

# Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the relationship between reparations campaigns and archives. It argues that this relationship requires archivists to take on the role of reparations activists, particularly in the campaign for black reparations in the United States. The article takes the form of a literature review, analyzing selected articles to establish the theoretical connection between archives and reparations, to demonstrate this connection through case studies, and to show that archivists have a particular obligation when it comes to reparations for racial discrimination and violence against black people in the United States. Finally, the article explores the ways that archival practices can be turned toward reparative justice. This is a call for American archivists to recognize their complicity in systemic racism and in so doing, become activists for reparations.

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## KEY WORDS

#ArchivesForBlackLives, Antiracism, Transitional justice, Truth commissions, Reparations, Activism, Archival theory and principles

... we must imagine a new country. Reparations—by which I mean the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences—is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely.

—Ta-Nehisi Coates<sup>1</sup>

Reparations are a modern concept, one tied to the transitional justice framework that emerged after World War II and the gross human rights abuses of Nazi Germany. In the 1970s and 1980s, countries in Latin America such as Argentina and Chile formed truth and reconciliation commissions as a way of exploring claims for reparations in the aftermath of violent military dictatorships. In the decades since, nations and states around the globe, from Canada to New Zealand and, most famously, South Africa, have sought to come to terms (some more earnestly than others) with roots embedded in a history of cultural genocide, ethnic cleansing, or apartheid by establishing truth and reconciliation commissions. Reparations are often a piece of the corrective recommendations made by these commissions. The United States, for the most part, has abstained from truth and reconciliation. No one could logically argue, however, that our historical legacy of racial violence against black Americans—a history that includes slavery, Jim Crow, state-sanctioned lynch mobs, housing discrimination, police brutality, and mass incarceration—is less “worthy” of the investigation and recommendations of a truth and reconciliation commission than those human rights crimes committed by Argentina, Chile, South Africa, or Canada. So why have we not seen this process in the United States? Where is the national conversation on black reparations? This vacuum can and should be filled with the materials in archivists’ hands. This article will argue that archives play an essential role in establishing claims for reparations and that because of this relationship, archivists in the United States should work to advance the cause of black reparations.

I will make the argument for archivists as reparations activists through a review of literature from within the archival field with a focus on three themes: first, the connection between archives and reparations on a theoretical level; second, an examination of case studies that demonstrate this connection; and, third, the specific obligation of archivists in the United States when it comes to black reparations. The article concludes with a consideration of how this obligation can be fulfilled. The first section makes a broad argument for the role of archives in reparations based on writings by Terry Cook and Rebecka Sheffield on archives as evidence and the work of Verne Harris and Achille Mbembe in describing the archives’ connection to power. Three case studies that demonstrate the impact of archives on reparations campaigns follow. All three are described from the archival perspective and, when compared, show the impact of archivists on the success of a reparations movement. Based on this conclusion, this article makes the case for archivists’ involvement in black reparations

by pairing calls for archival activism from Randall Jimerson and Verne Harris with writings on the discriminatory nature of the American archives by Jarrett Drake, Alex Poole, and Tonia Sutherland. Finally, the article concludes with some speculation on how archivists can be advocates for reparations. This area is not widely written about in the archival field, and hence the conclusion depends on a consideration of recent moments of reparatory justice and activism in the United States and of how archival functions fit into this work.

## Defining Reparations

The International Center for Transitional Justice defines reparations as “measures to satisfy victims, such as revealing the truth, holding perpetrators accountable, and ceasing ongoing violations . . .” in cases of massive, systemic rights violations.<sup>2</sup> These measures can take many forms including symbolic gestures such as an official apology or the erection of a monument, legal actions such as the restoration of rights or exoneration of a conviction, or material compensation such as direct payments to victims or their descendants, restoration of property, or payments to funds or assistance programs. Regardless of the measures taken, reparations, as opposed to, say, case-by-case legal settlements, are necessary because the injustice was massive and systemic. To prove that a human rights violation on this scale occurred, one must have evidence—evidence often found in archives.

## Evidence and Power: The Role of Archives in Reparations

Few contemporary archivists would argue that the materials in archives amount to objective evidence, at least not in the way Hilary Jenkinson did in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> As a profession, archivists now acknowledge the various ways bias and subjectivity enter the archives through appraisal, description, and preservation. As Terry Cook pointed out, however, this does not negate the power of archives as evidence. In his article, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms,” Cook argued that the delineation of the archives’ purpose as either evidence or memory is more “porous” than most think.<sup>4</sup> In fact, in the archives one sees evidence and memory working in tandem: “Without reliable evidence set in rich context, memory becomes bogus, false, wishful thinking, or is transformed into imagination, fiction, ideology. Without the need for constructing memory/story, assigning value, determining priorities, evidence is useless, irrelevant, and unused, or buried in a vast sea of transient data.”<sup>5</sup> Reparations, and the truth and reconciliation processes that usually precede them, involve the reconstruction of memory based on evidentiary claims. The decision to establish an investigation through a truth and

reconciliation process provides the memory framework that gives meaning and importance to evidence, and the evidence in turn guides whether the outcome of this framework is reparation.

The third archival paradigm shift that Cook identified, after evidence and memory, is the use of archives to shape identity through these dual functions of evidence and memory. Here, archivists find their voice as “social activists for memory-meaning,”<sup>6</sup> and, in doing so, archives become tools of accountability and transparency. Rebecka Sheffield echoed this vision of archives as evidence operating alongside memory construction in service of justice in her argument that preservation as an archival imperative be reconsidered in service of “stewarding” the stories of marginalized communities. Sheffield found new relevance for the archives-as-evidence paradigm in social justice work, which “underscores the evidential value of records in our care, as collections are accessed for the purposes of furthering court cases, reparative justice, and redress. . . .”<sup>7</sup> Jenkinson saw archives as evidence of official transactions preserved for official, that is, government, purposes. With Sheffield and Cook, archives’ value as evidence of actions, official or otherwise, is maintained, but preserved to further identity construction and social justice work.

Archives document the transactions of governments and, as such, are tools of power. For proof of this, look no further than the copious amounts of documentation preserved in the archives of the most oppressive states. The relationship between the archives and the state is elucidated in “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits,” by Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe. In this essay, Mbembe described the uneasy connection between the archives, authority, and public memory. Governments need archives, and the documents they contain, to establish their legitimacy—control over these documents amounts to control over the nation. At the same time, the materials in archives constitute a threat to the state by virtue of their ability to recall past lives, past events, and past ills committed by the government. The archives work in opposition to what Mbembe calls the state’s “chronophagy,” or eating of time. Mbembe explains that the state must nullify the threat of recollection and revenge, and it does so by commodifying the archives:

Thus the desire for revenge is removed just as the duty of repentance, justice and reparation is withdrawn. The commodification of memory obliterates the distinction between the victim and the executioner, and consequently enables the state to realise what it has always dreamed of: the abolition of debt and the possibility of starting fresh.<sup>8</sup>

The power of the archives, therefore, is its ability to oppose the state’s chronophagy and the clearing of its debts for past wrongs. And so, the state seeks to control the archives and the stories that it tells. Verne Harris, who worked for the state archives in apartheid South Africa and then as an archivist

for South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has witnessed this process firsthand. Describing how the apartheid government exercised control through the archives, he said, "By their silences and their narratives of power, their constructions of experience, apartheid's memory institutions legitimised apartheid rule."<sup>9</sup>

The archivist has agency, however, and both Harris and Mbembe saw the necessity for the archivist to challenge the exercise of oppressive power in the archives. For Mbembe, the existence of the archives makes possible the reopening of claims against the state because the violence of the state "is defined in contrast to the very essence of the archive since the denial of the archive is equivalent to, *stricto sensu*, a denial of debt."<sup>10</sup> In other words, the state cannot govern through oppression and violence without the knowledge that it will not be called to account for its violence, a certainty that the existence of the archives precludes. Archivists are then the intermediaries between the power of their holdings and the control of the state. As Harris said, "Archivists, whether they realize it or not, are at once the objects and instruments of political pressure."<sup>11</sup> No situation will bring political pressure to bear more than one in which the government is being asked to account for past violence. The possibility for reparation rests on the evidentiary potential of the archives, a potential that the state combats through the exercise of power. Luckily, archivists have agency and expertise, and so have the ability to activate archives in the service of reparative justice. In a series of case studies, one sees the consequences for victims of human rights violations when archivists decide whether and how to take up this call to action.

## Case Studies

In each case reviewed here, the success of a reparations campaign depended in some way on the role of the archives and the archivist. Though there have been dozens of movements for reparations all over the world, the role of the archives in these movements has not been fully reported. As discussed, documentary evidence is crucial in establishing the need for reparations and in fulfilling claims, so one can assume that archives and records have an important function in many more cases than have been covered in the archival literature. An examination of the few examples discussed in the field, however, indicates that the archivist can influence the success of a reparations campaign. The first case this article looks at, in Norway, demonstrates the unfulfilled potential of the archivist in ensuring justice for victims, while the last two, both in the United States, show how the archivist can not only assist in reparations claims, but also offer reparative justice from within the archives.

In Norway, a reparations campaign began in the 1980s to remedy the discrimination faced by the country's "war children." This term refers to people born to Norwegian mothers and German fathers during the Nazi occupation of Norway. After World War II, these mothers were seen as traitors, and the country sought to deport their children. Though they only deported a small number, most war children were excluded from Norway's social welfare system. As a result, many war children grew up in economically disadvantaged circumstances. Norway was the only occupied country where such discrimination took place, because it was the only country where the Nazis established a maternity home and accompanying archives. The postwar Norwegian state used this archives to identify and discriminate against war children. In the 1990s, Kare Olsen, the archivist at the Norwegian National Archives who was responsible for handling the inquiries from war children seeking information on their parents, wrote an article on the topic, breaking the "scholarly silence" on this issue, and his work was an impetus for the government to sponsor an investigation into the treatment of war children.<sup>12</sup>

The government's investigation culminated in legislation granting reparations to the war children in 2005. The archives had played an important role in exposing the truth in the investigation that led to this legislation, but the Norwegian National Archives was unable to meet the needs of victims seeking redress payments. The amount of money granted to war children depended on their ability to document the suffering they had endured, and the majority of applicants were unable to supply such documentation. Gudmund Valderhaug, in his article on the reparations, explained how the archives found itself implicated in this history of state-sponsored discrimination: "The records in question were created by the very same public bodies that discriminated against the war children and neglected their needs, and they created the records to justify exactly the same actions. Consequently, the war children's own voices are not present in the Norwegian archival heritage."<sup>13</sup> The Norwegian archivists would have to confront their history as a tool of the state to provide justice to victims.

As Valderhaug explained, when archivists are faced with a situation such as this one, they can simply handle the request of the victim as they would any other reference question, but they are obligated by their "position of power in relation to the user" to go further.<sup>14</sup> Valderhaug argued that this stance should have been adopted in service of the war children's special needs: "There is another option; the archivist may use her archival expertise to uncover the conditions of record creation in the given period. . . . Is it probable that any of the record might have been lost? Could there be found better information at other archives? And: is it possible to reconstruct any of the missing documentation from the few traces that may be found?"<sup>15</sup> The case of the Norwegian war

children demonstrates that the legislative action of reparations is not enough; victims depend on the archivist and his or her activism for justice.

The process by which another group victimized as a result of World War II received reparations is in some ways similar, and in other ways quite different, from that of the Norwegian war children. Emiko Hastings, in her article “‘No Longer a Silent Victim of History’: Repurposing the Documents of Japanese American Internment,” told the story of a victorious reparations campaign for Japanese American WWII internees and the important role of the archives in this process. Archival researchers uncovered the racist truth of Japanese American internment, establishing a need for reparations. In 1960, prominent Japanese American historian Roger Daniels was doing research in Department of Justice files, and a sympathetic archivist allowed Daniels access to classified records that contested the then-widely held belief that real security threats justified the internment of Japanese Americans. In the 1980s, researcher Peter Irons obtained memos from the Justice Department through a Freedom of Information Act request showing that evidence the government had presented to the Supreme Court in making its case for internment was falsified. The final straw came when amateur archival researcher Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga found written justification in the National Archives for the internment based not on military threats, but on racism toward the Japanese American community. Herzig-Yoshinaga’s discovery formed the basis of a 1983 report by the Commission on Wartime Relocation of Internment of Civilians that recommended reparations to victims. The Civil Liberties Act of 1988 took up these recommendations and offered a letter of apology from the president along with a \$20,000 redress payment to surviving victims. Eighty-two thousand Japanese Americans received these reparations.

As was the case with the Norwegian war children, the materials contained within national archives, which had originally been used as tools of oppression, became the foundation for a movement for reparations. In this case, however, archives played a more extended role by addressing their own complicity in injustice. One of the effects of Japanese American internment was the loss of records and other property belonging to the relocated families. As Hastings put it, “The loss of historical materials from before the war was enormous, erasing most traces of prewar Japanese American history.”<sup>16</sup> What is more, the War Relocation Authority, the government agency responsible for internment, produced thousands of photographs and files on each internee, thereby supplanting the long history of Japanese Americans with records documenting only their otherness and assumed criminality. Hastings explained that part of the reparative goal was to correct this archival injustice: “During the 1980s redress movement, there was an explosion of oral history projects focused on Japanese Americans . . . and the Japanese American National Museum has established a program to act as the central repository for archiving oral histories. . . . These

community-generated records have filled many gaps and omissions in the official records of internment. . . .”<sup>17</sup> The concerted effort to collect these histories and make them accessible through exhibitions fundamentally shifted the narrative about Japanese American internment, constituting an archival reparation.

Archivists most fully take up the call for activism in the example of the Bracero Justice Movement. “Bracero” refers to the guest-worker program that brought thousands of Mexicans to the United States to work in agriculture between 1942 and 1964. A portion of the wages earned by the workers was withheld and sent to Mexico, ostensibly to set up a retirement fund for them when they returned home (and therefore offering an incentive for them to leave the United States when their labor was no longer needed). In reality, however, most workers were never made aware their wages were being garnished, and, when a group of braceros claimed this money years later, it was nowhere to be found. In the early 2000s, the Bracero Justice Movement (BJM) was founded to seek recuperation of this money owed to the braceros. At the same time, in 2005, shortly after President George W. Bush announced his intention to create a new guest-worker program, the National Museum of American History brought together a group of institutions to preserve the history of bracero communities under the banner of the Bracero History Project (BHP). In her article, “From Ephemeral to Enduring: The Politics of Recording and Exhibiting Bracero Memory,” Mireya Loza explained how archivists and activists worked in tandem:

Public history efforts coalesced with activist efforts, as the BHP utilized the networks and communities created and reinvigorated by the BJM to access ex-braceros and their families in order to preserve oral histories, digitize documents, and collect objects. In towns across the United States and Mexico, oral historians from the BHP worked with activists from the BJM to invite bracero communities to work with the project. The support from activists, in many cases, led to the success of the collection sites.<sup>18</sup>

Not only did the activists help public historians and archivists gather materials, but the resources collected by the historians and archivists reinforced the claims and advanced the goals of the activists. Jennifer Osorio, in an earlier article on the bracero reparations campaign, wrote about the double-standard of recordkeeping reflected in the plight of these workers: “Braceros and their heirs are being asked to provide five to eight items that prove they are entitled to money they should have received four decades ago, by a government that has been unable to keep track of \$32 million in withholdings.”<sup>19</sup> This double-standard also occurs in the case of the Norwegian war children, but, in this case, archivists in the BHP took an active role in correcting this double standard by inserting the braceros’ stories into the archives, thereby giving them an institutional legitimacy that they could use to back up their claims for redress.



Their stories' presence in the archives also provided braceros and their descendants with the opportunity to define their own identities, especially when faced with the stigma of being incorrectly labeled as undocumented. At a time when immigrant identities are so politicized, this work continues to be of great importance. As Loza said, "The memories of bracero communities signal that this is a shifting history that continues to unfold. Politicians, activists, and public historians stand on these shaky grounds and try to make sense of the past and wield it in service of their present-day concerns."<sup>20</sup> Osorio also discussed this in her piece on the braceros, noting that, at the time of her writing, the United States was considering the creation of a similar guest-worker program. To avoid the injustices of the bracero program, archivists must ensure the retention and recall of records: "This will be particularly important for government archivists, who need to constantly examine the line between being a government representative and being an activist for the record."<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the International Center for Transitional Justice states that steps to prevent the repetition of injustice are an essential element of any reparations program.<sup>22</sup> As debates over immigration become ever-more contested and vitriolic, Osorio's call to action takes on new urgency.

### Archivists and Black Reparations: A New Call for Activism

The case studies above demonstrate that reparations have been instituted in reaction to a range of injustices, from wage theft to mass internment. All of the cases have a fundamental similarity: they describe human rights violations resulting from the state's discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, or immigration status. Racial discrimination is part of the fabric of the United States, and our country could be called to account for any number of instances of discrimination—the ethnic cleansing of native peoples or the exploitation of Chinese workers, to name just a couple. The call being made here—for archivists to join the campaign for black reparations—does not preclude the call for archivists to be involved in other campaigns for justice. And work on how archivists can be involved in these other movements should be done. As I have argued, archivists can and should be activists for reparations whenever they are needed. This article will now turn to making a case for why archivists should be activists for black reparations in particular.

Black reparations refers to reparations for the human rights violations committed against black people in the history of the United States, from slavery to modern-day police brutality. This article is not intended to be an argument for black reparations. Others have already made the argument convincingly. Chief among them in recent years is Ta-Nehisi Coates, who described in his article "The Case for Reparations" how black Americans have been systematically excluded from the prosperity and security afforded to whites. He traced

this story from slavery to Jim Crow to redlining. There are indications that the case for reparations is reaching the mainstream: in January 2016, a United Nations working group released a report recommending a broad set of reparations to remedy systemic discrimination faced by African Americans tracing back to slavery.<sup>23</sup> The growing call is one reason for this article's focus on black reparations, for this is a call that archivists should answer. A second reason is that in both the archival discourse and in the realities of our repositories, there is a clear sense of an archival injustice committed against black Americans. Our complicity as archivists therefore requires our participation in this struggle.

Verne Harris went beyond complicity to argue that the archives is an instrument of power. To Harris, the archives is defined as a set of rules that determine the significance of information and how this information is interpreted. Harris called these the laws of context. When materials enter the archives, they do so because they are judged to fit within this context, or made to fit through interpretation. Archives, because they establish these laws, are instruments of power, "Instruments that in their most fundamental of operations create and destroy, promote and discourage, co-opt and discredit, *contexts*."<sup>24</sup> So, here we see a cyclical operation by which power creates the laws of context and, in doing so, defines the archives, which then uses this context to determine what is archival, furthering the interests of the powerful. Jarrett Drake demonstrated the dangerous truth in this formulation in his analysis of the creation of false police records to justify the shooting of six unarmed black men on the Danziger Bridge in New Orleans six days after Hurricane Katrina. An initial internal investigation based on the police officers' reports found no wrongdoing. The victims' families filed suit, leading to a Justice Department investigation, which ultimately found that police had fabricated the existence of witnesses, made up statements by the victims, planted a gun on the scene, and then created a record of that gun as evidence. Drake concluded, "The ways in which state agents create and use records in the society—especially for the expressed intent to justify the deprivation of life or imprisonment of innocent civilians—inevitably impacts those who are charged with the responsibility of ensuring their preservation and access."<sup>25</sup> Archivists, then, must contend with the reality that records in their care have been created for the express purpose of exercising oppressive power. In the three years since Michael Brown's murder in Ferguson, Missouri, the country has seen police brutalize black and brown people over and over again, with those responsible almost never seeing any consequences. The police reports and records invoked in these cases are held to be objective tellers of truth; our society does not question the context of these records. Examining the context would involve acknowledging the way some forms of record-making are seen as legitimate. i.e., archival, while others are discounted entirely. These are Harris's laws of context. In Drake's examination of the Danziger Bridge murders

we see that, in a society built on a foundation of systemic racist violence, the context of the archives is racism and white supremacy.

Harris urged that archivists must be activists who contest the context of the powerful. He said, "If power is exercised through the construction of the archive, then the locus of participation in the exercise of power is precisely the processes of the archive's construction. . . . The time for activism, in other words is never past."<sup>26</sup> Randall Jimerson also saw activism as an archival imperative. For Jimerson, archivists must take "active steps to counter the biases of previous archival practices."<sup>27</sup> Those biases are seen in every archival practice from appraisal to preservation to access. Alex Poole, in his article, "The Strange Career of Jim Crow Archives: Race, Space, and History in the Mid-Twentieth-Century American South," documented how archives and libraries embraced Jim Crow to keep black researchers from accessing their materials or collecting papers related to black history and culture.<sup>28</sup> Tonia Sutherland scathingly indicted archives' continued failure to collect materials documenting violence against black Americans, a failure she says amounts to "archival amnesty."<sup>29</sup> Sutherland said that despite the large quantity of images showing "Black death" at the hands of whites, archives have declined to collect these materials. Here "Black death" refers to the lynchings and riots of the twentieth century as well as to police killings like those on the Danziger Bridge. By not bringing these materials into their collections, archives are obstructing the ability to hold perpetrators and the system of racist violence accountable: "American archives, through appraisal and other practices, continue to extend the amnesty that was granted to Confederate slavers by inadequately collecting and maintaining the records that would make transitional and restorative justice possible in the U.S."<sup>30</sup>

### Archival Approaches to Reparations

A response to Sutherland's criticism sees appraisal as a method by which archivists can contribute to reparative justice. This means seeking out collections that document the human rights violations of the past and also prioritizing access to these materials. For example, an article in *The New York Times* brought attention to the way the New York Life Insurance Company had profited from selling slave insurance policies in the nineteenth century. The reporter of that piece wrote that in her investigation, the company allowed her to view a few ledgers, but "declined to allow a reporter to interview its archivist to determine whether additional records related to the slave policies still exist."<sup>31</sup> The materials in this corporate archives tell the story of individuals who were enslaved and of the profits made off their enslavement. Such records should be accessible, and archivists must be activists for the public's right to uncover the past.

Indeed, materials documenting racist violence litter our archives. Acknowledging that archives were, and continue to be, created in the interest of white hegemony, we must establish a new context for our records. Jeannette Bastian wrote in “Whispers in the Archives: Finding the Voices of the Colonized in the Records of the Colonizer” about finding the presence, or “whispers,” of the enslaved African population in the colonial archives of the West Indies. Though records made by the black population were excluded from colonial archives, abundant documentation of their lives exists in the records of plantation owners, slave auctioneers, the courts, and local government. Bastian argued that the provenance of these records should be reconceived: “. . . Records become ‘witnesses’ to a silent society, a community that is the subject of the records rather than their makers, but one that is no less involved in their creation.”<sup>32</sup> Bastian was calling here for a different approach to provenance. Because provenance is fundamental to how we appraise and describe archives, assigning provenance to those who were excluded from records creation makes these whispers audible. In doing so, the names in a slave auctioneer’s ledger become individuals whose stories carry forward to the present day. Furthermore, we acknowledge the writers of such records as the oppressors of people instead of normalizing their violence.

Such reexamining occurred in the Georgetown University Archives in 2015. In that year, student protests erupted following the revelation that in 1838, the university sold 272 enslaved people to keep itself afloat. The proof was in the archives: detailed documentation of who was sold and where, as well as letters circulated among university leadership discussing the sale. In reaction to this revelation and the protests, a wealthy alumnus financed an independent genealogy project to track down descendants of the 272 enslaved people, known as the GU272. Genealogists were able to locate hundreds of descendants across the country, who in turn pressured Georgetown to take measures to redress its past. The university convened a Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation that recommended an array of measures ultimately adopted by the university, including the renaming of buildings bearing the names of figures involved in the slave sale, the creation of a memorial honoring the GU272, and the granting of preferred admissions status to the descendants. The university also made the records of its involvement in slavery easily accessible through the establishment of the online Georgetown Slavery Archive.<sup>33</sup> The reparative justice of holding the university accountable was made possible through the archives. Additionally, the creation of the digital archives itself serves as a reparative mechanism by making the full history of one of the United States’ most prestigious universities widely available and known.

Digitization makes it possible to disseminate the documentation of white supremacist violence and to connect the dots between state actors, corporations,

and individuals implicated in these injustices. For example, the ongoing project, *Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, mines archival resources to create a searchable database of over 27,000 transatlantic slave voyages, with the names of ship owners and captains, along with over 90,000 names of Africans aboard the ships.<sup>34</sup> A similar database unveiled in 2013, *Legacies of British Slave-ownership*, used the records of the Slave Compensation Commission in Britain to create a searchable database of every slave owner at the time slavery was abolished in Britain in 1833.<sup>35</sup> Ironically, when slavery was abolished, these slaveholders were given reparations for freeing their slaves. Many families in Britain today continue to benefit from this wealth. Among them are prominent names like the former prime minister, David Cameron.<sup>36</sup> Archivists should support the development of these tools and their use, and they should encourage genealogists to trace not only their families' stories of immigration and hard work, but also their histories of slave owning or KKK membership. As Ta-Nehisi Coates put it, "To proudly claim the veteran and disown the slaveholder is patriotism à la carte. A nation outlives its generations. We were not there when Woodrow Wilson took us into World War I, but we are still paying out the pensions. If Thomas Jefferson's genius matters, then so does his taking of Sally Hemings's body."<sup>37</sup>

In archives, there are countless whispers, even shouts, of racial injustice. These materials tell us of the victims and the perpetrators, and allow us to chart the system of violence that continues to permeate our society. Elevating these voices and stories is one way we can move toward a more just archives, an archives that fights for reparations. As Sutherland reminded us, there are still gaping holes in our collections and an unwillingness to fill them. In the face of archives' historical and contemporary complicity in white supremacy, it is necessary to acknowledge that our institutions are built upon structural racism and to look outside our walls for justice. Involvement in community archives or grassroots documentation projects is one way of doing so. In 2015, Jarrett Drake organized a team of archivists to document police violence in Cleveland, Ohio. Drake explained his decision not to partner with an existing archives or library in doing this project: "The unbearable whiteness and patriarchy of traditional archives demand that new archives for black lives emerge and sustain themselves as spaces for trauma, transcendence, and transformation."<sup>38</sup> As archivists, we can bring our expertise and knowledge to assist in the creation of archives for racial justice and, in so doing, lead our institutions toward truth and reconciliation.

## Conclusion

Archives and reparations go hand in hand. The discourse within our field tells us that, for as long as they have existed, archives have been operating in

the service of power. But by embracing our role as activists, we have the opportunity to turn this very evidence against the structures of power, which in the United States are rooted in white supremacy. The case studies here demonstrate the crucial role of archivists in transitional justice, reminding us that the success of these movements often rests on our shoulders. In the United States, there is a particular urgency for archivists to be activists for black reparations. To break out of the cycle of racist violence we are trapped in, we must also redress the ways our archives are implicated in that violence. As Tonia Sutherland wrote, “For truth and reconciliation to occur the nation would be compelled to tell a version of history from slavery to lynchings to the New Civil Rights Movement that includes the voices and experiences of Black Americans and other communities silenced by archival amnesty.”<sup>39</sup>

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* (June 2014), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Lisa Magarrel, “Reparations in Theory and Practice” (May 4, 2011), International Center for Transitional Justice, <https://www.ictj.org/publication/reparations-theory-and-practice>.
- <sup>3</sup> Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration Including the Problems of War Archives and Archive Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), 4.
- <sup>4</sup> Terry Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms,” *Archival Science* 13 (2013): 97.
- <sup>5</sup> Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community,” 102.
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