

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<sup>11</sup> See for example, Cheryl Regehr, Wendy Duff, Jessica Ho, Christa Sato and Henria Aton, "Emotional Responses in Archival Work," *Archival Science* 23 (2023): 545-568.

archivists can't deal with these things themselves then maybe they should find another line of work. I *know* people think this because I've heard them say it and because it was included in the responses to Sloan and Vanderfluit's survey.

Here's where I will confess to some of my own early scepticism about secondary trauma in archives. I'm not really proud of this, but I know that the scepticism came from my own place of grief and trauma. The first time I heard archivists talking about their own feelings of distress when working with difficult records, I was reminded of the time a doctor I was seeing started to talk to me about how hard it was on them that my baby died. I was incensed. I felt like this doctor was comparing their pain to mine, suggesting that they were somehow similar, which was 100% sure they were not. The grief of pregnancy loss is such a disenfranchised kind of grief and their suggestion even made me feel like their grief – the grief of doctors who are so highly respected in our society – could overshadow my own and the grief of other parents like me. When I first heard archivists talking about secondary trauma, I had a similar reaction: was the focus on their feelings and responses diminishing the experiences of people documented in or creating or using records? If we made everything about us, what would that mean for the people who experienced trauma first-hand and the kind of care *they* needed, when their pain, I imagined, was so much more urgent? I'm in a less raw place now – and have been for a long time now, thank goodness – and I see much more clearly now how **there is no competition here**, how the type of trauma or pain or response that is experienced second-hand is *different than* the type of trauma or pain that is experienced first-hand and how it requires a different approach and a different kind of care, but also how **care is not finite**. We can have enough care to go around. *If* we pay attention. *If* we keep running towards the danger.

One way that I was really convinced of this was by listening to the archivists I interviewed for the Conceptualizing Archives as Grief Work project. It was overwhelmingly clear that archivists needed to talk about grief and other emotions, their own, their donors', their users'. It was overwhelmingly clear that many needed much more support than they were getting to be able to continue in their work, *and* that they were thinking about what kinds of support and care needed to be extended to creators, donors, users, and also record subjects – either directly, through interpersonal interactions, or indirectly, through practices like archival arrangement and description. The problem – or at least one of the biggest problems – was where the support they needed would come from and how they would be supported, too, in making changes that would allow them to better extend care to the people involved in and impacted by their work.

In her recent book on archival values, Victoria Hoyle talks about the curious disjuncture between values archivists *profess* and values they *enact* through archival practices. Hoyle first traces the shift in archival discourse – for example in journal articles, books, conference presentations, etc. – from a focus on traditional archival values of objectivity, authenticity and entirely records-centric preservation to values that reflect ongoing discussions in the field about equity, affect, social justice, and care. These shifts in values, Hoyle explains, might be expected to result in shifts in practices, but when she spoke with archivists during her research she found that radical shifts in how archivists *talk* about their work were not always mirrored by radical shifts in how the work gets carried out.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Victoria Hoyle, *The Remaking of Archival Values* (Routledge: London, 2022).

From the field of critical heritage studies, Hoyle adapts Laurajane Smith's theory of Authorized Heritage Discourse to describe how values are "ascribed, circulated and naturalized" within discursive fields. She proposes the concept of an Authorized Archival Discourse (AAD) that "naturalizes a range of assumptions"<sup>13</sup> about the nature and meaning of archives as well as about how we should manage them, at the same time as it naturalizes "certain subjectivities and forms of experience over others."<sup>14</sup> The Authorized Archival Discourse, Hoyle argues, is pervasive and persistent, and in her discursive analysis of the ways that archivists' discussions of archival values reflected both awareness of the need for change *and* reinforcement of the status quo, Hoyle demonstrates AAD at work; while her participants often expressed desire to remake archival values and enact more people-centred practices, they were "constrained both by the contexts in which they operate and by the language, symbols and processes they use."<sup>15</sup> The Authorized Archival Discourse, Hoyle argues, "sets out disciplinary boundaries and professional identities – i.e., ideas about what archives are and what archivists to – that are embedded with each retelling. Retellings are coded into archival education, daily tasks, and overarching narratives about archives."<sup>16</sup> Hoyle shows how emerging affective values "generate dissonance with the authorised discourse but don't absolutely displace it or lead to its conscious rejection. On the contrary," she writes, "the dissonance is mitigated by repurposing traditional principles in ways that reassert and protect established ways"<sup>17</sup> of thinking about and doing archival work.

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<sup>13</sup> Hoyle, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Laurajane Smith, quoted in Hoyle, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Hoyle, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Hoyle, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Hoyle, 18.

What Hoyle is getting at here is the pervasiveness of the traditional, the way it is so deeply embedded in our discourse and praxis – in our archival education, in our standards, in our institutional policies – that resisting it requires considerable effort, long-term commitment and systemic change. It requires awareness of how AAD operates to tell us we can't do something because it's not the way things are done, as well as awareness of how even those of us who profess the will to change might not realize how deeply and unconsciously we've absorbed – or naturalized – this telling. I think Hoyle's ideas – and warnings – about AAD can be tremendously helpful at many different levels to keep us attuned to where and how we retreat back into our protective crouch in the face of difficult, transformative work. In particular, Hoyle's work reminds us that any lasting, consistent change in archival practices has to be systemic; if, as a profession, we are going to commit to caring for people in the archives, this care needs to be envisioned and enacted not only by individual archivists but – and especially – at the level of leadership, of institutions, of the profession, of archival theory.

When I think about the urge, sometimes not entirely conscious, to retreat into our protective crouch, I've also found Danielle Robichaud's description of how the prioritization of everyday tasks is political work to be useful and inspiring.<sup>18</sup> Many times when I've spoken about the need for more person-centred archival practices, for example in arrangement and description, which inherently require more time and attention than archivists have been used to being able to give to these tasks, I've encountered resistance, primarily centred around the feeling the archivists resisting have that there is not enough time or other resources needed to

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<sup>18</sup> This paragraph and the next are reworked slightly in an article reporting on some of the Conceptualizing Recordkeeping as Grief Work project. See Jennifer Douglas, "On 'Holding the Process': Paying Attention to the Relations Side of Donor Relations," *Archives & Manuscripts* 50 (2023), p. 37. doi: 10.37683/asa.v50.10925



do more than they are already doing. This is something that Robichaud addresses, too, in her article on redescription practices and equitable descriptive policies at the University of Waterloo, showing how the decisions archivists make about how to allocate time, attention and other resources are in fact decisions, choices; they demonstrate a kind of prioritization. Robichaud reminds us of Antonina Lewis' description of "archival fragility" to argue that "by focusing on comfortably familiar neoliberal deflections like time and resources, archival fragility side-steps meaningful, action-oriented change."<sup>19</sup> In other words, maintaining the status quo is a choice archivists make that allows them to avoid change; this choice, Robichaud shows, is often at the expense of justice- and equity-oriented work.

David James Hudson makes similar points about how discourses of "practicality" in LIS serve to condone and/or endorse hegemonic racial politics and white supremacy. As he explains, "our very expectations and assumptions about the practical character and value of our field subtly police the work we end up doing and supporting, the kind of questions we ask and conversations we have, [and...] our sense, more generally, of what useful and appropriate [ ] interventions look like from the standpoint of our profession."<sup>20</sup>

Work like Hoyle's, Robichaud's, Hudson's and Lewis' reveals how discourses of practicality and prioritization reinforce the authorized archival discourse; they are political; they allow us, as individual archivists, as a profession, to sidestep conversations about meaningful, transformative change through recourse to the always-familiar language of scarcity – scarcity of

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<sup>19</sup> Danielle Robichaud, "Integrating Equity and Reconciliation Work into Archival Descriptive Practice at the University of Waterloo," *Archivaria* 91, no. 1 (2021), p. 101. See also Antonina Lewis, "Omelettes in the Stack: Archival Fragility and the Aforeafter," *Archivaria* 86 (Fall 2018), pp. 44-67.

<sup>20</sup> David James Hudson, "The Whiteness of Practicality," in Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (ed), *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Studies* (Library Juice 2017), p. 205.

time, people, money, which are all real concerns – but, we must admit if we are honest with ourselves, are also about scarcity of will and commitment to change. Hoyle, Robichaud and Hudson also show how change must happen at structural levels. This is not change that can be effected solely through or depend on gestures of kindness of individual archivists – or better self-care practices. We are talking about change that requires fundamental changes to institutional policies, to systems, standards and practices. In a recent article titled “Towards an Archival Reckoning,” Raquel Flores-Clemons talks about how hard it is to maintain a “people-first approach in institutional settings because you have to prioritize the needs of the organization that holds the collection.”<sup>21</sup> The shift that is required to move us to more person-centred approaches and practices is a systemic problem that requires commitment at the leadership level – in other words, it’s not just on individual archivists to keep running towards the danger: this is an institution-wide, profession-wide endeavour.

### ***The Transformative Potential of Archival Care***

I think we are being called to do this work. When Katie Sloan and Jenny Vanderfluit proposed the Canadian survey on archivists’ experience of secondary trauma, I thought there would be interest, but I was blown away when nearly 300 people started the survey and 155 completed and submitted it. This is a hugely significant response rate. Laurent and Wright’s more recent international survey received 1138 valid responses from 100 countries. These numbers provide considerable warrant; they tell us that working archivists are concerned about trauma in and

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<sup>21</sup> In Ashley D. Farmer, Steven D. Booth, Tracy Drake, Raquel Flores-Clemons, Erin Glasco, Skyla S. Hearn and Stacie Williams, “Toward an Archival Reckoning,” *The American Historical Review* 127 (June 2022), p. 807.

around archives and about the support that is needed to enact and continue policies and practices that provide care for the different people who can experience trauma and difficult emotions in archival settings. I think we should be recognizing, too, how the Reconciliation Framework: The Response to the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce<sup>22</sup> is also calling us, as individual archivists, as a discipline and as a profession, to rethink how and why we do the things we do with records, to call into sharp relief how the authorized archival discourse needs to be held up to scrutiny and its naturalizing and normalizing effects actively resisted so that we can respond to the Frameworks' principles and objectives. Every step of that work will require a trauma-informed approach. Every step requires us to put people in the centre, to really consider the emotional, affective impacts of our work on people, and to acknowledge that emotional and affective impacts are also political impacts. In short, to fight the protective crouch. To keep running towards the danger.

I'm starting to feel like I'm belabouring the phrase, but I hope it is clear that I see it – and the idea it embodies – as not only a warning or a kind of scolding, but also as a generative call to action, a call to pay attention and to keep paying attention. It's tempting to turn away from difficult topics like grief and trauma, but as with all efforts towards transformative change, and especially when the stakes are so high for so many, we need to continue to engage this work with heart, to avoid assuming we're done because we've done something, or hoping someone else will do it for us, to resist retreating back into our protective archival crouch. Which is not, as I hope I've managed to convey, an *innocent* protective crouch – it's a crouch

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<sup>22</sup> The Steering Committee on Canada's Archives. Response to the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Taskforce. Reconciliation Framework. 2022.  
[https://archives2026.files.wordpress.com/2022/02/reconciliationframeworkreport\\_en.pdf](https://archives2026.files.wordpress.com/2022/02/reconciliationframeworkreport_en.pdf)

with consequences and it's a political choice, a choice that shows where we fall in the politics of care and its distribution.

I'm reminded here, in closing, of something one of the parents I interviewed said about care. Brooke explained how photographs were especially valuable because they proved that her daughter was real, a real baby, who was love, but she also described the reluctance she felt to share the photographs with others unless she felt sure they could look at her daughter with love. As Alex, my research assistant and I, worked through the interview transcripts we kept coming back to this question: what would it mean to look with love in archives? In the context of the interviews with bereaved parents, looking with love allowed us to recognize how records could take untraditional forms, be found on the body in the form of tattoos, on the land as trees, in rituals performed on special occasions. Looking with love made us think about what kinds of care records that were so precious to their creators required, and, too, what kind of care their creators needed. Looking with love made us ask how love could be preserved and passed on in archives, and Brooke's words caused us to think, too, about how to make sure archivists look with love and how they help researchers look with love. Looking with love – centring people and care – we realized, could help us to find ways to transform archival theory and practice. If we work at it. If we try.

I know this talk ends with more questions than answers. How do we do the work of looking with love? In what specific ways will our principles and policies and practices and workplaces be transformed when people and care are centred? These questions are at the heart of every presentation in this conference's program; they are what we will all be thinking about, together, over the next couple of days. What I hope *this* talk has provided is a sense of

the urgency, the *continuing* urgency of the work as well as a call to push into the discomfort a little, but also more than a little: in Polley's stories, the gentle pushing never got her far enough, and I'm not sure gentle pushes will get us far enough either. Perhaps I can by end by challenging those of you especially with decision-making power, with the power to prioritize what work gets done and what doesn't, to approve – or not – the more person- and care-centred practices that are proposed to you, to try to notice where the authorized archival discourse or recourse to practicality rears its 'no, I don't think we can do that because...'. I want to challenge you to see what might happen if you say yes – or at the very least, put out an invitation: let's talk some more about that, you can say, and see what we can do. Thank you.