Digitization, Post-Custodialism, and the Future of Community Archives: Reflecting on the L.A. as Subject Digital Residency Program

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Community Archives

Community archives are broadly defined as "collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control."[1] As more scholarship and collaboration emerges between community archives and university archives, the notions of control and power are brought to the forefront, asking archivists at larger institutions to center the exchange of skill and knowledge over the more finite project-based collaboration model.

The LAAS Digital Residency Program intends to creates bridges between the larger institutions where Resident Archivists are based and L.A. as Subject member archives.

Post-Custodialism

In a new post-custodial era, "digital technology allows archivists the ability to return physical collections to the original record keepers and create digital copies that can be housed in an institutional repository."[2] Resident Archivists move to the role of overseer and digital record manager while physical collections digitized through the L.A. as Subject Residency Program are controlled and maintained by the community organizations to which they belong. With the USC Digital Library, for example, a license agreement limits their use of digitized community archive collections, using reference metadata to share contact information for the archive. While post-custodialism generally applies to this type of partnership, "non-custodial" -- where an archives has a stewardship role but not an ownership role -- might be a more precise description.

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L.A. as Subject Digital Residency

The L.A. as Subject residency is made possible through a generous grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). A collaborative effort by L.A. as Subject (LAAS); Gerth Archives and Special Collections at California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH); Oviatt Library at California State University, Northridge (CSUN); and the USC Libraries, each hired a Resident Archivist for a two-year term.

The L.A. as Subject Residency Program provides the opportunity for recent MLIS graduates with an interest in pursuing a career in archives to learn from professionals and scholars in the field and gain experience in working with community archives. This project will help LAAS members to share knowledge and capacity for building digital collections and to assess and/or complete digital projects and to gain experience in ongoing work at a variety of L.A. area community-based archives.

Collaborative projects between Resident Archivists and partner community archives range from digitization to collective metadata creation to digital asset management consultations. All projects aim to work with a people-first ethos that prioritizes the transfer of knowledge and relationship-building over output.

About LA as Subject

L.A. as Subject is a research alliance dedicated to preserving and improving access to the archival material of Los Angeles history. Much of the city's history is preserved in libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions. Other valuable and unique collections – those that reveal the stories of neighborhoods, families, and influential Angelenos – are scattered across Southern California, curated by smaller institutions and individual enthusiasts. With an online directory of more than 230 separate collections, L.A. as Subject ensures that researchers know what materials are available, where they are located, and how to access them.

Strengths

- A more complete description that gives the community a larger say in how material is described and contextualized
- Community archive maintains physical and intellectual control
- Sharing resources and tools for sustaining projects with community partners

Weaknesses

- Competing agendas or focuses
- Sharing resources, tools, and grant funding for sustaining projects with community partners
- Sites still rely on hubs for digital preservation of high resolution files

Opportunity

- Increased visibility of the community archives collection via shared platforms like Calisphere and DPLA
- Building relationships with community organizations and archives
- Help sites develop practices and policies or refine those already in place

Threats

- Co-option of collections by the larger institution
- Diverging goals among project team and between hubs and partners
- Sustainability - sites often don't have the resources or funds to continue projects beyond the project
- Unforeseen circumstances (e.g. natural disasters, global pandemics) met without contingency plans

Citations

[1] Stevens, Mary, Flinn, Andrew and Shepherd, Elizabeth, "New frameworks for community engagement in the archive sector: from handing over to handing on," International Journal of Heritage Studies, 16:1 (2010), 59
[2] Gauthereau, Lorena, "Post-custodial Archives and Minority Collections," *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Blog*, August 7, 2018, https://recoveryprojectappblog.wordpress.com/2018/08/07/post-custodial-archives-and-minority-collections/
[3] Kelleher, Christian. "Archives Without Archives: (Re)Locating and (Re)Defining the Archive Through Post-Custodial Praxis," in *Critical Archival Studies*, eds. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand. Special issue, Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies 1, no.2 (2017). DOI: 10.24242/jclis.v1i2.29, 14. Kelleher expands upon post-custodial theory in this article with the term "non-custodial," used in an earlier piece by T-Kay Sangwand as a more accurate term to describe their specific project at the University of Texas at Austin's Human Rights Documentation Initiative.