



ARTICLE

# On 'Holding the Process': Paying Attention to the Relations Side of Donor Relations

Jennifer Douglas\*

School of Information, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

## Abstract

This article reports on a series of interviews with archivists and recordkeepers conducted as part of a larger project exploring relationships between grief and recordkeeping. Though the interviews were not explicitly focused on donor relations, it emerged that the relationship between archivists and donors was a particularly emotionally charged one: interview participants described deep and complex relationships with donors, whom they often knew over a long period and through difficult or complicated times. Interview participants also reported feeling unprepared for this emotional work. This article responds to a perceived lack of attention paid to donor relations in archival theory and education by acknowledging the significance of donor stories, feelings and relationships. Aligned with the ever-growing emphasis in archival theory and praxis on person-centered approaches, the article suggests where such approaches are needed in relation to archival education and training, the collection and preservation of donor stories, relationship-building, and recognition of different kinds of archival labor.

**Keywords:** *Archival profession; Donor relations; Donors; Emotions; Grief*

## Introduction

This article draws on a series of interviews with archivists and other records professionals conducted as part of a larger project exploring relationships between grief and recordkeeping. The Conceptualizing Recordkeeping as Griefwork: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice (2017–2023) project sought to understand the ways that grief might underpin or be otherwise involved in the creation, keeping and preservation of archives, primarily through interviews with archival creators and with archivists and records professionals. The interviews discussed in this article focused not only on how grief was part of or impacted archivists' work but also addressed other emotions involved in archival work; how prepared archivists felt for the emotional dimensions of their work; and what resources existed to support archivists working with emotional materials and people.

A prominent theme throughout these interviews related to archivists' interactions with donors. Although donor relations were not an explicit focus of the research project, it emerged that the relationship between archivists and donors was a particularly emotionally charged

\*Correspondence: [jen.douglas@ubc.ca](mailto:jen.douglas@ubc.ca)

one: interview participants described deep and complex relationships with donors, whom they often knew over a long period and through difficult times, such as at the end of a career or the death of a loved one, and with whom they engaged in complicated and sensitive conversations and negotiations. Interview participants who emphasized the emotional nature of donor relations also described feeling unprepared for these relationships, pointing to education programs that emphasize the mechanics of acquisition by focusing, for example, on the transfer of materials into the legal custody and administrative purview of an archival institution without consideration for the relationships and feelings that are associated with or result from the transfer.

This article responds to the scant attention paid to donor relations in archival theory and education by acknowledging the significance of donor stories, feelings and relationships as themes that emerged from research on grief and other emotions in and as part of archival work. Aligned with the ever-growing emphasis in archival theory and praxis on person-centered approaches, the article suggests where such approaches are needed in relation to archival education and training, the collection and preservation of donor stories, relationship-building, and recognition of different kinds of archival labor. As Itza Carbajal argues in an article on ‘the politics of being an archival donor’, ‘current archival paradigms tend to focus more on the archival materials than the people behind them’.<sup>1</sup> This article argues for a shift from this type of transactional and extractive emphasis toward attention to people, feelings, relationships and care.

### **Talking about archivists and donors**

Recent articles on archival donors by Rob Fisher and Carbajal, and the only monograph on archival donors, by Aaron D. Purcell, discuss the ways that ‘donors as a stakeholder group remain overlooked in archival donation programs, as well as in archival scholarship’<sup>2</sup>; they are, Fisher asserts, ‘largely absent from our professional discourse’.<sup>3</sup> In a review of Purcell’s book, Geof Huth, suggests that this absence might speak to how archivists ‘have determined that donor relations is a simple and obvious practice that requires little skill’.<sup>4</sup> As a ‘guidebook for successful programs’, Purcell’s book focuses on developing that skill (or set of skills). He provides a framework for professional archivists working with donors through a series of steps including initial contact, negotiations, examination of potential donations (e.g. site visits), appraisal and the drafting of donor agreements, and transfer of materials. Surveying the literature on donors in their 2009 article, Geoff Wexler and Linda Long note that it largely ‘focuses on the technicalities of donor relations, such as legal precautions, accurate recordkeeping, and appraisal of material on-site’.<sup>5</sup> While Purcell’s book includes a chapter on ‘donor types’ and attempts a categorization of donors (including ‘the unassuming’, ‘the rich and famous’, ‘the sick and elderly’, and ‘the difficult, demanding, and non-donors’),<sup>6</sup> its presentation as a ‘guidebook’ means that it also tends to focus on what Wexler and Long might call ‘technicalities’ – or the ‘how to’ – of donor relations.

Other writing on donors discusses the development of relationships with donors, often in the sense of how archivists might work to establish or improve relationships with different individuals and communities in order to diversify their collections,<sup>7</sup> secure additional funding and resources,<sup>8</sup> or collaborate on projects to improve description and increase access to materials.<sup>9</sup> Wexler and Long’s article is notable for delving deeply into Long’s experience of working with ill and dying donors; the article considers the close relationships that can develop between an archivist and a donor and impact the acquisition process. Carbajal, who argues that much of the archival literature on donors tends to ‘position donors as a means for acquiring more things’, makes a case for more reciprocal and collaborative relationships between donors and archivists that empower donors to participate in broader decision-making about

their records, while Fisher stresses the agency donors have to influence archival practices. While early research sometimes framed donors as the cause of archival 'problems',<sup>10</sup> Carbajal and Fisher remind us that donors are people, with complex motivations for donating archives and agency to assert their needs and desires. Although the archival literature is moving in the direction of engaging more deeply with the nature of donor relations, as the authors cited here agree, scholarly and professional writing on donor relations is limited in extent and scope and more research is needed to fill this gap. Although the Conceptualizing Recordkeeping as Grief Work project did not set out to study donor relations specifically, this article seeks to address this gap at least in part by sharing the perspectives of a number of archivists working with donors.

## Methodology

The interviews discussed in this article were conducted between May and September 2019 with 29 participants who responded to an open call for archivists and other records professionals to talk about grief and archival work. The interviews, which were approved by the University of British Columbia's behavioural research ethics board, followed a semi-structured interview protocol, where participants were provided in advance with a series of questions related to how grief was involved in participants' work with donors and creators, with records, with records subjects and with researchers; about other emotions involved in these types of work; about how prepared participants felt for the emotional dimensions of archival work; and about any relevant resources they found helpful, as well as about resources they wished existed.<sup>11</sup> During the interviews, additional related questions were asked to clarify or add detail and participants were encouraged to ask questions and to direct the conversation as needed to share their own experiences and stories.

Three project research assistants and I transcribed the interviews, and transcripts were returned to participants for approval, at which time participants were also invited to make any additions or deletions to the transcripts as they felt appropriate or necessary; two participants did not return transcripts at this point, meaning 27 participant transcripts were included in the data analysis. Thematic coding of these transcripts was carried out with an expanded research team that included two additional research assistants using a codebook we developed through an iterative process and that included both structured and emergent codes.<sup>12</sup>

In this article, I pay particular attention to codes related to archivists' relationships and work with donors. Donors – and the relationships archivists had with donors – figured prominently in the interviews; 24 of the 27 participants discussed working with donors, and across the transcripts, the code 'relationships with donor and creators' was used 141 times and the code 'donor emotions and experiences' 156 times. In the sections that follow, I pay special attention to the research team's analysis of these two data codes to explore themes related to donor stories, feelings and relationships. Although several interview participants consented to be named in published findings, others did not and in the remainder of this article I use an alphanumeric coding system to refer to participants; in these codes, the letters indicate the type of archival position held by the interviewee (Table 1).

It should be noticed that archivists and recordkeepers self-selected to participate in the project, and that they participated because the topic of grief in and related to recordkeeping resonated in some way for them. The research discussed here was exploratory in nature, focused on particular experiences, and engaged with participants interested in those experiences. As I suggest throughout this article, more research will be needed with a broader focus on donor relations to fully understand the motivations and feelings of donors and the relationships that archivists form with them; this article opens one window onto these aspects of donor relations through its particular focus on grief.

*Table 1.* Participant codes

---

UA = University or college archives or equivalent
ASE = Archival scholar/educator
PA = Provincial or territorial archives or equivalent
MA = Municipal archives or equivalent
CA = Community archives
SA = School (K-12) archives

---

### Talking with archivists about donors

When asked about where and how they encountered grief and other emotions as part of their work, many participants called special attention to working with donors during acquisition of archival materials and to maintaining donor relations. They explained how these processes can be laden with emotion, including but certainly not limited to feelings of grief and sorrow, and discussed how generally unprepared they felt to work in emotionally charged contexts. Although the interviews did not specifically set out to explore the relationships between donors, their materials, and the archivists who work with them, as such a frequent topic of conversation, these aspects of archival work merit special attention. In this section, I discuss four thematic groupings identified during the analysis of interview transcripts and related to: (1) the kinds of triggering life events that lead to donation; (2) feelings associated with different aspects of the donor-archivist relationship; (3) the nature of those relationships; and (4) the significance of donor stories.

#### Triggers

*'Records don't change hands without some kind of trigger. And often those triggers are not necessarily happy ones.'* [PA3]

Catherine Hobbs notes that when private donors work with archival institutions they are 'personally transferring [their] records as part of [their] very own life' and reminds archivists that archival donation is 'usually a highly personal and emotional transaction'.<sup>13</sup> Several of the archivists I spoke with reinforced the intimate and emotional aspects of appraisal, acquisition and donor relations, often describing how the process tended to be *triggered* by some kind of emotionally difficult life event, as for example the end of a career, the closing of an organization or association, illness and/or death of the donor or someone cared for by the donor.

Wexler and Long's important reflection on working with dying donors is one of few articles that directly engage with ageing, illness and death in archival work. Wexler and Long argue that archivists should be better prepared to work with ageing and dying donors because archival work is 'intimately bound up with these life events'. Archivists work with 'people at the end of their lives' and with 'those who are left behind – widows and widowers, lovers and partners, siblings, relatives and friends, not to mention colleagues and loyal employees, executors, and lawyers'.<sup>14</sup> The nature and effects of this kind of 'mediator deathwork'<sup>15</sup> were discussed in the interviews I conducted. For example, four participants described attending to donors on their deathbeds, explaining that it seemed important to the donors to talk to 'their archivist' before they died, sometimes to make sure their records would be understood and cared for, and sometimes because they wanted to 'sit and just talk' [UA1] with someone with whom they had, over time, developed an important, long-term relationship. Engaging directly with the concept of death work, some participants identified the archivist's role in 'facilitating a good end' [CA1],

a role that is discussed in more detail below, but that for the archivist involves both reassuring the donor that their archives will be cared for and attending to the ending of the relationship.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to discussing the experience of attending at a donor's deathbed, participants described the impact of witnessing a donor's physical and mental decline in old age or due to illness. One participant who worked in a municipal archives [MA1] described their relationship with a community donor:

I've watched him deteriorate, and I've found that very difficult. Because he was...he was such a vibrant member of the community and he's such a lovely man. And you know, I've sat at his house and his cat has sat in my lap, and I've developed a...a relationship with him. And then, they were just forced to leave their house and move into a retirement community, so he donated some more records [and] just watching him not be able to explain the records to me the way he did five years ago. I find that quite difficult.

Another archivist working at a provincial archives [PA1] described working with donors with terminal illnesses who were aware of having little time left to ensure the safe keeping of their records and legacy. This archivist referred to a phone call they 'will always remember':

He phoned one day. I don't even really remember what about. He was just... he did a lot of work. He was a very interesting person. And I remember he said to me, 'You can't imagine what it's like, to not have enough time left to do everything you want to do'. And he died shortly after, and we got the last set of records.

They added, 'You meet a lot of people at difficult times in their life, for sure'. [PA1]

Triggers for records donation also include the end of a donor's career. Several participants discussed this type of trigger, with one archivist who worked in a university setting [UA1] explaining that some donors approach the end of their career 'very positively', while others 'find it very, very difficult to go through their papers and give them away. Because they know they're closing a door on something'.

A similar type of 'door closing' trigger is the end of an organization or association. Some participants described organizations that meant a great deal to those who worked for them but that could no longer be sustained, due to financial difficulty, a lack of volunteers and/or societal change; one archivist working for a large city archives [MA2], for example, described working with 'organizations that are wrapping up because they no longer have a place, like IODEs<sup>17</sup> or things like that, where nobody joins them anymore', or because of a 'loss of physical spaces, buildings [and] communities'. As with people 'wrapping up' their careers, those responsible for the records of associations and organizations may have different attitudes toward the ending; while some may be pragmatic and eager to have the records off their hands, others may feel the loss more acutely. PA1 described working with the donors of the records of older women's organizations: 'these older ladies come in, and they bring the records, and they are *sad* [emphasized] that this isn't going to continue, and that...you know, it's something that they had found so vibrant and important, is – had fizzled, or died, really'.

Records enter archival care as the result of these various triggers that signal the end – or deterioration of – a life, a career, an organization or a community. Archivists 'often work with donors when they're most vulnerable' [ASE1]; UA1 suggested that the time that archivists work with donors – at the end of something or the transition into something new – is also in some ways 'their best time'. Donors may be 'at a time where they're really looking back and they're – they want to share'. This kind of sharing, UA1 felt, was a 'privilege' and one that came with many feelings, both for the donors and the archivists.

## Feelings

*'It's very rarely a happy occasion that prompts someone to donate records to an archives.'* [PA1]

Records donation is, or at least can be, an emotional process; in the interviews, donor relations and acquisition were emphasized as feeling-inflected processes. Participants described a range of feelings felt both by donors and creators and by archivists.<sup>18</sup> Unsurprisingly, since grief was a focus of the research project, participants discussed feelings of grief experienced by donors, who might be mourning the end of a career, of a loved one's life, or of their own life. Several participants discussed how records donation can be understood as part of a grieving process – one of the ways that grieving donors integrate and 'grow accustomed to the absence of a person' [CA1].<sup>19</sup> Donors' grief may be particularly pronounced when they are grieving someone who died young and/or unexpectedly [CA2], but even when a records creator lived a long and fulfilling life, the acquisition process involves handing over materials that connect donors to their lost loved ones, the 'physical evidence of their past existence' [CA1].

Living creators negotiating the transfer of their records may feel a similar kind of grief: 'even when people are downsizing, they're going through, like, a period of having to let go of, of that grief...and it's difficult. You can see they're not quite sure how to let go of it, they don't know what to do with it' [UA2]. Living creators, UA2 added, may experience a certain level of concern and anxiety about what will happen to their records: 'they're very concerned about the material being lost. And that, as well, it's almost like they're losing a part of themselves'.

One archivist working in a university archives [UA6] described feelings they encountered in donors during the acquisition of a community organization's records, noting that grief and other feelings of loss over records are not only felt as a result of a loved one's death:

It's almost like, a sense of loss of community, that I see...just the fact of them donating the records and seeing, as the years go by, this incremental loss of membership. And trying—and like, failed attempts to try and bring more people in and to continue this thing that's been going on for decades. And then it's like, the final moment of donating it to the archives. Like, we tried everything and we failed. [...] And our community failed. That it's really hard to, kind of, deal with that feeling... every time I've come across it in a community's records. In talking with donors or even the accession records, I always come across this great sense of loss, almost failure, from donors, that they could not keep the organization going, or feeling as if their communities have abandoned them or left them behind.

One participant who worked in a university archives [UA2] spoke at some length about how archivists have tended to neglect donor feelings. Acknowledging that archivists are often working with people experiencing loss of some kind, this participant suggested:

I don't think we've ever really thought about it [deeply]. It's more like, treated as an acquisition process. So, you know, someone comes in, they want to donate, [and we say,] 'Okay, here we go, here's your deed of gift'. But we never stop and sort of slow down and think about...you know, we're dealing with the estate, we're dealing with the executor, or we're dealing with someone's family member. And so I'm not sure if we're always as...as respectful as we could be in the sense that we're dealing with someone who has passed away.

'We tend to be a bit cold-hearted', they added, focusing on policies and procedures instead of on 'the significance of these items to the person who is donating them' and how they feel about giving the material away. This participant [UA2] spoke about the importance of validating donor feelings, and recounts an incident where they had been, as they later saw it, insensitive with a donor by suggesting some materials had no archival value: 'And that upset her. Like

she was in tears over it. And as I reflect back on it, I'm realizing now I was very insensitive in saying that they had no value. They had value because it was how she reflected her self-worth'. This archivist recognized the ways that records triggered memories for donors of important times in their lives or represented aspects of their past selves that held deep significance. UA2 felt that archivists are 'missing out on the symbolism' of records, and worried that what we profess about the value of records as reflections of a creator's life is not reflected in our policies and procedures, and especially in how we interact with donors.

Other participants described similar interactions with donors where they had misunderstood or not realized the significance of either the materials or the interaction. MA1 talked about a donor who continued to bring materials into the archives over a period of time. 'She kept bringing things and just asking me to do on-the-spot appraisals at the counter' MA1 recounted, explaining how they had to tell the donor repeatedly that the material did not have permanent value for the archives. 'But what I realize, now', MA1 shared, 'is that she was dealing with the death of her mother, and this was the way she was dealing with it'. Although MA1 was unsure what the archivist's responsibility might be in a scenario like this, they recognized that the donor's feelings needed to be acknowledged and understood.

One archivist working in a small, local archives [MA3] emphasized this need to acknowledge donor's feelings, identifying this as a key role that archival institutions and archivists play:

You're called upon fairly regularly to minister people, and often it is some form of grief. And it's not always the usual form of grief, like they've lost a person. Sometimes it's the loss of their youth, the loss of their former life, the loss of what they see as their heyday or their prime...you know, when elder people move from a large place that had all their stuff around them, and they move to a small place and they have to get rid of all that stuff, it's a death every single time, and for some it's hugely traumatic and if we develop a relationship with them and with their family where we continue to take things and sometimes we take things that everybody knows are just going to go right out the back door again, but still it's an acknowledgment.

### Stories

*'Story is sacred. If you're telling a personal story or your family's story, nobody has exactly that story that you are telling. It's yours and you're sharing it with me.'* [UA5]

Referring to the type of listening archivists need to engage in, MA3 told a story about 'a woman who came in, literally clutching to her chest' a tattered and mass-manufactured print painting depicting a story from the Bible. MA3 continued:

And it was faded, and worn, and had been hung on a wall for so long that all the corners had tears where the pushpins had held it to the wall. And her best friend had just passed away, and this [object] had hung over her couch for as many years as this woman could remember. And with tears streaming down her face, she asked us to put this in the museum to remember her friend.

This item was not a traditional record, but for the donor, it functioned as a record of her friend's life and of the depth of their friendship; without this story, however, the meaning and significance of the object as a record are utterly lost.

Donor stories – the stories donors tell about their records and their lives – were a prominent topic of conversation during the project interviews. 'They *really* tell me their stories', UA3 emphasized, while UA1 explained how important it can be for donors to make sure archivists

have their stories straight. UA1 describes an instance where they were called to visit a donor just days before he died. ‘All he did’, UA1 explains, ‘was sit there and talk to me, about all these stories...and I knew he was hoping that somewhere...like I would be able to take this and put it in his papers’.

The stories participants heard from donors recounted not only the kinds of details about a donor’s life and recordkeeping habits that would end up in a biographical sketch or scope and content note but also stories about the emotional significance of records to the donor. One community archivist [CA2] described how the stories donors tell about their archives emphasize different details than archivists might start out looking for; house visits, she explained:

usually start with sitting down and they will tell me their parents’ life story, which can be very short or very long, and then we can walk around and they’ll point at certificates on the wall, newspapers, photo albums, but they won’t talk about the photo album as in ‘this is the family photo album from 1950 to 1960’, they’ll say, ‘oh, and this covers our family trips and we went on this family trip because my father worked really hard and we went to a conference...’, and everything is tied to the emotion, it has very little to do with how many photos are in this album, what is there, what’s their status, what’s the preservation concerns, what am I going to do with it. It’s very much an emotional walk through.

UA2 similarly emphasized how donors tell stories about what records mean to them; describing the acquisition of a professor’s papers, she explained, ‘we were going through her materials, her fonds, [and] it was interesting because everything had a special memory to her, and it was the way she viewed herself, through her records’.

These kinds of stories, about donors’ lives, their records, and their significance can be told with urgency, with donors looking for someone to ‘hold on to’ them. A participant who worked as a school archivist [SA1] described this kind of storytelling: ‘I’ve had somebody grab my arm on multiple occasions and be like “listen, here’s where I used to live, this is what we used to do when I was a boy...”’ Sometimes, as was the case in this example, the urgency is connected to a feeling there is no one besides the archivist who will listen; as SA1 added, ‘they say, “I don’t know who else to tell. My kids don’t care”’. The archivist plays a particular kind of role as a listener, and is a receptacle for a specific kind of story; as another archivist who worked in a provincial archives [PA2] put it, ‘a lot of donors...want to make sure the legacy of the person they knew and loved is, somehow – that the records themselves aren’t just transferred, but that there’s more to it’. The ‘more to it’ relates to the donor’s or creator’s story, to the way they will be remembered. UA3 talked about a donor and his partner’s records. The records, UA3 explained, ‘were a vital part of his partner’s life and his relationship with his partner. And to preserve them was preserving the memory of that relationship and of him’. Donors, many participants emphasized, come to the archives with a real need to have stories heard, acknowledged, and validated. As UA3 suggested, donors look to archives to care for records in a way that honors the dead; listening to, acknowledging and passing on their stories is part of that honoring.

Interview participants identified two key challenges associated with donor stories; they called attention both to the potential difficulties of recording and preserving donor stories and to the emotional labor involved in listening. SA1, describing instances of alumni ‘grabbing’ her at events to share their stories, elaborated that this:

puts me in a strange place because it’s kind of an oral record, so do I go back to my office and desperately try to write down these things that are told to me, and over the course of the day [at an alumni event] I get five or ten of these. Do I ask them to come back to do a

proper oral history? It's this outpouring and this sense of responsibility, that they're giving me in essence their life story, and hold on to it, don't drop it!

UA2, who talked about how the records of a professor they worked with connected deeply to the professor's sense of self, also discussed how difficult it could be to preserve that connection: 'Nowhere was this captured in the records', UA2 explained, 'and so how do we, as archivists, say, okay, how do we capture this? Do we capture it? Where do we report it in the fonds? Or in the RAD<sup>20</sup> description or whatever it is that we're doing? And what is the significance of it?' Participants in this project described not having formal processes to record and preserve donor stories, and noticed how current descriptive standards do not make specific space for donor stories to be shared with researchers in finding aids. UA2 felt strongly that more needed to be done to 'capture' the emotional significance of records to their creators:

We need to keep in sight that there is something fundamentally important, that, when they're looking at something, when they turn over the photograph and they say, 'This is what this means to me and this is why it's important', it needs to be captured. It's not just a paper, it's not just about grief or anything like that. It's about...some sort of, I don't know, like, continuity of humanity in a sense?

While they recognized how important it was to listen to and acknowledge donors' stories, participants also noticed the type of 'emotional labor', as CA2 put it, of engaging in this type of listening. Telling their stories can be difficult for donors. While some find the experience satisfying and rewarding, for others the experience is painful and full of grief. The archivist sometimes takes on what several participants described as a counselling or grief therapist role in these situations. An archivist working in a college within a university [UA5] described feeling like they had 'become kind of the sponge for all these stories', and although they felt that archivists had an almost 'sacred' responsibility to care for the stories and lives connected to archives, they recognized, too, the effects this weight of responsibility could have.<sup>21</sup> CA2 also discussed this weight, describing how they often became donors' 'go to person on all things'; donors were able to talk to them about their own lives or the lives of their loved ones and realized they were a good listener; CA2 explained, laughing, that 'it's because they can get me on the phone', but over time, listening can become a burden, and one that archivists may feel compelled to carry. 'I've not yet figured out how to say no, nor do I totally think I should, I don't want to disconnect. If I am their connection to the archives, to the [anonymized] community, I don't want to be responsible for severing that connection'.

The experiences shared by participants about listening to donor stories highlight the importance of these stories both to the donors and creators of archives as well as to the meaning of the records they leave behind; participants suggested that archives cannot, in many cases, be fully understood without the context of the stories donors tell about them. The interviews also revealed that participants lacked methods for recording and preserving stories, and that while they viewed their role as listeners – as witnesses to a life – as a privilege, they also recognized the emotional toll associated with this privilege.

### *Relationships*

*'...to listen to what it meant to him, to hear the stories of his lost partner – it just takes time; it is a relationship.'* [UA3]

Discussions about the events that trigger archival donation, about the feelings associated with these triggers and with the acquisition process, and about the importance of listening to and

acknowledging donor stories underscore the different ways that archivists and donors enter into relationships with each other as they experience difficult life events together and negotiate the transfer of sensitive materials. Recent scholarship in the archival field has highlighted the relational nature of archives and archival work. For example, in their work on radical empathy and archives, Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor describe the different types of relationships archivists form and are accountable within including relationships with creators, donors, researchers, records subjects and other archivists.<sup>22</sup> Interview participants also stressed this relational nature of archival work, observing that acquisition processes often involve multiple conversations, and sometimes home and office visits, and that these conversations frequently continue past the acquisition stage as collections are processed, digitized and made available for research use. Archivists work closely with donors and as discussed here in the section on triggers, often through emotionally difficult and/or distressing times. Relationships develop between donors and archivists as they work together over long and sometimes challenging time periods.

‘I have very, very strong relationships with my donors’, UA1 stressed, describing how these ‘relationships go over a long period of time’. ‘You become the point person’, UA1 said, ‘you take care of your donors’. This archivist described how relationships developed over time, recounting house visits that included homemade muffins and porch conversations: ‘[this one donor] always baked us muffins and we’d sit there on her porch and we’d look at the daisies, and we’d talk about stuff, and then she’d – you know, and it really – like, at this point, she wasn’t even talking about [her career and records] anymore. She was now talking about her grandkids and stuff’. PA3 also emphasized the importance of these types of non-records-related conversations: ‘Sometimes our conversations are just about visiting. We’re not “negotiating,” we’re creating a relationship’.

In some cases, UA1 has developed multi-generational relationships, getting to know and work with a donor’s children and grandchildren as years passed. The potential depth of donor relationships is evidenced in the desire some donors have expressed to see UA1 in their final days. This wish made sense to UA1: ‘we’re the keeper of their history’, they explained. ‘We’re the keeper of their legacy...we’re really important to them’. UA1 talked about how the relationship between a donor and archivist involves a certain degree of one-sidedness that develops because the archivist has a particular kind of access to a donor’s life: ‘you actually know them more than they know you because [laughs] you’re also in their papers, right? So you know...it’s not – it’s more of a one-sided relationship. I mean if I died, I don’t know if they’d feel that badly, right? I know them better than they know me. And it’s all about them. It’s not about me when we – when I go visit them, or whatever. You know, it’s about them’. Although UA1 understands their role as being in service to the donor, they also see some elements of reciprocity in the relationship, describing the ‘life lessons’ they have learned from donors: ‘Some of the things I’ve learned about life have...have just been what donors have said to me about who they are. Whether it’s work ethic, or, you know, just taking time to look at a flower...just the philosophies of life that I’ve been able to gain from them’.

Other participants also spoke about relationships with donors that included being part of preparations for their death and/or helping family members to grieve after the death of a loved one. One participant, who worked in a provincial archives with private donors, considered the role of the archivist in comforting creators and their loved ones at the end of life, explaining that it can be important for a ‘family to witness the good conversations that are going on’ and for both the creator and their loved ones to feel satisfied that records will be ‘in a good place’ and treated with care. [PA3]

One community archivist [CA1] described a particular kind of relationship between archivists and grieving donors, which they described as ‘holding the process’. CA1 explained first

how they worked in the same archives for 30 years. 'It's a long time', they said. 'You build up a lot of relationships, you lose a lot of friends, you go to a lot of funerals, you give – and this is really quite healing, if you do it properly – you get to stand up in memorial meetings and say some things about the person. And you're the only person who knows certain things. So that's a joy'. Noting both the sorrows and joys of long-term relationship, CA1 explained how they understood their role of 'holding the process':

... there were the usual conventional things you do as an archivist – meeting and talking with the person, the widow, about the records and their meaning; taking only those she's ready to part with; remaining in touch and returning when asked, for further conversation and another set of material. Those choices are always hers, or indeed the family's, in another situation which comes to mind. You allow them at the end of the day to say 'Actually, we're going to hold onto these for the moment'. And then, when they're ready for the next step, you're there – when the next year or so comes along, and they're ready to release and share more, you are there. You are holding the process. When I say 'allow', I think what I mean is you allow yourself to let go of a personal or institutional need to acquire, to have a conclusion to a transaction, to have an institutional process come to an end. You allow yourself and the institution to serve their needs to grieve and to manage the personal transition from the living presence to the negotiated absence of the person and the physical evidence of their being.

Holding the process involves the archivist in a crucial aspect of grief work. Other interview participants spoke about relationships with donors that involved the archivist in a kind of witnessing and/or counselling role. UA5, who worked in the archives of a religious college and acknowledged the 'intergenerational harm' experienced in the community, stressed that 'these aren't just pieces of paper for these people. These are very important parts of their life, or their parents' lives that they're handing over. And so...maybe it comes back a bit to that idea of almost having a pastoral role or counselling – not that I would consider myself a counsellor but you kind of have to just be very attentive to what people – what people need in this job'. MA3, the archivist who accepted the Bible story painting, likewise stressed that archival work can involve an 'element of ministry'. While these two participants leaned on religious language and imagery, this was done to draw attention to the importance of acknowledging the significance of relationship, of paying attention to where people 'are at' when they come in to an archives, of 'just listening' [UA5].

The kinds of relationship building discussed by these participants takes time, and participants who discussed the importance of relationship building to donor relations acknowledged that it can be difficult to balance the time it takes to build relationships against the time required to complete their other work. One archivist working in a large university archives [UA7] talked about working with an aging donor, going through hundreds of boxes together, and feeling 'the tension' between 'the emotional stuff' and the 'problem-solving': 'I had all this other stuff to do', UA7 lamented. They elaborated:

[The donor would] sometimes get lost in stories, you know, go on tangents....You know, she would start talking about her children, and everything, like, that was unrelated to what we're doing. And it was all very interesting and I was happy to listen to it all. But I...I had to get back to the work! So, it was just like, 'How are we going to actually get through all this?' And make [institution name redacted] happy, and the librarian happy, and keep *her* happy, and just manage all that?

UA3 addressed this tension on the archivist's time by questioning how institutions have identified the 'metrics of success'. This participant described the way that relationships develop over

time as donors bring more materials in and tell her their stories. They talked about the importance of honoring the openness donors demonstrated in telling their stories and the trust they placed in the archivist to listen and care, even if the institution would not ultimately acquire the material. UA3 acknowledged that this was not always a perspective shared by the institution they worked for, or other similar institutions, where ‘success’ is measured by amount of materials acquired, processed, digitized and used. UA3 explained:

So let’s say I spent, you know, a significant amount of time with three people, none of which we took their papers. But if we had, that would have been time well spent. But because I didn’t – because we didn’t, that’s not time well spent. It’s not a measurable outcome. And I find it very hard not to spend that time when it is somebody who’s just lost a partner, or who’s just lost – had a loss. I’m just not going to rush them. I just can’t do that. [I am going to be] listening to their stories.

UA3 talked about this kind of relationship work continuing past the point of acquisition, describing an experience with a donor who ‘was wondering why we hadn’t given the art work of his partner a conservation treatment...you know he wanted better care for the materials’. UA3 took his question to the conservator and then talked to him again: ‘I spent a lot of time listening to him about what that meant to him. So, even if we couldn’t do the conservation work – or what happened is it’s going on a list to be done eventually – but that – to listen to what it meant to him, and to hear the stories of his lost partner...it just takes time – it is a relationship of a kind’ and, UA3 argued, therefore needs to be handled in a sensitive way. If ‘he sees that it’s not well taken care of, it feels like the organization to which he donated them doesn’t care about him or the relationship – like it would be hard not to see that they don’t actually care about him or the relationships...And that’s where, you know, I was trying...That’s all I could sort of say is, I cared, and I will do the best I can to make sure that I can take it as far as I can’.

### **Implications for future scholarly and professional work**

The experiences and stories explored across the four themes of triggers, feelings, stories and relationships have significant implications for the development of more person-centered and trauma-informed policies, procedures, education and training. Because this research project was not specifically focused on donor experiences and relationships, additional research is necessary to fully develop new theories and methodologies, but areas for consideration and future research can be sketched out, and here, I propose five key interventions.

#### *Improving education and training*

Several of the participants interviewed said they had some idea of how to work with dying or ill donors and their loved ones because of their own past experience of loss and bereavement. While personal experience of trauma, grief and/or other emotions can certainly help to prepare an archivist to work in difficult scenarios, this experience should not form the bulk of their preparation; it is unfair and unethical for education and training programs to fail to prepare students to work in emotionally difficult situations in the face of the growing evidence that these are a regular feature of archival work.<sup>23</sup> Students and trainees need to know that a great deal of archival work involves interpersonal interaction (counter to the idea that archivists all work alone in basements sequestered with their collections) and that these interactions can be emotionally complicated and/or difficult. Students and trainees need to be trained in cultural sensitivity and to practice cultural humility,<sup>24</sup> and prepared to work in trauma-informed ways.<sup>25</sup> Archival educators are beginning to develop curricula that include this type of preparation, for example, at the Archival Education and Research Institute (AERI) held in

Liverpool in July 2019, Anna Sexton described efforts at University College London to 'train, prepare and support' recordkeepers to work with traumatic records.<sup>26</sup> At AERI 2022, Henria Aton, Christa Sato and Wendy Duff discussed the co-teaching by archival studies and social work scholars of a 6-week workshop for archival studies students in the Master of Information program at University of Toronto.<sup>27</sup> Professional archivists and archival professional associations are also taking on some of the responsibility for preparing archivists to work in trauma-informed ways and with difficult records. Michaela Hart, Nicola Laurent and Kirsten Wright were among the first professional archivists to speak publicly about the effects on archivists of working with difficult materials and of the need for trauma-informed archival practices.<sup>28</sup> Their public speaking led to the creation of a professional workshop offered through the Australian Society of Archivists.

This type of education and training needs to be widespread, embedded into all archival studies curricula, and treated not as an additional feature but as a core competency; curricular change of this magnitude will require program- and institution-level commitment to change. Professional associations also need to continue the work of archival education and training programs so that professionals already in the field, whose education neglected these topics, are able to acquire knowledge and skills to work with difficult records and in difficult relationships, and so that professionals can continue to add to their knowledge and skills throughout their careers.

#### *Developing ways of 'holding the process'*

When Catherine Hobbs reminds archivists that people donating their records are leaving a part of themselves behind, she follows up with a reminder about the responsibility this creates. 'The archivist', she asserts, 'needs to respond appropriately to the emotion which surrounds importing to the archives the records of someone's life'.<sup>29</sup> Several interview participants echoed Hobbs' call to recognize the emotional attachment that donors have to the materials they are handing over. For example, Hobbs' concern is similar to CA1's emphasis on 'holding the process', which includes acknowledging attachment (both to records and to the people they are connected to) and facilitating a kind of 'letting go'.

Discussion of the archivist's role in this type of facilitation was a common thread across the interviews. As described here, 'holding the process' involves the archivist in a form of grief work; in certain scenarios, the archivist may be part of the process through which a donor 'negotiates the absence of the person and the physical evidence of their being'. Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisaukas and Devon Mordell draw explicit links to recordkeeping as a kind of griefwork, showing how creating and interacting with records can be a means by which the bereaved continue relationships with their lost loved ones<sup>30</sup>; it makes sense that letting go of these materials requires a particular kind of acknowledgment or process, and this is an area that deserves more attention from archivists. More research is needed to better understand the experiences of donors and, subsequently, to develop caring and trauma-informed approaches to acquisition work and the training needed to implement them.

#### *Preserving donor stories*

The importance of the stories donors tell about their lives and records was emphasized in a majority of interviews, but it was unclear to what extent these stories were being preserved and – where appropriate – communicated. A core tenet of archival theory and methodology is the importance of preserving records' contexts and most of our work is aimed at doing so. Archival scholars have regularly argued that records on their own cannot tell whole stories; constituting a 'sliver of a sliver of a sliver'<sup>31</sup> of the whole, they act as 'touchstones'<sup>32</sup> for memory, requiring 'activation',<sup>33</sup> to move from 'evidence of me' to evidence of us.<sup>34</sup>

How and where to capture records' full contexts and stories is not clear, however. While donor-provided information is likely to be included in finding aids in biographical sketches and scope and content elements, the telling of detailed stories about records is not accommodated in current descriptive standards and these stories are not often shared with users in other forms.<sup>35</sup> Often, stories about records are heard by archivists during the accession stage and may be recorded in some form in an accession record or file; these types of materials are not always – or even often – available to researchers<sup>36</sup> and new accession standards do not include fields that encourage the capture of detailed records stories.<sup>37</sup> The significance that interviewees accorded to donor stories suggests that these require more deliberate care and that archivists should look at developing ways of preserving them where they have consent to do so.

Three community archivists [CA1, CA2 and CA3] interviewed for this project conduct oral histories with donors as part of their regular procedures; SA1 also mentioned conducting oral history interviews but acknowledged it was 'kind of a fly by thing' rather than being their usual practice.<sup>38</sup> The use of oral histories with creators and donors has been discussed in the archival literature; for example, Carmen Ruschinsky describes an oral history project at Concordia University, the aim of which was to 'integrat[e] donor interviews into archival practice' in recognition of the importance of donor stories to 'meaning-making' in archival collections.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Robert G. Weaver and Zachary R. Hernández describe an evolving process to incorporate donor stories into arrangement and description workflows at the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University's Southwest Collection/Special Collections Library (SWC/SCL). They explain how recording oral histories with SWC donors had been a regular practice for many years, but that these recordings were typically stored separately from the archives and seen as a way of creating a supplementary record; only more recently have archivists realized the potential associated with working directly with donors during arrangement and description, allowing their stories to inform arrangement and add richness to description, and ultimately, making the archival process more collaborative and 'democratic'.<sup>40</sup> The recording of donor stories is also integral to Jamie A. Lee's work with the Arizona Queer Archives and the Digital Storytelling & Oral History Lab, where, Lee asserts, storytelling is the archives' 'organising principle and practice'.<sup>41</sup> Archives, Lee argues, become 'accessible and knowable'<sup>42</sup> through the stories that are told about, in and through them.

The commitment to storytelling that archivists such as Ruschinsky, Weaver and Hernández, and Lee demonstrate could be more widely adopted in archival programs. The importance accorded by interviewees to donor stories suggests that more work is needed to develop means of hearing, recording, and preserving them. Donor stories also need to be shared (as appropriate) by linking them to or including them in finding aids and other descriptive tools.

### *Measuring 'success'*

A recurring issue discussed by participants in these interviews related to the tension they felt between the need to complete their work 'efficiently' and the time it takes to nurture donor relationships and honor their stories and experiences. As UA3 put it, the institutions in which archival work is carried out need to rethink what is considered as 'measurable outcomes' and how productivity is defined. Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee explain the ways that archival work has become subject to neoliberalist 'market metrics', citing 'new emphases within the administration of public institutions on "cost efficiency" and "profitableness"'.<sup>43</sup> Raquel Flores-Clemons discusses the difficulties of 'keep[ing] a people-first approach' in institutional settings 'because you have to prioritize the needs of the organization that holds the collection',<sup>44</sup> while Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci and Marika Cifor show in their research on the affective impact of community archives that these types of metrics are affecting not only public institutions but also community-driven archival efforts, where

community archives are 'increasingly forced to articulate their value in tangible – and often quantitative – ways to funders in the prevalent neoliberal frameworks'.<sup>45</sup> Within these neoliberal frameworks, time that does not lead directly to tangible returns in terms of number of accessions or linear metres processed – in other words time that cannot be measured in direct outcome – may be considered wasted, inefficiently spent and/or non-fundable; however, participants in this research project identified time spent building relationships as an integral part of archival work.

In my own experience, when I advocate for richer description and person-centered archival practices, methods that require more time and attention than is currently granted to tasks, I am frequently met with resistance; this type of work is criticized as being impractical and difficult or even impossible to implement with the resources available in archival institutions. However, contributions to archival scholarship by practitioner-researchers point out that how archivists decide to allocate time and other resources is to some extent at least a matter of prioritization; for example, invoking Antonina Lewis' concept of 'archival fragility',<sup>46</sup> Danielle Robichaud argues that 'by focusing on comfortably familiar neoliberal deflections like time and resources, archival fragility side-steps meaningful, action-oriented change'.<sup>47</sup> In other words, maintaining the status quo is a choice archivists make that allows them to avoid change; this choice, Robichaud shows, is often at the expense of justice and equity-oriented work. In a similar vein, David James Hudson notes how discourses of 'practicality' condone and/or endorse hegemonic racial politics and white supremacy<sup>48</sup>; as he explains, 'our very expectations and assumptions about the practical character and value of our field subtly police the work we end up doing and supporting, the kind of questions we ask and conversations we have, [and...] our sense, more generally, of what useful and appropriate political interventions look like from the standpoint of our profession'.<sup>49</sup>

These discussions about neoliberalist creep and the white supremacy of the status quo highlight how, as both Flores-Clemons and Robichaud show, change needs to happen at structural levels; the kind of person-centered approaches advocated for in this article and in other recent archival scholarship depend not on gestures of kindness from individual archivists but rather on fundamental changes to institutional and systemic policies, standards and practices.<sup>50</sup>

### *Centering people and relationships*

The conversations I had with archivists and recordkeepers about working with donors highlighted the importance of relationships and of person-centered approaches to archival work. Traditionally, archivists' attention has been focused primarily – and sometimes seemingly exclusively – on the record, meaning that archival scholarship and education has privileged research and teaching about acquisition and preservation over public service. Increasingly, however, attention is shifting toward the people who create, donate, use and/or are represented in records.<sup>51</sup> Projects such as Memory-Identity-Rights in Records-Access (MIRRA) in England, Find and Connect in Australia, and the Shingwauk Project in Canada have shown that centering the person documented in a record, rather than, or in addition to, the procedures or policies for managing the record, can help archivists and records professionals identify actions and processes that have the potential to inflict harm or retraumatize records users.<sup>52</sup> As Elizabeth Shepherd has expressed, there is a clear call from those impacted by recordkeeping decisions and processes and from recordkeepers themselves to move away from a 'culture of recordkeeping for compliance' to develop instead a 'culture of caring recordkeeping'.<sup>53</sup> The interviews discussed in this article show that a culture of caring recordkeeping includes care for the people from whom archives acquire materials.

Caring recordkeeping involves particular kinds of archival labor. The archivists and recordkeepers I spoke with emphasized the importance of listening, of taking time, of honoring

people's experiences and stories, and of acknowledging that donors may be feeling complex and difficult emotions. Caring recordkeeping involves relationship building. Lee asserts that 'the archives is, becomes, and exists in relationships. Always in relation',<sup>54</sup> and drafts a manifesto for a 'radical hospitality' that would transform archival practice and inform 'new ways of being in the world together'.<sup>55</sup> Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson advocate for a 'slow archives' approach that acknowledges the centrality of relationships to archival work. Drawing on their work to develop archival systems and interfaces that 'center Indigenous temporalities, relationships and geographies', they ask how 'embodied, intimate, kin-based, land-based affective practice[s] of listening, sensing, remembering, making and remaking' can be foregrounded in archival processes.<sup>56</sup> Slowing down, they argue, is not only about taking more time, and it is certainly not in opposition to getting the work done. It is, fundamentally, a practice of 'focusing differently, listening carefully, and acting ethically' to privilege relationality as an archival logic.<sup>57</sup> Caswell and Cifor also place relationships – and people – at the center of archival theories and practices, arguing for a 'feminist ethics of care' that recognizes how archivists are 'caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility'.<sup>58</sup>

The interviews show that there is a need to shift thinking and teaching about donor relations from a fundamentally transactional approach to one that is more person-centered and that focuses on the relational aspects involved. As Dainan M. Skeem points out, the importance of emphasizing the *relations* aspect of donor relations is especially vital as archivists increasingly work with donors over long periods of time and through various stages of their careers. Archivists need to know not only how to start a relationship but also how to continue one.<sup>59</sup> A shift to prioritizing relationships will necessarily encompass aspects of 'holding the process', working on different timelines and reconsidering expectations and outcomes.

## Conclusion

This article has explored themes related to triggering life events, feelings, stories and relationships in the context of archivists' work with donors, and has suggested that more work is needed to understand and prepare new archivists for the complex relationships that can exist between them and donors. The conversations I had with participants highlighted how changes to existing archival education and training programs, to institutional policies and procedures, to particular workflows and to inter-personal relationships require solutions at different levels across archival institutions, education programs, and professional associations. As Dorothy Berry has argued about reparative description and access, the kinds of systemic and structural changes required to shift archival education, institutional policies and professional practices to a person-centered model involve much more than a 'workflow adjustment'.<sup>60</sup> Projects such as MIRRA and the Emotional Response to Archival Records project at the University of Toronto are looking at the roles of archival institutions in supporting records subjects and recordkeepers, respectively; additional research could look at the roles archival education programs and professional associations have to play in developing understanding of, and supporting recordkeepers involved in, the emotional dimensions of archival work.

The conversations I had with interview participants about donors occurred in a particular context – in a study on grief and other emotions in archival work – that will have impacted their nature and focus; a more broadly focused study on donor relations might reveal other characterizations of the work and experiences of the different parties involved. Furthermore, because the research described in this article was not explicitly focused on donor relations, more research is required to understand the nature of the different types of relationships that can develop between archivists and donors and the impact of relationships on the acquisition process. This article suggests several potential areas for future research – around education

and training; holding the process; preserving donor stories; measuring success; and working in relationship – but these are by no means exhaustive.

Carbajal's assertion that 'current archival paradigms tend to focus more on the archival materials than the people behind them' is borne out by the archivists I interviewed. The conversations about donor relations that are explored here demonstrate a strong disconnect between the prominent focus on transaction and procedure in archival literature and education and the lived experiences of working archivists. This disconnect means that archivists are underprepared for the emotional dimensions of their work. 'That's something my archival education did not prepare me for', UA5 told me: 'The idea that I would be...that emotionally involved with people who were very emotional about their records'. This article argues for a shift from the types of transactional and extractive emphases evident in 'archival paradigms' toward attention to people, feelings, relationships and care. While more attention is beginning to be paid to the emotional dimensions of archival work, the eagerness of the archivists and recordkeepers who responded to the call to participate in this research project and other related projects, the high attendance at conference sessions on related topics, and the shift in archival theory toward affect, emotion and empathy all demonstrate that there is a great deal of more work to be done and that now is the time to do it.

### Acknowledgements

This research conducted for this article was generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Canada through the Insight Development Grant (2017–23). I am deeply grateful to the 29 archivists and recordkeepers who shared their experiences with me during the summer and fall of 2019; thank you for your candour, your empathy and your trust. This research was helped along by an outstanding research team, including graduate research assistants Alexandra Alisaukas, Elizabeth Bassett, Noah Duranseaud, Ted Lee, Christina Mantey and Catherine Hall. Thank you to the two anonymous peer reviewers for your generous feedback, to the editorial team, and to the Australian Society of Archivists for your commitment to open access publishing.

### Notes

1. Itza Carbajal, 'The Politics of Being an Archival Donor: Defining the Affective Relationship between Archival Donors and Archivists', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1–26, doi: 10.24242/jclis.v3i2.114.
2. Ibid.
3. Rob Fisher, 'Donors and Donor Agency: Implications for Private Archives Theory and Practice', *Archivaria*, vol. 1, no. 79, Spring 2015, p. 92.
4. Geof Huth, 'Review of Donors and Archives: A Guidebook for Successful Programs, by Aaron D. Purcell', *The American Archivist*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2016, p. 201.
5. Geoff Wexler and Linda L Long, 'Lifetimes and Legacies: Mortality, Immortality, and the Needs of Aging and Dying Donors', *The American Archivist*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2009, p. 479.
6. Aaron D Purcell, *Donors and Archives: A Guidebook for Successful Programs*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2015. See Chapter 7 on 'Donor Types'.
7. See for example, Jessica L Wagner and Debbi A Smith, 'Students as Donors to University Archives: A Study of Student Perceptions and Recommendations', *The American Archivist*, vol. 75, no. 2, 2012, pp. 538–66.
8. See for example, Elizabeth Konzak and Dwain P Teague, 'Reconnect with Your Alumni and Connect to Donors', *Technical Services Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2009, pp. 217–25; Ben Primer, 'Resources for Archives: Developing Collections, Constituents, Colleagues, and Capital', *Journal of Archival Organization*, vol. 7, no. 1–2, 2009, pp. 58–65.
9. See for example Andrea Payant, Becky Skeen, Anna-Maria Arnljots and Randy Williams, 'Beyond Crowdsourcing: Working with Donors, Student Fieldworkers, and Community Scholars to Improve Cultural Heritage Metadata', *Journal of Digital Media Management*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2020, pp. 242–253.
10. Barbara Kaiser, 'Problems with Donors of Contemporary Collections', *The American Archivist*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1969, pp. 103–7.

11. For a detailed overview of the project, see Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisaukas, Elizabeth Bassett, Noah Duranseau, Ted Lee and Christina Mantey, “‘These Are Not Just Pieces of Paper’: Acknowledging Grief and Other Emotions in Pursuit of Person-Centred Archives”, *Archives & Manuscripts*, vol. 1, no. 50, 2022, pp. 5–29.
12. A more detailed discussion of the work of the research team can be found in [removed for anonymization].
13. Catherine Hobbs, ‘The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals’, *Archivaria*, vol. 2, no. 52, Fall 2001, pp. 132–3.
14. Wexler and Long, ‘Lifetimes and Legacies’, p. 478.
15. ‘Mediator deathwork’ is a term used by death studies scholar Tony Walter, who explores types of professional work that involve a professional mediating between the dead and the public, often through some form of public rite. Examples he discusses include coroners, funeral directors, obituary writers, mediums and museum curators. Archivists could also be included in this list as they translate their knowledge of a deceased creator to create appraisal reports, finding aids, exhibits, etc. Tony Walter, ‘Mediator Deathwork’, *Death Studies*, vol. 29, no. 5, 2005, pp. 383–412.
16. In Wexler and Long, ‘Lifetimes and Legacies’, Long discusses her experience working with and caring for a donor at the end of the donor’s life.
17. IODE stands for International Order of the Daughters of Empire.
18. Recent work across several research projects has explored archivists’ ‘emotional responses’ to working with records and the people who create, donate, use and are documented in them. See Cheryl Regehr, Wendy Duff, Henria Aton and Christa Sato, “‘Humans and Records Are Entangled’: Empathic Engagement and Emotional Response in Archives”, *Archival Science*, vol. 22, 2022, pp. 563–83; Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisaukas, Elizabeth Bassett, Noah Duranseau, Ted Lee and Christina Mantey, “‘These Are Not Just Pieces of Paper’: Acknowledging Grief and Other Emotions in Pursuit of Person-Centred Archives”, *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2022, pp. 5–29.
19. Because the interviews conducted for the Conceptualizing Recordkeeping as Grief Work project were specifically focused on recordkeepers’ experiences of grief, and because participants self-selected based on their interest in this topic or on the degree to which it resonated with them, our conversations emphasized grief as an aspect of archival work, including in donor relations. New research on donors might address what Duff et al. are calling ‘emotional responses’ more broadly and uncover other experiences or emphasize different feelings.
20. RAD, *Rules for Archival Description*, is the Canadian description standard.
21. This participant’s metaphor of the story ‘sponge’ and her characterization of archival listening as a ‘sacred’ duty calls to mind Jamie A Lee’s self-description as ‘the storytelling receptionist and concierge’. Lee, too, describes the effects of being ‘touched, moved and changed’ through every conversation and story and represents archives as ‘a space of reception that turns itself into a sacred resting place. Jamie A Lee, ‘Archives as Spaces of Radical Hospitality’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 36, no. 108, 2021, p. 156.
22. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, ‘From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives’, *Archivaria*, vol. 81, Spring 2016, pp. 23–43.
23. Recent work on secondary trauma and archivists and on the emotional dimensions of archival work confirm that experience of working with difficult materials and in difficult situations is widespread. See Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit and Jennifer Douglas, ‘Not “Just My Problem to Handle”: Emerging Themes on Archivists and Secondary Trauma’, *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, vol. 6, 2019, p. 20, available at <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1090&context=jcas>, accessed 2 February 2023; Duff et al., ‘Humans and Records Are Entangled’; Douglas et al., ‘These Are Not Just Pieces of Paper’.
24. Jessica Tai, ‘Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description’, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1–23, doi: 10.24242/jclis.v3i2.120; Kirsten Thorpe, ‘The Dangers of Libraries and Archives for Indigenous Australian Workers: Investigating the Question of Indigenous Cultural Safety’, *IFLA Journal*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2021, pp. 341–50; Kristen Thorpe, ‘Transformative Praxis – Building Spaces for Indigenous Self-Determination in Libraries and Archives’, *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 23, 2019, available at <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2019/transformative-praxis/>, accessed 10 February 2023.
25. Kirsten Wright and Nicola Laurent, ‘Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice’, *Archivaria*, vol. 91, Spring 2021, pp. 38–73.
26. The program for this institute is no longer available online.
27. Henria Aton, Christa Sato and Wendy Duff, ‘Trauma-Informed Approaches to Information: Reflections on Co-Teaching an Innovative 6-Week Master’s Level Workshop’, Paper Presented at Archival Education

- and Research Institute, July 14, 2022, online, <http://aeri.website/events/category/virtual-aeri-2022/2022-07/>, accessed 15 May 2023.
28. Nicola Laurent and Michaela Hart, 'Emotional Labor and Archival Practice: Reflection', *Journal of the Society of North Carolina Archivists*, vol. 15, 2018, pp. 13–22.
  29. Hobbs, 'The Character of Archives', p. 133.
  30. Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisaukas and Devon Mordell, "'Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists'": Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives', *Archivaria*, vol. 88, Fall 2019, pp. 84–120.
  31. Verne Harris, 'The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa', *Archival Science*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2002, p. 65.
  32. Laura Millar, 'Touchstones: Considering the Relationship between Memory and Archives', *Archivaria*, vol. 61, Fall 2006, pp. 105–26.
  33. Eric Ketelaar, 'Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives', *Archival Science*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2001, p. 138.
  34. Sue McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me', *Archives & Manuscripts*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1996, pp. 28–45.
  35. See Jennifer Douglas, 'Toward More Honest Description', *The American Archivist*, vol. 79, no. 1, Spring/Summer 2016, pp. 26–55.
  36. Kristan Cook and Heather Dean discuss the types of information gathered and documented in accession files and consider how this information could be of use to researchers; they explain how the benefits of researcher access to this material are balanced against donors' privacy and suggest how filing practices in archival repositories can ensure that material that can be viewed by researchers without risk is made available. See Kristan Cook and Heather Dean, 'Our Records, Ourselves: Documenting Archives and Archivists', in Kathleen Garay and Chritl Verduyn (eds.), *Archival Narratives for Canada: Re-Telling Stories in a Changing Landscape*, Fernwood, Halifax and Winnipeg, 2011, pp. 56–73.
  37. See, for example, the Canadian Archival Accession Information Standard, available at [https://archivescanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/CAAIS\\_2019May15\\_EN.pdf](https://archivescanada.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/CAAIS_2019May15_EN.pdf), accessed 22 November 2022.
  38. It must be noticed that I did not ask specific questions about these practices, so it is possible that more participants were conducting oral history interviews as part of ad hoc or regular procedures.
  39. Carmen Ruschensky, 'Meaning-Making and Memory-Making in the Archives: Oral History Interviews with Archives Donors', *Archivaria*, vol. 84, Fall 2017, p. 106.
  40. Robert G Weaver and Zachary R Hernández, 'Oral History, Donor Engagement, and the Cocrecreation of Knowledge in an Academic Archives', *Archivaria*, vol. 1, no. 93, Spring 2022, p. 75.
  41. Lee, 'Radical Hospitality', p. 157.
  42. Lee, 'Radical Hospitality', p. 158.
  43. Marika Cifor and Jamie A Lee, 'Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2017, pp. 1–22, doi: 10.24242/jclis.v1i1.10.
  44. In Ashley D Farmer, Steven D Booth, Tracy Drake, Raquel Flores-Clemons, Erin Glasco, Skyla S Hearn and Stacie Williams, 'Toward an Archival Reckoning', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 127, no. 2, June 2022, p. 807.
  45. Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci and Marika Cifor, "'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise': Community Archives and the Importance of Representation", *Archives and Records*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2017, p. 10.
  46. Antonina Lewis, 'Omelettes in the Stack: Archival Fragility and the Aforeafter', *Archivaria*, vol. 2, no. 86, Fall 2018, pp. 44–67.
  47. Danielle Robichaud, 'Integrating Equity and Reconciliation Work into Archival Descriptive Practice at the University of Waterloo', *Archivaria*, vol. 1, no. 91, Spring 2021, p. 101.
  48. Drawing on critical race theory, Hudson explains how 'whiteness' dominative power resides, in crucial part, in its occupation of a space of unmarked normativity'. It 'persists through an ability to assert its historical peculiarity and precarity as timeless, universal, and neutral'. It is the 'mythical norm' (quoting Audre Lorde) that librarians and archivists protect and continue when they appeal to practical reasons why they cannot act to create change in policies and procedures. David James Hudson, 'The Whiteness of Practicality', in Gina Schlesselman-Tarango (ed.), *Topographies of Whiteness: Mapping Whiteness in Library and Information Studies*, Library Juice Press, 2017, pp. 203–234.
  49. Hudson, 'Whiteness of Practicality', p. 205.
  50. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, 'Revisiting a Feminist Ethics of Care in Archives', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1–6, doi: 10.24242/jclis.v3i2.162.

51. See the special issue of *Archivaria*, *Toward Person-Centred Archival Theory and Praxis*. The editor's introduction suggests a definition of *person-centred* and traces some of its lineage through archival literature and professional practice. Jennifer Douglas, Mya Ballin and Jessica Lapp, 'Introduction', *Archivaria*, vol. 94, Fall 2022, pp. 5–21.
52. For more information about the MIRRA project see, for example: Elizabeth Shepherd, Victoria Hoyle, Elizabeth Lomas, Andrew Flinn and Anna Sexton, 'Towards a Human-Centred Participatory Approach to Child Social Care Recordkeeping', *Archival Science*, vol. 20, no. 4, 2020, pp. 307–25; Victoria Hoyle, Elizabeth Shepherd, Andrew Flinn and Elizabeth Lomas, 'Child Social-Care Recording and the Information Rights of Care-Experienced People: A Recordkeeping Perspective', *The British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 49, no. 7, 2019, pp. 1856–74.  
For information about Find & Connect and the impact of understanding Care Leaver experiences on recordkeeping practices see: Joanne Evans, Frank Golding, Cate O'Neill and Rachel Tropea "'All I Want to Know Is Who I Am": Archival Justice for Care Leavers', in David A Wallace, Wendy M Duff, Renée Saucier and Andrew Flinn (eds.), *Archives, Recordkeeping and Social Justice*, Routledge, London, 2020, pp. 105–26.  
For information on the Shingwauk Project and the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre see: Krista McCracken, 'Community Archival Practice: Indigenous Grassroots Collaboration at the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre', *The American Archivist*, vol. 78, no. 1, 2015, pp. 181–91; Krista McCracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan, 'Residential School Community Archives: Spaces of Trauma and Community Healing', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1–17, doi: 10.24242/jclis.v3i2.115.
53. Elizabeth Shepherd, 'Care Leavers: "Trying to Access Childhood Records Is Distressing and Dehumanizing"', *The Conversation*, October 3, 2019, available at <https://theconversation.com/care-leavers-trying-to-access-childhood-records-is-distressing-and-dehumanising-124381>, accessed 10 February 2023.
54. Lee, 'Radical Hospitality', p. 157.
55. Lee, 'Radical Hospitality', p. 161.
56. Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, 'Toward Slow Archives', *Archival Science*, vol. 19, 2019, p. 90.
57. Christen and Anderson, 'Slow Archives', p. 90.
58. Caswell and Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics', p. 24.
59. Dainan M Skeem, 'Donor Relations in the Twenty-First Century', *Journal of Western Archives*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2018, article 9.
60. Dorothy Berry, 'The House that Archives Built', *up/root*, June 22, 2021, available at <https://www.uproot.space/features/the-house-archives-built>, accessed 7 March 2023.