Autonomous archives

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(Received 30 September 2008; final version received 7 January 2010)

By providing evidence for the creation and continuation of claims to identities and places, archives facilitate the participation of multiple publics in dominant cultural and political domains. In the context of fluctuating relations between competing and unequal publics in contested narratives and spaces, the means to control representations of documents determines the ways in which groups are able to participate in the present and influence the future. While government archives have attempted to include and incorporate diverse histories, many social justice organisations and social movements have chosen to operate outside of this framework by preserving the records of their own activities. This article theorises a concept of ‘autonomous archives’ as a crucial component of democratic heritage practices. It develops this notion through an exploration of archives that have emerged within marginalised publics in Vancouver, Canada: the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs Archives, the Hope in Shadows Archive, and Friends of the Woodward’s Squat Archive. Each of these archives point to the intersecting concerns of social identity, claims to place, and the political stakes of representation within heterogeneous and unequal publics. They also suggest the significance of archives in the formation of publics, within the broader context of cultural memory and democratic participation.

Keywords: archives; public memory; public spheres; emergent publics; social movements; social justice; identity formation

Conceptual frameworks – publics, pasts and archives

The preservation of archives is a highly political work of memory. In providing proof of actions, words and deeds carried out by governments, politicians, social rights advocates, concerned citizens and community groups, archives are crucial to the struggle to define social contexts and hold those in positions of power accountable. They witness relationships between particular groups, places and issues, and, in their role as evidence, provide the basis for judgments in courts and writing the histories of public life. By providing a basis for the establishment of public opinions, exchanges and actions by diverse groups in relation to issues of collective concern, documents from archives (and those destined for future archives) play a primary role in public spheres. In these senses, archives are always sites of potential as their eventual uses are undetermined. However, the functions of archives in social justice and public life are broader than their evidentiary capacities. Through their constitutive and relational capabilities, archives act as spaces for public formations and are thus central to

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understanding practices of heritage in democratic societies as they bridge publics’ constructions of the past and their imaginations of the future.

Analyses of publics, histories and archives have followed particular discursive patterns reflecting relations of power within particular social contexts. The dominant understanding of the role of archives in publics has often manifested in official stories of the Public (e.g. the Nation) residing in the Public Archives. In such normative accounts, the Public is the foundation of democratic culture, based on the principles of equality of participants, accessibility and deliberation on the common good (Habermas 1962[1989]). Official history forms the basis of the ‘imagined community’ of the Public by assuming consensual faith in a shared past (Anderson 1983). In Canada, this official memory is held in national and regional Public Archives, which have been defined by their adherence to the concept of ‘total archives’ – or the preservation of a cross-section of government and private historical documents stored in a single location, managed by the state and accessible to all. Within the normative paradigm, these archives are seen as inclusive and impartial while archivists strive to be objective guardians.

This singular notion of the Public, based on a politics of consent, has been criticised by some theorists who employ the notion of ‘counter-publics’ to accentuate the contested components of publics, emphasising that they are always multiple, heterogeneous, competing and unequal, both internally and externally (Fraser 1990, Angus 2001, Warner 2002). Counter-publics highlight alternative oppositional spaces in which marginalised groups construct collective identities and discourses apart from dominating groups. They are also sites from which these groups critique, engage and compete with other publics in order to affect and transform collective spaces and places. This sense of ‘publics’ and ‘counter-publics’ attests to the creative process of world-making (Arendt 1958, Warner 2002). As world-making, publics bear witness to the building of communities in common, and public spheres are always spaces of agonistic struggle over the actors to be included and the methods for determining the past, present and future of shared places. Out of this practice of democratic engagement, collective identities and solidarities emerge, as do possibilities for social transformation (Arendt 1958, Isin and Wood 1999, Mouffe 2000).

Similarly, many scholars discuss public history as an instrument in the political struggles for hegemony amongst a plurality of social groups. This view critiques the histories disseminated by governments, media, and many Public Heritage institutions which progress the dominant ‘imagined community’ of the Nation while obscuring the particularity and plurality of localised memories and more marginalised identities (Glassberg 1996). This position also opposes assumptions of universality inherent in the official history, and the possibility of a singular public memory, emphasising counter-memories and histories as tools to tell the stories of state oppression, coercion and erasure of diversity (Foucault 1977, Glassberg 1996). It finds legitimacy in local and vernacular forms of heritage, through which the contingencies of shared memories of diverse communities are reinforced, and their incorporation into broader narratives of the past is situated within a critical posture toward assumptions about perceived commonalities of experience. In doing so, public histories contribute to the contestations of publics and counter-publics, and are necessary components of the deliberations and world-making possibilities of democratic societies.

The universality and impartiality of the archive then also come under question. These positions range from a view of the archive as a tool of the state, intentionally perpetuating society’s relations of power (Ernst 1999), to an understanding of
archivists and archival policies as inherently subjective, and archival records as refracted through processes of valuation and interpretation that inevitably mirror dominant cultural understandings (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998, Cook and Schwartz 2002, Schwartz and Cook 2002). The possibility for truly impartial and inclusive assessments and approaches is thereby compromised by the power relations in which archives are always implicated. In an attempt to address these potentially dominating aspects of archival practice, archivists in Public Archives have engaged in re-reading records against the grain to draw out the stories of women, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups in their finding aids and access points, while simultaneously revising acquisition policies in attempts to fill gaps in holdings of underrepresented groups (Carter 2006). However, these efforts remain top-down in their approach, with government officials making decisions about the inevitable inclusions and exclusions, and the language and organisation through which the archives are represented (Hopkins 2008).

Stemming from such critiques of Public Archives, many groups have become active in forms of grassroots archival practice aimed at preserving the heritage of those on the peripheries of society, largely without intervention of the state or seeking incorporation into Public institutions. These practices are typically associated with ‘community archives’, which have gained importance and visibility in recent years. Particularly salient examples include the South African History Archive, the community archives movement in the United Kingdom, and archives throughout the world documenting the histories of particular ethnic groups, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered communities (see, for example, the websites for the South African History Archive, the National Directory of Community Archives (UK), Canadian Jewish Congress National Archives or ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (USA)). Definitions of these community archives are diverse and debated (Flinn 2007). Some view these practices as methods of political contestation and resistance against dominant social and cultural narratives. Others looking at archives that arise from groups with a common interest or within a particular geographical region, present them in a more neutral light. Community archives also vary in their affiliation with different levels of government and the degree to which they are established and institutionalised. As a result of long-term efforts, some have gained legitimacy as producers of historical, cultural and political narratives within their society, while others remain on the margins of public knowledge of the past.

In an effort to better understand the functions of documentary heritage within particular communities we explore the archival practices of emergent publics. Emergent publics can be conceived of as nascent communities without (as yet) solidified group cohesion, loci of identification, or external recognition. They often arise in neighbourhoods, social movements, or audiences of publications (to name a few), and typically are politicised through attention to particular issues they believe warrant collective action (Angus 2001, Warner 2002, Newman and Clarke 2008). As emergent, these publics have varying degrees of internal organisation and fluidity in relation to other publics.

Focusing on the community archiving practices of emergent publics, which we term ‘autonomous archives’, we explore the constitutive and relational potentials of archives, particularly for identify formation and publicising of marginalised histories. These autonomous archives are tied to specific issue-event contexts of public formation and witness groups’ struggles to establish themselves within cultural and political forums. They are autonomous in the sense that the group is its own source of initiative and responsibility (Clark 1984), it acts without deferring to another’s authority (such
as the state, or another community organisation), and has a public orientation tied less to inclusion in Public institutions than to acting in the intersecting spaces of public spheres. As is the case with many communities, emergent publics use the space of the archive to critique dominant narratives of official history and ensure that the diversity of their experiences is represented within broader collective memories and heritage. Paralleling the often nebulous distinctions between counter-publics and emergent publics, the boundaries between established community archives and autonomous archives are fluid, as groups and their heritage become more or less solidified, recognised and institutionalised over time. The concept ‘autonomous archives’ orients us towards the potential of archives to enable democratic participation amongst society’s most marginalised and fragmented.

In this paper we explore the reciprocal character of publics and archives through consideration of three emergent publics that have developed autonomous archives. Further, we consider how autonomous archives, both conceptually and practically, factor into claims to place, critiques of public heritage and the politicisation of representation within heterogeneous and unequal publics. Autonomous archives present a framework for understanding the archive as a creative, world-making process that contributes to shared knowledge of the past and has the power to transform modes of public engagement. Although we hope this will contribute to international literature on heritage, our focus on the Canadian context is not incidental as we assume the relationships between publics, places and archives, are inextricably linked. Through these unique heritage spaces, we see an opportunity to speculate upon the consequences of such alternative and emergent practices, and to explore the implications of power and participation in the archives. A consideration of how autonomous archives have the potential to form both constituting spaces (i.e. those that foster in-group processes of identity formation) and relational spaces (i.e. those that promote between-group relations in the world at large), makes possible a broader conceptualisation of the politics of heritage, and its interconnections with the ongoing projects of democracy.

The archival projects
Three illustrative cases offer familiar examples of emergent community-organised archives, and serve as focal points for conceptual reflection. The autonomous archival projects of the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, Hope in Shadows and Friends of Woodward’s Squat, are all situated in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Although they are in no way unique to Vancouver, their places in this neighbourhood are significant. Demonstrating varying degrees of institutionalisation and formality, each of these archives emerged from the needs and desires of a marginal and fragmented community in its efforts to express, collect, represent and preserve the evidence of its activities and experiences in particular places. In doing so, we argue that each archive ultimately contains the potential to act as a resource to remake the very environment it documents.

Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs
Since issuing its first articulated response to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau’s White Paper of 1969, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs has consistently opposed the Canadian government’s land claims policies and treaty processes which require the surrender of Aboriginal Title to ancestral lands. In its 40 years of existence, the Union has
repeatedly articulated the belief that land is more important than financial settlement of claims, and has provided support to communities engaging in political and legal negotiations concerning land and resource rights, health and education, and many other issues of importance to First Nations. Throughout this time, the organisation has maintained an archive of its work that simultaneously provides a glimpse into the hardships faced by Aboriginal people in British Columbia, and reinforces their knowledge, determination and resourcefulness in addressing common issues. The archive holds hundreds of audio and video recordings of meetings and events, through which Aboriginal voices speak on all issues of relevance to their communities, and are heard unmediated by the bureaucracy of government or mainstream media.

**Hope in Shadows**

Commonly described as Canada’s poorest neighbourhood, the Downtown Eastside is notorious for its open drug market, homelessness, sex work and high incidence of HIV. Since 2003, Hope in Shadows has been a multi-dimensional project aimed at documenting the vibrant and diverse community life of the area. Through an annual photography competition open to Downtown Eastside residents, an exhibition in a local gallery and the creation of a calendar from the prize-winning photographs which is sold by local residents, Hope in Shadows is a significant event for the community. The archive of this project consists of approximately 16,000 photographs, calendars, interview recordings and other textual materials. With its focus on preserving images and voices of residents’ family, friends, artistic endeavours and community involvement, the Hope in Shadows Archive provides a unique record of the Downtown Eastside as seen through the camera lenses of its inhabitants and told in their voices, offering a counterpoint to the stories most frequently told about the community in popular media and the municipal archives.

**Friends of the Woodward’s Squat**

In 2002, homeless people and social housing advocates organised a squat at the vacant Woodward’s department store also located in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. In a 92-day occupation of the building’s perimeter, the squat, known as ‘Woodsquat’, offered refuge and support for those in need in the neighbourhood, while attempting to influence policy-makers and raise public awareness of the housing crisis facing local residents. Throughout their stay, squatters created documents that were used to explain the necessity of the action, to mobilise support, for legal consideration, and to express the experience of and desire for neighbourhood solidarity and community autonomy. These accounts, including written, oral, graphic and photographic records, along with media representations and responses from the municipality, form the Friends of Woodward’s Squat Archive. It contributes to knowledge of Downtown Eastside inhabitants’ struggle against their marginalisation and has the capacity to ward off social amnesia about a controversial issue by providing evidence of the contestation occurring in places of everyday interaction.

Together, these three examples highlight the heterogeneity and plurality of emergent publics and their autonomous archival practices. The Union of BC Indian Chiefs, which has become significantly legitimated, recognised and established throughout its 40 years of existence, has possibly made the transition from ‘emergent’ public to well-established community. This institutionalisation is increasingly
reflected in its archives, now with a dedicated archivist and governed by semi-formalised policies and procedures. Thus, its place in our discussion is as a successful autonomous archival effort, though issues of initiative and stability remain at play. Hope in Shadows’ project and event-driven structure has resulted in an archive based on active documentation and collecting practices. The success of the project, combined with its affiliation with an increasingly well-recognised legal organisation, Pivot Legal Society, has helped to ensure that this archive is protected and managed despite the lack of dedicated place or trained archivist. At the other end of our spectrum of examples, Woodsquat was a social movement event that resulted in an archive collected, organised and maintained independently by a single archivist. This archive is in the greatest jeopardy – both physically because of its lack of a permanent dwelling place, and intellectually because of potential public inaccessibility.

Constituting spaces and places
The intimate connections between these publics and their environments call attention to the significance of place for communities, and by extension for their archives. By connecting stories of past experiences to present localities, public histories give places meaning. This connection to place affects the relationships between community members, their sense of responsibility for their environment and, ultimately, collective memory. Wallace Stegner (1995, p. 202) notes that ‘no place is a place until the things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments’. Through their discourses, group members transform the spaces in which they enact their everyday lives into historical places in which they are able to play significant roles. Although the development of a collective sense of place often involves struggles between (and within) various groups and interests with conflicting understandings of the same environment (Glassberg 1996), these shared perceptions perform a crucial function in community cohesiveness and identity. Documentation of such understandings in texts often forms the basis for the establishment of archives. The archive is then central to the relationship between place and discourse, and the ways in which these coalesce as resources for the formation of emergent publics.

In each of our examples, the group actively asserts that land is central to its identity and understanding of its history. The historicisation and politicisation of these places (i.e. British Columbia, the Downtown Eastside, or the Woodward’s building) is facilitated by the creation of archives by publics with a vested interest in their futures. By providing evidence of the historical continuity of the struggles over these contentious locations, they enable a change in valuation and conscious understanding of the place. For the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the history of the entire province of British Columbia supports the Union’s many member communities’ claims as they vie for large tracts of territory they believe to be rightfully an ancestral inheritance. Beyond entitlement to land, they struggle for identities and acknowledgement in a society that took over their place, made it its own and refused them a position. The ability to assert the longstanding and enduring nature of these historical claims has potentially far-reaching implications for the lives of Aboriginal people and those of future generations. For Hope in Shadows, the claim to place hinges on representation. In a neighbourhood notoriously subject to the gaze of the media and slum tourism which typically focuses on drug use, homelessness, poverty and mental illness, community members line up in the early morning on street corners each year, waiting to be given a camera and the opportunity to document an alternative perspective of the place they
Hope in Shadows provides an intentional focus on images of community, friendship, family — hope — in what is widely known as a place of darkness. Similarly, Woodsquat was a struggle over the terms of belonging and the declaration of the right to place in a community faced with a systemic crisis of housing. Often described as a dis-placed community, members of the Downtown Eastside banded together to demand the inclusion of local residents in determining priorities for how their built environment would be used. The archive that is preserved, like that of Hope in Shadows, is one of only a handful of remnants of the creative political spirit of the neighbourhood, which is subject to increasing gentrification.

These claims to place are simultaneously assertions of community identity. The ability of historical documentation to engender collective memory and social solidarity — crucial aspects of group identity — is widely discussed, particularly as it relates to the nation-state (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998, Freshwater 2003, Featherstone 2006). By resisting incorporation of their archives into the broad collections of national or civic institutions, these emergent publics harness the power to use the evidence of members’ common pasts to develop a collective history, which provides cohesiveness to the group, and facilitates the unity of vision for the future and the capacity to act that is necessary for their social and political survival and success. Although these community identities will always be as fraught with heterogeneity as the national identity is, by co-opting, and at times subverting, the strategies commonly implemented by nation-states in fostering ‘imagined communities’, those on the peripheries have the potential to use their histories as a rallying point and a source for constructing group identities outside of the official version — what Mike Featherstone (2006, p. 594) refers to as ‘post-national imagined communities’.

Although it could be argued that better care, publicity and accessibility is provided in larger, more powerful institutions that can afford to house the archive in a highly controlled environment with well-trained archivists to order and classify, these benefits are always countered by the reductive tendency of such institutions to operate within known schema, amalgamating and standardising diverse collections into understood official histories. The archive thus becomes displaced and decontextualised — a circumstance which leads the archive ‘to slip away from the originating collectivity’ (Featherstone 2006, p. 592). This slipping away jeopardises the constituting space of the archive for the collective, as well as its credibility as a reliable source of information about the past. The establishment of archives then also provides a tangible means by which a group can assert its autonomy. By maintaining control over its own works, ideas and history, emergent publics are able to strategically represent themselves rather than submitting their archives to be filtered through the words and space of state-based institutions. Recognising that once documents are made ‘public’ they are open to a free-for-all of potential meaning and interpretation, the autonomous archive acts as an initial formative space in which the group establishes precedence in terms of representation. In keeping their own archives, publics maintain the ability to make their own decisions about how their heritage is managed and provide the first reading of their records.

**Relational spaces and places**

In gaining the capacity to constitute themselves autonomously, publics develop the structure and internal resources necessary to participate in dialogues of the wider world, which is often a significant objective. Autonomous archives have the potential
to act as relational spaces from which multiple publics interact and negotiate their views of the past and aspirations for the future. They affect the ways in which publics are able to organise their histories, solidify their authority in political and cultural struggles, and thereby influence both the make-up and dynamics of public spheres, such as courts, city hall or mass media. By providing multiple sources for the management, description, interpretation and possibly the contestation of heritage, autonomous archives also offer an opportunity for enhanced nuance and meaning in knowledge of the past.

The archive has the ability to establish the status and power of the group as both distinct and authoritative in the eyes of other publics. As Patrick Joyce (1999, p. 38) states, ‘the archive is always a place where authority resides’. One facet of this authority is the significance of archives to academics and other researchers, which Helen Freshwater (2003) describes as ‘the lure of the archive’. Historians (and others) are both attracted to undiscovered textual territory, and legitimated by the use of new and original sources. This credibility is circular as the resulting work is validated by the use of primary documents, while the archive achieves recognition by its use in a formalised history. In public perception, the authority of the archive may extend back to the community, having an overall legitimating function on popular opinion of the group.

Furthermore, the archive substantiates the community’s statements about the past. Thomas Osborne (1999, pp. 53–54) states,

One can write about the past in many ways, but unless one is able to generate credibility, one is not really doing history. The status of such principles of credibility is at once epistemological and ethical: epistemological credibility because the archive is a site for particular kinds of knowledge, particular styles of reasoning that are associated with it; and ethical credibility because knowledge of the archive is a sign of status, of authority, of a certain right to speak, a certain kind of author-function.

In assuming the right to speak about its past, a public is also validated in its claims of continuity between past and present-day struggles. For instance, the Union of BC Indian Chiefs asserts the invariability of the organisation’s position on Aboriginal claims in statements such as, ‘Throughout its different leaders, the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs has remained consistent and uncompromising on its position on Aboriginal Title and Rights’, and ‘The fortunes and resources of the UBCIC may have gone up and down over time, but the hearts of the people have never changed’ (UBCIC 2009). The archive’s audio and video documentation of hundreds of the organisation’s meetings and rallies attest to both the ‘hearts of the people’ and the Union’s collective responses to members’ issues. Through these records, containing messages that remain both poignant and timely, tangible evidence is preserved in support of the historical nature of claims and the consistency of the group’s position and methods. Furthermore, the records work to establish the Union as an authority on the historical and current states of Aboriginal people in the province, a status which has facilitated its inclusion in provincial and federal government negotiations, and its involvement with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.³ Through the legitimation of the group’s accounts of the past, credibility may extend to present-day claims, and the public is accorded increased potential to affect social-political narratives and the future of the place in which it operates.

Publications, in the form of websites, books and journals, serve as the main form of publicity for archives of these emergent publics. Because of their intimacy with the
documents, the group that creates them may have a more immediate desire and incentive to publicise their contents than would a Public institution, often leading to wider exposure through their dissemination and outreach activities. Because these archives are commonly located within the places they were created, they are also more accessible to the people of these communities, which is especially significant for groups that typically have fewer means to travel and may feel excluded from other institutions based on their appearances or backgrounds. In particular, the Internet offers a significant mitigating effect to the prospective seclusion of autonomous archives. While the Union of BC Indian Chiefs Archives has begun to provide public access from its home in the Downtown Eastside, the organisation has also disseminated digital copies of photographs, posters and newsletters from the archives through its website.4 The writings of many of the squatters at Woodsquat, as well as those of their supporters and opponents are collected in a special issue of the journal, West Coast Line, entitled ‘Woodsquat’ (Vidaver 2003–04), and these records are currently being digitised as part of a partnership project between community groups and academic researchers.5 These publications give uncommon access to evidence of the experiences of the homeless – who are simultaneously one of the most contentiously public groups in our society, and one of the most invisible. In a similar spirit, Hope in Shadows publishes a digital collection of photographs each year on its website, and also produced a book of images from the archive accompanied by stories collected from the photographers (Cran and Jerome 2008). Like the calendars, the publication is sold on the streets of Vancouver by vendors who are Downtown Eastside residents making a profit from each book they sell. The archive then contributes to public understanding of the history of the community, and has meaning to residents of the neighbourhood who see their friends and local hangouts depicted in the images and the words of the photographers. Such publicisation makes known the existence of these archives, and also contributes to a shared history of these communities’ ongoing struggles to define their inhabitation in places that are rapidly changing.

Thus, autonomous archives have the potential to affect public memory and history more generally through their introduction of new and alternative narratives about familiar places. Because of their close proximity to their communities of origin, autonomous archives also have the capability to implement innovative descriptive and interpretative practices. Although the archival standards implemented in Public Archives can foster the sharing of information between institutions and publics, their predefined structure also limits potential (re)interpretations. Indicative of the notion that ‘alternative visions require alternative archives’ (Hamilton et al. 2002, p. 16), the descriptions of the photographs and photographers on the Hope in Shadows website, for example, are both poignant and in keeping with the spirit of the community. A photograph titled ‘Pigeon Park’ is accompanied by the following description:

Photographer Wilda Ruttle ran into Al Tardiff in Pigeon Park, a gathering place for many neighbourhood residents. She wanted to capture the graffiti in the background because it symbolizes the creativity and sense of hope in the community, and she felt that Al blended into the artwork behind him. Wilda follows her inspiration when shooting: ‘My photos are usually spur of the moment’. Pigeon Park holds special meaning for Wilda, since she has spent so much time there while settling into the Downtown Eastside.6

By giving the photographer (and in some cases the subject) the opportunity to contextualise and explain the photograph, it is given its fullest meaning. Because of its accepted place in the community, Hope in Shadows is able to solicit commentary and
interpretation of archival images from the photographers and their subjects, some of whom are without fixed addresses and would thus be unknown to a Public Archives, and probably untrusting of government archivists to record their stories. Similarly, the scanned photographs on the Union of BC Indian Chiefs’ website include feedback forms asking users to contribute information about the image. Its maintenance of connections to the families of individuals who are the subjects and authors of its documents provides the Union with greater ability to solicit community input on records’ interpretations than a municipal or federal archive would have. In doing so, both groups enable inclusivity in the production of the archive, placing expertise and agency in their constituents for representation of the texts. Thus, the archive grows and develops as users add contextual layers to the records. These descriptive practices have the ability, therefore, to promote creative and diverse readings of archives that better reflect their publics, as the archive is built and reinforced by iterative community involvement in the production of its contents. Such archives are in constant and continuous creation, becoming what Stuart Hall (2001) refers to as ‘living archives’.

Autonomous archival practices thus have the potential to transmit deeper insight into the meanings of records. As expressed by Barbara Craig (2002, p. 287),

… the usefulness of the memory recalled by archives is affected by two conditions: the qualities of the documents as credible evidence and the transparency of the contextual envelope that encloses them. Together, these work to transmit clear intent that provides a stable foundation on which users can begin to create their own meanings.

By maintaining ties to the geographical histories of the archive and associations with the organisations and individuals who created and used it, and by ordering and describing its contents in ways that are meaningful to the community, autonomous archives necessarily provide greater promise of transparent contextual layers that help to establish the reliability of the documents they contain. They also offer potential mitigation of the inevitable tyranny of archival practice by introducing a multitude of archives where decisions are made by a multitude of archivists reporting to diverse bodies with potentially conflicting agendas in disparate public spheres. Although the archive will never speak for itself, the interpretative effects may be more nuanced and reflective of their original contexts if the archive’s many subjects and originators provide the first reading.

The interactive and relational capacity of these autonomous archival practices then creates the possibility for increasingly participatory heritage environments. Although there are potentially chaotic implications of a model based on ‘hyper- or unbounded archivism’ (Burton 2008, p. 334), or what Michael Lynch (1999, pp. 81–82) describes as ‘archive cancer’ – the multiplication and redistribution of archives from the ‘contained, coherent and centrally administered corpus’, Lynch also notes that this movement away from the original ideal configuration also has the potential to ‘generate new, perhaps more powerful, archontic infrastructures’. This unboundedness presents many complications, but is also the archive’s greatest strength, analogous to the ways in which the uncontrolled nature of the Internet also provides the potential for ever more creative and inclusive approaches to the production of information and knowledge. As cultural repositories become further decentralised, the task of heritage communities remains to ensure their coherence through the development of new forms of structures and networks, the majority of which will occur in cyberspace. This is already evidenced in the prevalence of archival networks and portals that provide integrated access to the contents of diverse archives. The effectiveness of autonomous
archives in broader public knowledge lies in the extent to which they can be recognised and connected through commonly utilised channels in the global collective of documentary traces. As more independent, localised archives emerge within increasingly fluid and complex structures and social spaces, both the archive and the ideal configuration will be constantly reimagined and redefined.

The significance of the relational spaces of autonomous archives extends to the overall functioning of democracy. They contribute to the agonistic processes of politics by holding in coexistence the pluralistic accounts of competing and unequal publics. As Jacques Derrida (1996, p. 4) writes:

Of course, the question of a politics of the archive is our permanent orientation here … This question will never be determined as one political question among others. It runs through the whole of the field and in truth determines politics from top to bottom as res publica. There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation.

Significantly, Derrida qualifies the terms of participation and access – not only to the archive itself and the documents it contains, but also to its constitution and interpretation. The transparency of government and concomitant access to the archives of government is often taken as an assumed (if underutilised) feature of a democratic society. Access to the very constitution and interpretation of the archive has not been as deeply entrenched as a crucial aspect of democratic participation. The active creation, preservation and interpretation of archives can further be perceived as a means of pursuing social justice in public spheres (Harris 2001). In a democratic society this depends on access to the records of governance, including the records of the governed, in order to evaluate and affect the political processes. Autonomous archives, as all archives, become both places and practices where diverse viewpoints are represented, and individuals and groups with divergent interests meet in a common location (physical or virtual), and make use of the same materials, often to pursue competing goals. Thus, archives are microcosms of public spheres, wherein multiple publics self-constitute and engage in issues of collective importance, expanding democracy in the process.

The archive as a project – democratic heritage practices

Theorising the roles and possibilities of autonomous archives reveals them as potent places for emergent publics. And while there is always the potential for obscurity, or even secrecy, at their root they function as public places. That is, autonomous archives, like all archives, operate as political sites for the transformation of the private to a public. Osborne (1999, p. 54) argues that a component of the definition and ethic of the archive is that it relates to some public, ‘even if this constituency or public has only a kind of virtual existence somewhere in the future’. This is the potential and promise of the archive – that it may become known and used for some undefined purpose in an unknown future. This publicness of the archive is embedded at the outset when it manifests from groups that have engagement in public spheres as a primary goal and purpose.

Autonomous archives therefore present possibilities for new democratic forms of heritage practice. Connecting publics, places and pasts, these archives act as both constituting and relational spaces within which publics are able to form their identities
and effect change in the world. Thus, the archive becomes ‘an active aspiration, a tool for reworking desires and memories, part of a project for sustaining cultural identities’ (Featherstone 2006, p. 594). Paul Ricoeur (2004, p. 86) stresses the futility in what he terms, ‘the cult of memory for the sake of memory’, which obviates the potential moral and political elements of memory, and the necessity of concern for the future. Emphasising the significance of the ‘work’ of memory and the ‘duty’ of memory, he asserts, ‘it is justice that turns memory into a project; and it is this same project of justice that gives the form of the future and of the imperative to the duty of memory’. The will to remember and to archive can be seen as a project and a movement – even a social justice movement in the examples elaborated here – based on concern for the future grounded in contested meanings and uses of places. Autonomous archives are useful to the emergent communities that create and maintain them; however, they are also sites of possibility, as their impact on public knowledge about the past is still uncharted and open for exploration.

Notes
1. Note that we capitalise ‘Public’ to refer to officially sanctioned sites, practices and discourses.
2. Although this designation is disputed, see for example an article in a national newspaper that describes the Downtown Eastside as ‘a harrowing display of human desperation’, and ‘a world of misery crammed into 10 blocks’ (Matas and Peritz 2008). For a critique of these perspectives, see Sommers and Blomley (2002).
3. See Union of BC Indian Chiefs http://www.ubcic.bc.ca/issues/transformativechange.htm for an example of involvement in government negotiations.
4. Providing access via the Internet is particularly important for British Columbian Aboriginal communities which are widely dispersed. Although Internet access is a barrier in very remote communities, there is typically a shorter distance to travel to a computer than to the archives itself. Furthermore, the Union is a well-known organisation; thus, less Internet-savvy members may be inclined to use its website as a source of trusted information than that of a government archives.
5. Community Health Online Digital Archive Research Resource (CHODARR) is currently active in cataloguing, digitising and publishing the records of British Columbian organisations with an emphasis on health and social welfare which otherwise would not be publicly available. See http://harvesters.sfu.ca/chodarr/.

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References


