

Personal Archival Practices: Broadening Our Understanding of Archival Stewardship

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ABSTRACT

Archival stewardship is a useful concept in understanding an archivist's management of records and collections. Without the practical application of stewardship, archives would be less accessible and intelligible to the public, far less physically protected, and disconnected from the community from which it may stem. This work remains invaluable in the archival field, but it is both inadequate in capturing and frequently leaves out the care, labor, and intellectual contributions of community members who are stewards of their own archives prior to donating them to institutions. By better understanding their archival stewardship work, this paper broadens the archival field's definition of stewardship to include unique, community-specific contributions, its findings impacting core theoretical concerns such as intellectual contributions to history and archival silences. Using a feminist epistemological framework, this paper takes seriously knowledge produced by a community and thus broadens and strengthens the model of archival stewardship as we know it.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Archival arrangement and description; Community engagement; Archives; Collection development.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Personal archives; Stewardship; Critical archival studies; Academic libraries and archives.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2025.2043>

INTRODUCTION

Stewardship work remains invaluable in the archival field, but it is both inadequate in capturing and frequently leaves out the care, labor, and intellectual contributions of community members who are stewards of their own archives prior to donating them to institutions. By better understanding archival stewardship work of personal archivists within a community, the archival field's definition of stewardship can begin to include unique, community-specific contributions, restoring agency to communities that have always been caring for their own records, and shifting the center of the conversation away from institutional definitions and practices. While this research project is part of an ongoing study of personal archival stewardship in the Armenian community in the United States, this paper more closely focuses on grounding literature, theoretical frameworks, and identifying points of interrogation and potential impacts of personal archival stewardship.

This paper is driven by the questions: How can personal archival stewardship influence practices of stewardship in academic institutional archives? How can the field of archival science better understand this care and labor preserved upon a collection's encounter with such institutions? Archival labor, care practices, arrangement methods, and many other unique elements of stewardship broadens not just the definition and boundaries of academic institutional stewardship but also witnesses how collections are *already* impacted and influenced by the stewardship work that was done by community members. Much of archival science's understanding and theoretical underpinnings of stewardship work originate from institutional or professional contexts. This particular paper lays the groundwork for expanding the field's understanding of stewardship work by first recognizing archival labor done in a community.

Defining Personal Archival Stewardship

Personal archival stewardship is defined as the labor of the person (or specific people) collecting, preserving, arranging, describing, studying, (and potentially donating to an institution) materials in a collection or archive. These range from personal papers, archives of a community organization, family archives, or collections around a specific topic. This paper uses this term to describe the aforementioned labor done by a person rather than the collective work done by a community in a systematic way. A multidisciplinary breadth of literature is necessary to understand the theoretical and practical significance of this work. Therefore, this work is framed using literature from fields such as philosophy, feminist studies, and archival studies—specifically as they relate to personal and institutional archives and stewardship, oral history stewardship, case studies on personal archives, donor relations, and more. Using the Society of American Archivists' definition of stewardship as a launching point, this paper adds to this description by citing authors that challenge the strictly physical definition by including oral history stewardship (Kim et al., 2024), stewardship as the amplification of marginalized voices (Sheffield, 2016), and the stewardship of records where they are seen as living relatives instead of dead ancestors' materials (Loyer, 2021). This research particularly focuses on stewards because they may not be the subject of the collection they work with or are not reflected in the materials in any explicit way. Stewardship is thus hidden work that may not be seen as legitimate contributions to an archival collection, let alone the historical narrative being told within.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review explores the importance of studying this phenomenon from a feminist epistemological lens as it strengthens the importance of locating intellectual contributions of a community to historical records, and who is seen as a knowledge producer. It also argues that a majority of records and collections in institutional archives were once personal collections and that while personal and institutional archives have significant distinctions between them, archives within institutions are not fundamentally more trustworthy or legitimate than personal or community archives. Creating an intellectual and practical link between personal and institutional archives also helps frame the influence of personal stewardship on archival collections. Stewardship work in institutions is thus inevitably influenced by the care, arrangement, and preservation work already done by people in the community, and recognizing this link restores and reaffirms the knowledge production of community members.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Epistemology

Feminist epistemology helps theorize instances of erasure, pushback against knowledge production for oneself or one's own community, and unconventional knowledge practices. This philosophical framework at once frames the harms done by historic and archival erasure, misrepresentation, and silence, as well as *reframes* what we mean and see as 'knowledge' in the first place (Dalmiya & Alcoff, 1993, Visweswaran, 1994). Why are 'old wives' tales' seen as myth? Why are certain types of knowledge gendered or epistemologically discriminated against (as Dalmiya & Alcoff, 1993 call it) in the first place? Feminist epistemology literature specifically discusses how knowledge production has been gendered in fields like science and medicine, and how types of knowledge production like testimony and community knowledge are legitimate even if not written down.

Knowledge practices are socially formed and understood, making knowledge production itself a social, communal act. Through collective knowledge production and the spaces it creates, women build new worlds where they can comfortably exist and finally belong (Lugones, 1987). Their knowledge has always had shared roots and their isolation from participating in epistemic practices was because knowledge was incorrectly branded as objective in the first place (Haraway, 1988). Women's communal knowledge was instrumental in developing knowledge around health, medicine, the environment (Harding, 2011), and especially pregnancy and childbirth (Dalmiya & Alcoff, 1993). In instances of third world women, Visweswaran (1994) explains that their personal archives, diaries, and writing "challenge[d] the very notion of a canon," creating an entirely new one for and by themselves (p. 39). This space of production afforded "avenues of creativity" as well as allowed them to possess new "degrees of freedom" (p. 30). Collections such as the zines at the Sallie Bingham Center at Duke University, Riot Grrrl Collections at NYU, and the Barnard Zine Library (all of which were once exclusively community archives) all "reimagine possibilities of feminist storytelling" (Eichhorn, 2013, p. 21). In the context of the Armenian community, Armenian women are especially likely to be the stewards and memory keepers in their community (Doghramadjian, Garcia, Punzalan, 2025). Their labor is one that encompasses preservation work, arrangement of records, and even facilitating community engagement. Feminist literature also surfaces this vital issue of care labor, its gendered nature, and its theoretical impacts when it comes to archival work. Caswell and

Cifor (2016) discuss both the feminized and laborious nature of archival work, which is often diminished and invisible. They, too, find adopting a feminist ethic entirely transforms relationships within the archive: the archivist finds a renewed responsibility with record creators, record subjects, users, and communities, and vice versa.

Personal and Community Archives

Community archives are a defining example of collaborative knowledge production. They are sites of reclaimed power, agency, and narrative for communities deliberately or unintentionally left out of, erased from, or misrepresented in formal archives and definitive historical accounts (Caswell, 2014), and spaces of “aspiration” in addition to collection and “recollection” (Pell, 2015, p. 51). For example, Middle East and North African communities have been historically excluded from traditional, academic, and government archives, and collective archives allow the community to feel represented (Marks et al., 2023). Community archives like the South Asian Digital American Archive recover and preserve materials such as oral histories of communities “excluded from traditional institutions” (p. 371) and archives like Alternative Toronto are created to “remember the past differently” (Lapp, 2023, p. 127). Activist archives that are created and preserved by social movements, like 56a Archive in London and Occupy Wall Street in New York City, become sites of mobilized self-determination (Pell, 2015) as well as “modes of self-representation and self-historicization” (Cifor & Wood, 2017, p. 3). Similarly, the Riot Grrrl Collection includes an array of audiovisual, written, and artistic records from the underground feminist punk movement of the same name, deployed to “*take a position* in the field of cultural production that was hitherto denied” (Eichhorn, 2013, p. 22). Community archives can also be supplemental to history, documenting a space or a scene that adds to existing archives rather than rewrite them. The Louisville Underground Music Archives document the diverse music scene of Louisville, Kentucky, reaching out to and including the larger community in its archiving effort; Louisville’s musical scene would not be complete without it (Daniels et al., 2015). Not only are these community archives responses to social and material conditions, but they are transformative spaces in which knowledge production can rewrite and enrich history and build a new future.

Core Principles: Archival Stewardship in the Community

The field of archival science has already started to grapple with the importance of and also implement working and building relationships with the communities their collections represent (McKemmish et al., 2005; Roy and Trace, 2018; Shilton and Srinivasan, 2007). Scholarship around decolonization of archival institutions, especially from the perspective of Indigenous communities, helps frame the necessity of this dynamic. Archival institutions have portrayed communities according to colonial constructs, prioritized mass collection without regard for relationships with the community, and are ultimately disembodied and stripped from their original contexts (Guerrero, 2021; Henchy, 2021). The political, imperial, and militaristic conditions Indigenous communities have been subjected to caused a rupture not only in their collections, but of their communities as well. Therefore, collections are like an extension of the family, or even seen as a relative itself (Loyer, 2021). When encountering their own records, they encounter family members and materials that not just belong to their ancestors but are

indeed their ancestors themselves. Indigenous studies have also identified relationship-building and centering the community around archival decision making but have changed how the field views a collection in the first place. Xyooj (2021) explains that regarding Hmong studies, decolonization cannot begin until the community is positioned as “legitimate, credible experts” and their ways of knowing are seen as valid (p. 233). Working with communities from which knowledge originates necessitates we view individuals as knowers (Xyooj, 2021).

Relationships archival institutions can build with those represented in their collections also restore agency to the communities in question through collaborative choices made around preservation, stewardship, classification and description practices (Roy and Trace, 2018; Sheffield, 2016; Wong, 2021; Xyooj, 2021). Archivists are not passive actors in institutions but rather are endowed with power to make decisions around a collection’s description and portrayal, the public’s access points to the materials, and depiction of the archival subjects themselves. Instead of viewing archival stewards as surrogates for community members in archival processing, these Indigenous voices can instead be consultants and collaborators in the portrayal of their own histories, and of their own archival relatives. This collaborative model ensures a collection’s sustainability, and ongoing use by the community once accessioned. By prioritizing and centering the expertise of communities, archival institutions relinquish and restore decision making power to communities where the production of knowledge has always existed.

POINTS OF INTERROGATION AND POTENTIAL IMPACTS

By witnessing the intellectual contributions of personal archivists, collections in institutions can be made more whole, better contextualized, and set up for increased use by the community. Community members can be seen as legitimate actors in narrating their own histories and cultures, and stewardship can be yet another entry point that our field uses to locate the contributions that shape an archival collection. This research is an opportunity to highlight the stewards of collections, and not just the subject of the collections themselves. Especially when the steward is not the subject of the material, they become susceptible to being forgotten and written out of the records they helped preserve, organize, and made the intellectual decision to donate.

In the case of the Armenian community, its intersection with archival theory is still emerging (Gilliland and Hovhannisyan, 2022; Doghramadjian, Garcia, and Punzalan, 2025), yet its history of rupture and dispersal makes the preservation of its cultural heritage all the more essential. Several Armenian special collections across the country have been processed by academic institutions and have been preserved in nearly the same state as when they were donated. The stewards and donors of these materials were intimately familiar with their contents and were the most knowledgeable regarding their coherent arrangement. Especially in communities that have experienced large-scale violence and destruction—particularly to cultural heritage institutions, as Rayan (2024) meticulously showcases regarding the Palestinian diaspora—community members are the most qualified to preserve and steward their records and archives.

If we can better recognize what stewardship work outside the institution looks like in practice, several elements of institutional archives and core concepts in archival science can be seen in a new light. The following are six potential impacts of explicitly seeing stewardship as a mode of knowledge production. First, a collection where the steward is not a subject of the collection can be better reflected in the archival record itself, and in telling the overarching story of the collection, either through a description of the collection, or through the finding aid itself. Second, recognizing stewardship work both eliminates and rectifies possible pockets of silences within the archive. When personal archival stewardship is recognized as shaping a collection now housed in an institution, and is incorporated through elements of description and the public-facing finding aid, archival silences take on a new meaning, but are also remediated simultaneously. Third, the influence of stewardship cements the notion that institutional archives are not uniquely legitimate on their own but are shaped and created by those in the community. Personal archiving is inevitably imprinted on institutional collections. Fourth, this research expands the notion of archival stewardship, providing new and concrete examples in practice within the community—elements that are more than just physical preservation. Fifth, stewardship can become another component in shaping the historical record, and thus recognized as knowledge production that is distinct from record creation itself. This is an opportunity for the institution to view stewardship as an intellectual act, but also for stewards to recognize their own work as such. Last, meaningful stewardship by a community member can shape the use of the collection by that community once the collection is accessioned by an institution, and inform the life that the collection has after donation. It is not just stewardship as an archival concept that will be better informed and defined, but the life of records before donation and appraisal will gain importance in understanding the life of the records within the institution, and thus legitimizing the records created and the work done in the community.

CONCLUSION

There is already a strong foundation of research written that locates the importance of working with communities to rectify harms inflicted by archival institutions, and better contextualize collections through community-led arrangement and description in order to reflect a collection's community history and narrative. However, this paper shifts the focus of this existing research in two ways. First, much of this research still centers the community and interrogates how the *institution* can do better to reflect and locate the needs of a community; this research instead centers the archival work being done by members of a community and how they shaped a collection prior to its donation. Second, instead of recommending institutions and archival practitioners change their *own* methods of stewardship, this research uses the concept of personal archival stewardship to push institutions to recognize the labor that has already been done, and reflect that accordingly during accessioning, processing, and description phases. Stewardship work will thus become more than just physical preservation, but will provide new entry points for far more rich descriptions, contextually accurate finding aids, and most importantly reflect community members' knowledge production and intellectual contributions to history through a collection that was made more whole through their work.

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