Dangerous Papers: Building an Archive of Anti-Prison Resistance

In recent decades, a wealth of literature has revealed the political importance of archives, not as straightforward repositories of history but as authorities that determine which stories are remembered. In this article we apply these insights to our own work of archiving activist histories, charting the trajectory that a particularly controversial collection of papers travelled on its way to becoming preserved as part of the history of California prisons. Over several decades, anti-prison advocates collected a personal documentary history of abuses perpetuated behind bars. After gathering dust in the basement of a private home, the collection eventually found a home at a university archive. Yet archivists abandoned the project when they determined its subversive contents presented a possible threat to the California prison system. This circuitous path reveals not only the anxieties of official archives, but the key role played by individuals and institutions willing to preserve risky histories. Through analyzing this archival work, we show how preserving the history of state oppression can become a deeply personal and bold undertaking with the power to subvert official channels for history making.

Geographers have critiqued the secrecy and seclusion that surrounds American prisons, located mostly in rural locations that conceal the brutal reality of mass incarceration (Che 2005; Bonds 2006). Architecturally, prisons hide entire populations from view, with only approved visitors granted access (Schept 2014). The sites where prisons are built and where prisoners come from are part of a single, spatially discontinuous, region that Gilmore (2008) conceptualizes as “forgotten places.” Added to geographical concealment is the erasure of history. Narratives of imprisoned people and anti-prison movements are generally absent from

official archives, which function to disqualify certain historical narratives at the same time as they preserve others (Foucault 1972; Echevarria 1998). Police and prison archives have been shown to reproduce racial categories and reinforce narratives of state repression (Sekula 1986; Bressey 2006). Presently, no dedicated archive documents the history of prisoner organizing or institutional repression in California. Researchers at state archives are required to request specific documents in advance and wait months for requests to be approved. Worse, no public index or finding aid exists for documents from the California Department of Corrections (CDC) after the 1980s. The archive of the prison system remains, itself, under lock and key. In the sections that follow, we describe the emotional labor involved in collecting these forgotten histories and the crucial role played by activist archives willing to preserve them.

Developing a Personal Archive of Prison Resistance

In 2013, more than 30,000 California prisoners refused to eat in protest against solitary confinement. Although prisoners could not see each other or make physical contact, if they stood at their cell doors and shouted, they could communicate. What emerged from their discussions was the largest-ever prison hunger strike in the US. This radical action was characteristic of similar mobilizations, political rebellions, and lawsuits launched by generations of imprisoned organizers in California. Throughout this period, a small group of attorneys and investigators across California worked with prisoners and their families to challenge and document prison brutality. At the center of this effort were civil rights attorney Catherine Campbell and private investigator Tom Quinn, who often collaborated with imprisoned activists and self-educated lawyers, amplifying political struggles behind bars.

Catherine was raised in Fresno, California, where she continues to reside. The largest city in California's rural San Joaquin Valley, Fresno lies near the center of California's "prison alley" along Highway 99, where eighteen prisons are sited, thirteen of which were built since the mid-1980s (Gilmore 2007, 129). Viewed in activist and legal circles as one of the most important figures in California's anti-prison movement, Catherine repeatedly sued the CDC between 1992 and 2006 over guard brutality and homicides of imprisoned people. Working alongside former prisoners, she co-founded a number of organizations, including California Prison Focus, one of the longest-running prison abolitionist organizations in the US, with the stated purpose of "abolish[ing] the California prison system in its present condition" (CPF nd). Her most significant work included a number of lawsuits beginning in the mid-1990s against the CDC regarding shootings of prisoners. In their lawsuits, Catherine and her colleagues alleged that guards and administrators at Corcoran State Prison deliberately set up rival prisoners to fight and repeatedly shot at them during the contrived altercations (Tate 1999). As a result of their advocacy, the California Legislature launched an investigation into misconduct at Corcoran, and the CDC was forced to revise its shooting policy (Campbell 2016).

Catherine and Tom met while working on a case together and went on to form a twenty-year marriage and working collaboration. Entirely self-taught, Tom had trained as a private investigator while living in a drug rehabilitation community. Known by friends and colleagues as a tenacious researcher, he spent more than two decades investigating how and why the CDC developed super-maximum security prisons where inmates were kept in isolation. A Vietnam War veteran and staunch opponent to US imperialism at home and abroad, he took an intense interest in the brutality he saw in the CDC. He cultivated relationships with whistleblowers inside the CDC including rank and file guards, commanding officers, administrators, and special

investigators tasked with surveilling so-called prison gangs. “And they told me this,” Tom later explained, “they said if you want to understand the prison system, you have to understand the paperwork. You have to understand how the paperwork works” (Quinn 2016, 3). For Tom, the documentary history of the CDC was key to understanding its spectacular brutality. His drive to comprehend the CDC’s vast bureaucracy led him to accumulate paperwork at an almost feverish pace. He filed hundreds of Freedom of Information requests; conducted dozens of interviews; and often visited the halls of the state legislature to talk to lawmakers and their aides who helped him acquire internal memos and planning documents. He also collected thousands of pages of newspaper articles and clippings and photocopies of CDC archival documents.

Together, Catherine and Tom gathered nearly one hundred bankers’ boxes of documents, photographs, videos, and audio recordings covering their decades of legal activism and historical research, including a documentary film Tom produced for California Prison Focus about the shootings in Corcoran (Quinn, et al. 1997). Taking advantage of discovery during lawsuits, and leveraging relationships with state librarians and lawmakers, Tom and Catherine were able to acquire an extraordinary array of internal CDC paperwork (Quinn 2016). They also conducted sprawling depositions with CDC officials, staff, and imprisoned people. “We found out so much,” Catherine explained, “much of it having to do with [the shootings], but a lot of it just for filling our curious heads about the CDC and how it worked. […] We had a wide berth to ask questions” (Campbell 2016). The collection reflected their broad and deep investigation, based in their own curiosity, legal advocacy, and the personal commitment to record keeping. At this point, however, they did not envision the collection as an archive. It belonged instead to the ephemeral category of unofficial archives—private collections stored in houses produced by everyday acts of memory-keeping (DeSilvey 2007; Lorimer 2009). Recognizing the value of

their collection, Catherine and Tom planned to write a book together based on the materials. Yet in 2013 Tom was diagnosed with cancer. His ill health made the book project impossible, and the idea for creating an archive was born.

The process of developing an official archive was deeply bound up in the personal lives of all who were involved. REDACTED, a coauthor on this paper who is Catherine's niece, was living with Catherine and Tom at the time he was diagnosed. His greatest concern, during the painful years of radiation and chemotherapy, was to ensure that the research could be made public. REDACTED assisted with the early efforts to archive the collection. Working together, they spent many late nights in the living-room pulling out documents from boxes at random, prompting stories of litigation and activism that paved the way for REDACTED to record Catherine's oral history, a lengthy interview covering the entire period of Catherine's prison activism. As Ashmore, et al. (2012) argue, working in domestic archives enables an exploratory approach to knowledge, as being a guest in a home leads to intimate research conversations.

Domestic archives also reveal the messiness of the archival process, as collections grow to include an assortment of objects and papers that may have not been intended as part of an archival collection (Ashmore, et al. 2012). Catherine and Tom's personal papers included folders filled with often humorous observations about gossip among prison guards, stray pages of prison poetry, as well grainy surveillance footage of prison abuse that was anonymously delivered to Catherine during her litigation. Such personal records can be essential for accessing stories left out of the historical record. In her research on the hidden history of US police violence abroad, Seigel (2018) received private, donated archival materials from former police officers employed overseas, enabling her to do research on a subject otherwise shrouded in secrecy. Records maintained by the Coalition Against Police Abuse also emerged in-part from private letters

documenting incidents of police abuse. By placing these personal materials in a public archive, CAPA and Seigel pushed back against the privileging of archival material developed by the state or academic institutions (Rodríguez 2016; Seigel 2018).

Both Tom and Catherine intended for their papers to remain in California's Central Valley where the issues were most pressing, and selected Fresno State University as the preferred home for the collection. In 2013, the Quinn-Campbell archive was established. Yet when Tom died in 2016, university administration underwent a series of changes. Under a new dean's directorship, opening of the archive stalled for the next year and a half. REDACTED, a coauthor on this paper whose research examines the history of the CDC, was the first researcher to work in the archive. With Catherine's prior consent, he travelled to Fresno to visit the archive in 2018. When he arrived, archivists denied him access to the materials. University librarians, likely facing top-down pressure from administrators, reported that the collection would need thorough review, yet offered little institutional support for this endeavor. In the midst of the deadlock, the archive announced that the papers would be turned over to the CDC. Given that Catherine and Tom's work was dedicated to exposing and rectifying corruption within the CDC, REDACTED fought for it to be returned instead to Catherine's possession. Through this process, his research morphed from observation in the archive into active participation in its preservation, following the tradition of participatory historical research (DeLyser, 2014; Bressey, 2014). Once more, the papers became a private collection with an unknown future, at risk of being forgotten entirely.

After Tom's death, Catherine relocated to a small house by herself where the boxes sat gathering dust in a garage. The presence of the boxes remained a burden, a source of grief, and a reminder of an unfinished project that had been of central importance to her and Tom. Several

boxes remained scattered across the homes of her children, who were eager to clear them away. As Ashmore, et al. (2012) note, private collections can take over domestic space in unwieldy ways. Yet the process of finding an archive for the collection presented serious logistical challenges. When REDACTED and REDACTED met, we were able to work together with Catherine to secure a new home for the materials. This process involved an enormous amount of trust, as well as the emotional toll of excavating the past once more. For Catherine, preserving the archive involved confronting her own mortality. The emotional nature of archival labor is not uncommon. Derrida (1996) describes archiving as the "feverish" impulse to preserve memory in the face of the constant erasure caused by the passage of time. In this way, archives record the personal lives of all who are involved in the process of making history. As the section below details, they are also crucial tools to uncover forgotten histories of state repression.

Activist Archives and the Preservation of Risky Histories

State archives have become a topic of theoretical interest in recent decades, not as innocent sources of history, but as institutions with the power to determine what counts as knowledge (Agamben 2002; Stoler 2002). Archives reflect a combination of power and place, as material repositories tasked with housing official knowledge (Kurtz 2001). As Derrida (1996) writes, "there is no political power without control of the archive." Yet when it comes to policing and incarceration, an "archival void" blankets the historical record (Hernández 2017, 2). As the California Public Records Act exempts police departments from archiving their records, many internal police records have been destroyed entirely.

To tackle this historical lacuna, scholars and activists have sought to preserve the history of police and prison systems. Hernández (2017) developed what she terms a "rebel archive,"

comprised of a diverse collection of institutional records alongside personal papers documenting everyday experiences with—and resistance to—the carceral landscape of California. This work involved filing suit against the Los Angeles Police Department to secure access to hundreds of boxes of police records which had never before been released to the public (Hernández 2017). Foucault's interest in the question of prisons also began with his work developing a prison archive. Alongside French intellectuals and activists, Foucault founded the Prisons Information Group with the aim of revealing the realities of everyday life behind bars. The project highlighted how imprisonment is fundamentally shrouded in silences because of the hidden nature of imprisonment itself (Huffer 2016). More recently, Huffer (2016, 52) cites "posts from trans prisoners at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, or the voices of prisoners on Houston's prison radio show" as examples of prison counter-archives. In each collection, grassroots archival labor played a crucial role in resisting state attempts to erase the memory of its carceral past.

In our search for a new home for the Quinn-Campbell collection, we found help from a small activist archive in southern California. In the early 1950s, Communist Party member Emil Freed founded the Southern California Library (SCL) in an attempt to preserve leftist thought during the height of anti-communist repression. During this period, archivists accepted an enormous risk in their efforts to protect radical histories. Today, the SCL houses approximately five hundred collections of grassroots struggle and radical scholarship that are open access and available to any interested party. SCL records have enabled the research of countless abolitionist and activist researchers, including the work of Vargas (2010) on black resistance movements in Los Angeles. Rodríguez (2016) writes that the SCL houses some of the most important existing records of anti-police resistance, including the papers of the Coalition Against Police Violence (CAPA), a radical anti-police organization founded by former Black Panther Party member

Michael Zinzun in the 1970s. Rodríguez argues that CAPA's collection emerged out of everyday and insurgent struggles against a racist state, challenging the notion of academic distance as the assumed starting point of archival production. Today, the entrance of the SCL building features a mural of Michael Zinzun alongside other grassroots anti-police activists.

After arriving at the SCL, the Quinn-Campbell collection was born again the Prison Law Archive (PLA). To launch the archive, we were tasked with investigating tricky questions of ethics and confidentiality. The collection is unique because it includes files acquired through discovery, as well as the depositions of corrections officials, prison guards, and formerly and currently incarcerated people that were not filed in court records. Because of the vast scope of legal discovery, attorneys' papers offer unprecedented access to legal history and have been used in the analysis of US migration detention (see Loyd and Mountz 2018). Yet despite their importance to unearthing undisclosed state histories, lawyer's papers are difficult to archive because of complex confidentiality concerns (Hobbs 1992; Covitz 2001). Kupers (2017) argues for the importance of measures to protect the confidentiality of inmates in prison litigation, as any notes might be made public as part of a lawsuit. When archiving such lawsuits, questions of confidentiality become even more pressing.

Beyond prison records, archival collections more broadly present a complex tangle of ethical concerns (Cameron 2001). Issues of privacy, consent, and confidentiality pertain long after the actors reflected in the archive are no longer alive. When archives contain records about presently living people, ethical questions become even more challenging. Interpretation in archives is also profoundly subjective and activist materials can be used towards repressive political purposes (Bailey, et al. 2009; Sekula, 2002). Koopman (2015) warns about the misuse of activist research for state repression, particularly in an era of increased military interest in the

discipline of geography. In the case of the Belfast Project archive at Boston College, several former paramilitaries in the Irish Republican Army were arrested and prosecuted after their oral histories were subpoenaed by Northern Irish prosecutors. As King (2014) writes, in cases where testimonies concern criminal activity and codes of silence, confidentiality is not simply advisable, it is fundamental.

While only a small portion of the PLA is restricted under a legal protective order, the archive contains material that could potentially endanger lives. In California prisons prior to 2013, the only way for imprisoned people to escape indefinite solitary, aside from dying or paroling, was to debrief. Prison investigators required alleged prison gang members to disclose the membership and organizational structure of their supposed prison gang. If the content of a debrief were to become public, a participant might face gang retaliation. Considering the grave danger debriefing might present to imprisoned people and their loved ones, we completely restricted access to all debriefs contained in the collection. Sorting out these complex ethical challenges involved an enormous amount of labor, and willingness on the part of the SCL to allow us to undertake this work. This case illustrates both the risks of archiving prison records as well as the crucial need for archives willing to protect such sensitive information.

Activist archives play an important role in reshaping the nature of history. Not only do they enable subjugated narratives to gain historical legitimacy, they can also challenge the rationalized knowledge of the bureaucratic archive (Flinn et al. 2009 ; Wakimoto et al. 2013; Stoler 2014). While institutional archives are often foreboding and exclusionary spaces, restricting access to approved scholars, activist archives respond to the demand for remembering as a site of emotional justice (Cvetkovich 2003). Activist archival labor can become an important expression of resilience in the face of austerity so often faced by community institutions (Griffin

2018). As the SCL is located in South Los Angeles—a neighborhood heavily impacted by policing—scholars who visit must confront the lived reality of capital flight, state violence, and surveillance. While we visited the SCL, we witnessed unhoused community members using the library as a safe space in the neighborhood. Yusef Omowale, the director of the library, shared stories of local residents who sought out the SCL to find refuge from family or community violence. Zavala, et al. (2017), in their research on community archives, write that the SCL "encouraged the participation of users in appraisal and description practices, and described the community, not the archive, as the owner of the material they possess. These practices represent shifts in dominant archival management practices" (2017, 202). By prioritizing community-based approaches and pushing back against the historical exclusion of marginalized groups, small activist archives challenge the traditional model of university and government repositories. In the case of prison records, such archival labor is also crucial to preserving histories that might otherwise be destroyed.

Conclusion

For the more than two million people living inside US prisons today, access to knowledge is severely restricted. Internet access remains tightly controlled and book-banning has become a pervasive practice (Flood 2019). Yet knowledge is essential in the fight against prisons. It was a reading group that initially inspired prisoners in isolation at Pelican Bay Prison to launch a hunger strike in protest against their conditions (Camon 2016). The history of prison resistance reveals the central importance of knowledge preservation in the struggle for prison abolition. We hope, in some small part, that this collection might become a resource for prisoners

and their families in this struggle, and are working to expand the collection to include a digital exhibit that might one day be accessible to people behind bars.

The history of the Prison Law Archive reveals how archival labor can work to contest the state's repression of prison histories. After its long journey, the PLA now offers unprecedented access into the hidden abode of life behind prison walls, as well as the headquarters of the CDC where officials crafted the policies that defined the shape and scope of imprisonment in California. The process of preserving these papers was not clear or easy, bound up as it was with the anxieties of official archivists at Fresno State University, the personal lives of activists, and the high stakes of dissident information. This history reveals the nature of archiving as a lively, ongoing and controversial process, and the importance of actors and institutions willing to protect risky histories.

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