

## Gossip as Practice, Gossip as Care

Affective Information Practices in the Archives

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# Gossip as Practice, Gossip as Care

Affective Information  
Practices in the Archives

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**ABSTRACT** Often seen as suspect and untrustworthy, gossip as it is currently conceptualized comes from historic attempts by people who have experienced social marginalization to share information, build stronger relationships, and assess a dominant narrative against lived experience. In this article, I will be outlining how gossip has animated my archival work at the Crista Dahl Media Library and Archives, an artist-run centre in Vancouver, BC, and using the Crista Dahl Media Library and Archives as a case study. Several distinct uses of gossip emerge: these include offering space for archives workers to connect and build solidarity, opening up new avenues for reassessing what we consider to be relevant information in archival description, providing strategies for navigating sensitive information within collections, and acting as an alternative to narratives of trauma when considering archival silences. Drawing on practice theory and studies of community archives and deeply influenced by an ethos of transformative justice, this project is connected to the growing body of scholarly work that examines information and memory work through the lens of affect theory and a feminist ethics of care. This work contributes to the articulation of person-centred archival praxis by theorizing gossip as a tactic of care that trains the ear to better notice the experiences, complaints, and contributions of the people surrounding the records at hand.

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**RÉSUMÉ** Souvent perçu comme suspect et indigne de confiance, le potinage, comme il est présentement conceptualisé, provient de tentatives historiques de gens ayant vécu de la marginalisation sociale pour partager de l'information, développer des relations plus fortes, et évaluer et confronter des récits dominants face aux expériences vécues. Dans cet article, je vais décrire comment le potinage a animé mon travail archivistique à la Crista Dahl Media Library and Archives, un centre d'artistes autogéré de Vancouver, en Colombie-Britannique. La Crista Dahl Media Library and Archives est ainsi utilisée comme étude de cas. Plusieurs formes distinctes de potinage émergent : celles-ci se traduisent par offrir un espace de rencontre et d'échange aux archivistes afin de construire des liens de solidarité, ouvrir de nouvelles avenues afin de réévaluer ce qui est considéré comme de l'information pertinente aux descriptions archivistiques, offrir des stratégies afin de naviguer à travers l'information sensible dans les collections et, dans un dernier temps, agir comme alternative aux récits de traumatismes lorsque l'on considère les silences archivistiques. En se basant sur les théories de la pratique, les études théoriques de l'archivistique communautaire, et profondément influencé par les énoncés de la justice transformative, ce projet s'inscrit dans la lignée du nombre croissant de travaux scientifiques qui examinent l'information et le travail de mémoire à travers une perspective des théories de l'*affect* et de l'éthique féministe du *care*. Ce travail contribue à l'articulation d'une praxis archivistique centrée sur les personnes, en théorisant le potinage comme une tactique de soins qui entraîne l'écoute vers les expériences, les plaintes et les contributions des personnes associées aux documents à portée de main.

*We must record the knowledge we receive from our unarchived experiences. . . . look to . . . folk tale, gossip, rumor, dream, the talk that talks like trees underground sharing sugar and water and energy, the talk we talk in poetry.*<sup>1</sup>

*Be brave, 'cause gossip saves.*<sup>2</sup>

For the past several years, I have worked in the Crista Dahl Media Library and Archives (CDMLA), which lives within and is a part of VIVO Media Arts Centre (VIVO), an almost 50-year-old artist-run centre in Vancouver, BC, located on the ancestral and unceded territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh, and sə́líl̓wətaʔ peoples.<sup>3</sup> Artist-run centres in Canada emerged during a particular moment in the 1960s and '70s art scene as attempts to create a third space outside of galleries and museums for artists to curate, produce, exhibit, and be paid for their labour.<sup>4</sup> The history of the CDMLA rests in a similar third space. The CDMLA exists at the intersections of corporate archives, museum archives, and community archives and has traits of all three and allegiance to the conventions of none. Throughout its history, VIVO has operated simultaneously as an artist-curated exhibition space, a video art training centre, a video distributor, a newsletter publisher, and an ad hoc community space; the records of all of these endeavours now jostle up against one another in the Archives.<sup>5</sup> In his history of the start of the artist-run centre era, AA Bronson writes that the “connective tissue” of the time was artist’s videos and publications; these physical media travelled across the country, often accompanied by travelling artists, and eventually

1 Susan Briante, *Defacing the Monument* (Blacksburg, VA: Noemi Press, 2020), 35.

2 Beshéle Caron, “Gossip Saves,” performed by Rooms, track 4 on *It takes a lot to show up*, released January 1, 2016, Pretzel Records, cassette and digital album, <https://roooms.bandcamp.com/track/gossip-saves>.

3 Throughout this article, I will be using CDMLA to refer to the Archives itself and VIVO to refer to the larger arts organization that houses the Archives. VIVO has also previously been known as the Satellite Video Exchange Society, Video Inn, and Video In/Video Out before landing on its current identity as VIVO Media Arts Centre.

4 AA Bronson, “The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists,” in *Museums by Artists*, ed. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983).

5 Jennifer Abbot, ed., *Making Video “In”: The Contested Ground of Alternative Video on the West Coast* (Vancouver: Video In Studios, 2000).

“allowed us to allow ourselves to see ourselves as an art scene.”<sup>6</sup>

The task of archiving the connective tissue of an entire arts scene brings up particular idiosyncrasies, concerns that are ever present on my mind. At the CDMLA, the institutional fonds of VIVO was first arranged by an archivist in the 1990s and then disassembled and put into storage in the early 2000s. The files that constituted the original fonds have been reordered as well as they could be, but as with many institutional archives, there remain both a backlog of older records to process and reintegrate and an influx of new records documenting the ongoing work of the organization. My work in the CDMLA initially focused on arranging the Sara Diamond Fonds, a large collection tracing Diamond's art career and political activism, but my work duties also included chipping away at the backlog and processing the incoming flow. These records are in high demand for researchers, who are often looking for glimpses of specific artists or events that moved through the art space in previous decades. The records within the CDMLA trace complicated constellations of relationships between video producers, artists who worked at VIVO, and the larger social movements that have touched this city over the last half century. One question I have had while processing the organizational records has been how to best represent these networks in the descriptive record. Outside of its own organizational fonds, the CDMLA holds within its special collections the records of other artist-centred organizations, individual artist's fonds, and a plethora of video and textual documentation of the local arts and political scene from the '70s onward.<sup>7</sup> There is significant overlap between the subjects in the organizational fonds and those in the other fonds in the CDMLA's custody; Sara Diamond worked at the organization for close to a decade before eventually donating her collection to the Archives. A similar overlap concerns other artists whose work is present in the CDMLA and who have either produced work at VIVO or were employed or exhibited by VIVO during their lives. Collectively, the CDMLA's disparate holdings contribute to an affinity with community archives, an affinity that brings questions about gaps, silences, affect, and curatorial responsibility to the forefront.

6 Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat."

7 VIVO Media Arts, "Welcome to VIVO's Crista Dahl Media Library & Archive," VIVO, accessed December 10, 2021. <http://www.vivomediaarts.com/archive/>.

While working with the thornier elements of the CDMLA's collection in the past few years, I have been obsessively thinking about and through the method of gossip: gossip as a mode of interpersonal communication – a way of asking what information is missing – and as an affective information practice. The category of information that gossip trades in is almost exclusively affective – information pertaining to emotional experiences, relationships, or memories. Gossip is a deeply relational communication system, reliant on in-jokes, community knowledge, and small groups of trusted kin.<sup>8</sup> Through its combination of feelings, experience, and care work, it exists as a feminized tool, which is in turn routinely undervalued and demonized precisely because of its utility in efforts toward collective safety.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, I push toward a consideration of gossip as both an active practice and a tactic of care – a tactic that trains the ear to better notice the experiences, complaints, and contributions of the people surrounding records at hand. I first contextualize recent theories of gossip, drawing connections between feminist philosophy, Black queer studies, affect theory, and recent archival theory scholarship. I then move into a consideration of four areas of archival labour in which gossip can be taken up as a tool. In the first section, I consider gossip as an active practice, drawing on practice theory and examples of practice in community archives. In this section, I examine the potential for negative gossip and connect the theory I am tracing to transformative justice ethics. I then examine recent library and information studies scholarship on the use of gossip within the workplace, specifically as a tool of connection and clarity among marginalized information workers. I move on to look at how gossip can be captured within the archival record, through descriptions and finding aids, and how taking gossip seriously can provide new ways to look at the information present in the records. Finally, I expand outward to weigh the role of gossip in relation to archival silences, and I argue that gossip can be a frame to resist flattening narratives that equate silence or absence with trauma and erasure.

8 Marika Cifor, "Acting Up, Talking Back: TITA, TIARA, and the Value of Gossip," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 12, no. 1 (2016).

9 Channele Gallant, "Word Travels: The Social Network Sex Workers Built," *Bitch Media* (blog), December 18, 2017, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/social-network-sex-workers-built>; Karina Hagelin, "Gossip as a Site of Resistance: Information-Sharing Strategies Among Survivors of Sexual Violence" (MLIS thesis, University of Maryland, College Park, 2018).

I have deep curiosity about the pathways that open up when information systems born out of the brilliance of survival are weighted equally against systems that understand information as a collection of inherent truths. The method of gossip uncovers new avenues for reassessing what information we consider to be relevant in archival description, provides strategies for navigating sensitive information within collections, and offers space for archivists to discuss the realities of our own working conditions and experiences. Drawing on examples from the CDMLA, I approach gossip as a window, an opening through which practices of valuing the affective experiences of others can be cultivated and prioritized. The records of artists and activists, especially those embedded within community and non-traditional archives, are highly networked. Sometimes, working within this network means learning to gossip alongside it.

## Gossip as Record

First, some words to define a slippery subject: gossip is historically a communication of the subaltern, frequently used as a method for passing information along through feminized and racialized networks.<sup>10</sup> In the book *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power*, Karen Adkins offers a succinct definition: “Gossip is loose, typically evaluative talk that emerges from intimacy; there is some degree of trust, or shared background, at least asserted between participants, and it is the talk of a dyad or small group.”<sup>11</sup> In practice, gossip can be a way of testing stories, of crafting meaning together, and of filling in the gaps within social groups. The academic study of gossip ranges across disciplines, drawing from folklore, philosophy, communications, sociology, gender studies, Black queer studies, and most recently, archival studies.<sup>12</sup> Because of its gendered nature and its focus on transmitting emotional experiences, relationships, or memories, gossip is routinely dismissed as unreliable or unverifiable and therefore not true within Western

<sup>10</sup> Hagelin, “Gossip as a Site of Resistance,” 26.

<sup>11</sup> Karen Adkins, *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power: Knowledge Underground* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Adkins, “The Real Dirt: Gossip and Feminist Epistemology,” *Social Epistemology* 16, no 3 (2010): 215–32; Cifor, “Acting Up, Talking Back”; Silvia Federici, *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women* (Philadelphia: Common Notions, 2018); Patricia Myer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985).

colonial knowledge paradigms. The information produced through gossip often rests uneasily between private and public spheres, compounding this distrust of its validity. However, many feminist scholars argue that this slipperiness, in and of itself, is a strength – indeed, that gossip can produce “knowledge so valuable that it can contest the paradigm status of scientific method as the only reliable means of establishing truth.”<sup>13</sup> Lorraine Code argues that it is precisely the fluidity of gossip, which works as a system to move information back and forth through private and public spheres, that makes it a valuable tool of epistemological inquiry.<sup>14</sup>

Adkins, writing of gossip as a kind of tool, notes that

Gossip works to synthesize sometimes apparently disconnected ideas or pieces of evidence. . . . When we colloquially refer to gossip as the “dirt” or the “back story,” part of what we’re describing is the way in which gossip tells us the rest of a story that on its face is illogical or incomplete. In its synthetic function, gossip can fill in holes, or shift emphasis or perspective, to help us make sense of our experiences. In this sense, gossip works to make connections between public and private information.<sup>15</sup>

This active synthesis is also a strength when considering gossip’s utility as an archival tool; the role of the archivist often involves navigating the tensions between public records and the private stories contained within them. Paying close attention to stories and ephemera surrounding the records at hand can help us knit these spheres together.<sup>16</sup>

Following the push to incorporate affect theory into archival study,<sup>17</sup> there is a growing body of work that examines the usefulness, when conducting research,

13 Lorraine Code, “Gossip, or In Praise of Chaos,” in *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1995), 150.

14 Code, 152.

15 Adkins, *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power*, 66.

16 José Esteban Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 5–6.

17 Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23–42; Marika Cifor, “Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016).



of gossip captured within records. In an article on ACT UP, the influential activist group originating in the 1980s to fight the HIV/AIDS crisis, Marika Cifor analyzes gossip columns from the newsletters of several ACT UP chapters. She traces the knowledge production that can be drawn from close reading of the stories within, charting the community norms, stigma, and relational joy that can be inferred from the comments thrown down in the broadsheets by catty queens.<sup>18</sup> Taking up another queer story, Katrin Horn investigates the archival records of the 19th-century actress Charlotte Cushman, tracing how the fear of gossip about Cushman's sexuality shaped the records that she left behind. Horn argues for the value of gossip as historical evidence, as "both a cautious reminder of what we are not supposed to know and a unique source for what we nonetheless might know about the past."<sup>19</sup> Kwame Holmes' "What's the Tea: Gossip and the Production of Black Gay Social History" focuses in on gossip as it animates discussion within the Black gay communities of Washington, DC, in the 1980s and draws out ways in which gossip provided a vehicle to "authorize black queer subjects to speak back to modern identity politics."<sup>20</sup> Holmes performs a close reading of the gossip columns in the DC-based Black queer newsletter *Blacklight*, illustrating how those in the city's Black community used the vehicle of gossip to poke fun and roll their eyes at white gay cultural norms of the time period. Holmes also speaks to the gap in the official documentary record caused by the HIV/AIDS epidemic and structural homophobia and argues that paying attention to gossip is one tactic for listening to these histories, despite the silences left behind.<sup>21</sup>

## Gossip as Practice

My definition of gossip as an "affective information practice" borrows from Cait McKinney and their research at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), a central lesbian community archives based in New York City.<sup>22</sup> McKinney theorizes that

18 Cifor, "Acting Up, Talking Back."

19 Katrin Horn, "Of Gaps and Gossip: Intimacy in the Archive," *Anglia* 138, no. 3 (2020): 428–48, 445.

20 Kwame Holmes, "What's the Tea? Gossip and the Production of Black Gay Social History," *Radical History Review*, no. 122 (May 2015): 56.

21 Holmes, "What's the Tea?" 67.

22 Cait McKinney, "Out of the Basement and on to Internet: Digitizing Oral History Tapes at the Lesbian Herstory

affect is an important component of the information practices of marginalized communities, who may be working toward preservation of stories and histories that no one else is looking out for. Seemingly mundane and sometimes overwhelming tasks such as arranging records, digitizing audio recordings, and organizing photographic images become imbued with social affect through their locations within the queer archives project. McKinney writes, “Small dents in substantial projects take on a significance that makes the larger mission seem do-able. The everyday work of running the LHA, the digitization of one tape amongst thousands, is a modest, singular act in the present, motivated by a vision of what the archives could be.”<sup>23</sup>

The rippling impacts of small dents are echoed in research undertaken by Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez about the role community archives play in producing representational belonging.<sup>24</sup> In the course of interviewing volunteers and participants with the South Asian American Digital Archives (SAADA), the researchers heard stories of deep affective responses to the records held within the archives, which then motivated the participants to become further involved.<sup>25</sup> The themes of representation and belonging also surface in stories from artists with long-term relationships with VIVO. In a consideration of the organization’s history and the draw it has on present-day curators, Amy Kazymierchyk writes, “It is the movements we are involved in now that draw our attention to movements in the past. . . . We look to movements of the past, in this case the work and culture that artists, activists, and cultural workers from [VIVO’s] early history were producing, because we imagine our time here as a continuum of friendships, practices, and commitments.”<sup>26</sup> Through learning about their histories, which are held in the archives, the communities around both SAADA and the CDMLA are motivated to engage more deeply, to both unearth stories and contribute to the work within these spaces.

Archives,” No More Potlucks, July 2014, Internet Archive, February 7, 2015, <http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/out-of-the-basement-and-on-to-internet-digitizing-oral-history-tapes-at-the-lesbian-herstory-archives-cait-mckinney/>.

23 McKinney, “Out of the Basement and on to Internet.”

24 Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, “To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives,” *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 56–81.

25 Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, “To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing,” 70.

26 Amy Kazymierchyk, ed., *Anamnesia: Unforgetting: Polytemporality, Implacement and Possession in the Crista Dahl Media Library & Archive* (Vancouver: VIVO Media Arts Centre, 2012), 19.

This engagement between affect and information practices can be seen, too, in the ways archival methods are shaped within community archives. Again, looking at archival work at the Lesbian Herstory Archive, McKinney writes of the “feminist digitization practices,” which can look quite different from traditional archival digitization standards.<sup>27</sup> Digitization at the LHA has most often been a series of collaborative projects taken up one by one, without an overarching master plan. Work is done in small, steady chunks by volunteers. A distinct do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic runs through the process, as organizers at the LHA contend with limited budgets and make do with consumer-level digitization tools.<sup>28</sup> They pay thoughtful attention to online access to digitized material and consider the complexity of donor intent, right to privacy, and shifting identities in assessing how final projects should be stored and hosted online.<sup>29</sup> A similar kind of daily practice has shaped the CDMLA over its 50-year history. In its first iteration, it was called the Video Inn Library and served as both a repository for video art and an active, drop-in-style viewing room.<sup>30</sup> As the collection grew, so did the organizational processes and practices. It was run almost entirely by volunteers or by VIVO staff with no specific training, and the methods that emerged emphasized accessibility and practicality. The daily “log books,” kept from the ’70s through the ’80s, track the videos that were “checked out” for viewing in the room. They are also full of doodles, notes to other staff members, and gossip about the daily goings-on.<sup>31</sup> They are not the kind of official tracking method that might be found in a more formal archives, but they are rich in information because of their utility within the specific space where they emerged.

This kind of affective practice can also be seen in how stories get attached to particular moments in the history of the archives at hand. At one memorable moment in the early 2000s, when faced with a crisis that necessitated moving the entire archives lest it be discarded, the CDMLA’s namesake, Crista Dahl, recalls, “I just did what had to be done, following practical steps, and learned as I went. First we had to share the work of getting the boxes out of the hallway

27 Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 170–93.

28 McKinney, 169.

29 McKinney, 190.

30 Kazymierchyk, *Anamnesia: Unforgetting*, 25.

31 Kazymierchyk, 27.

downstairs. I simply asked people at the centre to bring up five or ten boxes each.”<sup>32</sup> Box by box, the contents of the archives were moved; photo by photo, they became digitized. The story of this labour has become part of the history of the space, passed down through archivists who work there and retold to visiting researchers. These are the day-by-day information practices that make up much of archival work, but in the context of spaces like the CDMLA, the LHA, and the SAADA, these small tasks are entangled with the affective traces of political memory, activist struggles, and the feeling of belonging.

What does it mean to consider gossip an information practice? A practice can be thought of as a series of small actions, which, through repetition and a continued engagement, create a “way” that a thing is commonly done. Practice theory emerged as a strain of cultural theory that creates a bridge between purely structural and purely individualistic modes of social production to examine the smallest social practices that spill out and form our social worlds.<sup>33</sup> Shaped by the social structures around us but actively chosen by the individual, a practice is the small space where larger collective changes are made possible.

Because of its history as a feminized information system, and its routine dismissal, gossip can operate in uncharted waters. In her examination of the corrosive aspects of gossip, Karen Adkins outlines two key aspects of destructive gossip: when it becomes decontextualized and when it is moving through insular spaces where there is no intimacy or trust among the gossipers.<sup>34</sup> The stories that emerge are more likely to be disconnected from the larger context in which they occurred. When the story being transmitted by gossip narrows to focus on individual behaviour, and becomes divorced from the larger social structures and dynamics that we all move through, it is more likely to be laced with affects of shame and punishment. When this happens in close-knit communities, there are fewer opportunities for the kind of synthesis of disparate stories that gossip provides in larger, more flexible networks.<sup>35</sup> There is also a higher risk of weaponized gossip – where someone targets an individual by spreading stories meant to undermine their reputation or position of power. In these instances, I see an

32 Kazymerchyk, 247.

33 Andreas Reckwitz, “Toward a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Theorizing,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 5 no. 2 (2002): 250.

34 Adkins, *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power*, 208.

35 Adkins, 204.

opportunity to think critically about the ways shame and punishment frequently co-construct innocence as its opposite.

Following this thread, I revisited Jackie Wang's essay "Against Innocence." Wang looks at experiences of racial and gendered violence and deftly argues that in times of interpersonal conflict, a play toward innocence by one individual can work to deflect the complexity of "the multiple power struggles that play in different conflicts" and instead recreates carceral logics of the deserving innocent and the disposable criminal.<sup>36</sup> The questions Wang brings up are explicitly abolitionist and are closely aligned with an ethics of transformative justice, a political orientation that shapes and guides my scholarly work. Transformative justice as a distinct project emerged in the '90s from the work of women of colour, queer and trans people, and others who needed to create systems outside of the police system to keep each other safe, who built on generational lineages of abolitionist work against the state.<sup>37</sup> It is an expansive collection of practices, which are motivated by questions such as: How can we respond to harm directly and compassionately without reproducing carceral logics of exile and punishment? How can communities be resourced to work through conflict and support all members without turning to the police or social workers? What supports do people on both sides of harm and conflict need to heal and move forward? Some of the core principles of this work necessitate becoming comfortable with uncertainty and with seeing the deep shades of grey embedded within people's stories. Two of gossip's strengths – (1) its ability to synthesize information and move it between the realm of structural forces and the individual and (2) its role as part of strong relational networks – are especially useful within the context of this ethical orientation. Thinking of gossip as an information practice provides a framework for how it can be an active tool that we can use in sharing and thinking through information in our daily lives and embedded communities – a tool that

36 Jackie Wang, "Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety," in *Carceral Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Semiotext(e), 2018), 283.

37 For a more thorough history of this work, see Ejeris Dixon and Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarashinha, eds., *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2020); Creative Interventions, ed., *Creative Interventions Toolkit: A Practical Guide to Stop Interpersonal Violence* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2021); Mariame Kaba, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021); Judith Levine and Erica R. Meiners, *The Feminist and the Sex Offender: Confronting Sexual Harm, Ending State Violence* (New York: Verso Books, 2020).

has more nuance than an innocent/guilty binary.<sup>38</sup> The possibility of negative or harmful gossip as outlined by Adkins remains, but treating gossip as a reasonable communication tool instead of a taboo activity, and actively working against essentialization, ameliorates the risks of negative impacts in these situations. If daily practices shape the world around us, looking thoughtfully at our personal information practices is one way to reflect on how our human selves are showing up in the world. Small shifts in daily practices can push us toward new worlds.

## Gossip at Work

One area where a practice of gossip is a lively and useful friend is in the workplace. Part of the work of bringing the human into the archives must involve looking at archives as sites of labour and at what it means to treat one another with care as colleagues. In her essay “On the Disparity Between What We Say and What We Do in Libraries,” Baharak Yousefi proposes gossip as a tactic to help ourselves and our co-workers as we move through and against institutional norms.<sup>39</sup> Libraries in North America, like archives, are exceptionally white professional spaces.<sup>40</sup> Yousefi encourages gossip as a strategy that can be used, especially by racialized information workers, to double-check their professional experiences against one another’s. This informal conversation enables us to support one another to “reduce the epistemic doubt” that creeps in after a meeting or an interview, where we leave not quite being sure whether we heard what we thought we heard.<sup>41</sup> By freely discussing our experiences, instead of “going our separate ways quietly and ‘professionally,’” we can check our experiences against those of others, connect patterns, and start to see how power is moving through the spaces we operate in.<sup>42</sup>

38 Adkins, *Gossip, Epistemology, and Power*, 242.

39 Baharak Yousefi, “On the Disparity Between What We Say and What We Do in Libraries,” *Feminists Among Us: Resistance and Advocacy in Library Leadership*, ed. Shirley Lew and Baharak Yousefi (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2017.)

40 American Library Association, “Librarian Ethnicity,” ALA, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.ala.org/tools/librarian-ethnicity>; Data USA, “Archivists, Curators, & Museum Technicians,” Data USA, accessed January 3, 2022, <https://datausa.io/profile/soc/archivists-curators-museum-technicians>.

41 Yousefi, “On the Disparity Between What We Say,” 98.

42 Yousefi, 99.

The deep need for more conversations with one another as archivists was highlighted in a roundtable at the Association of Canadian Archivists conference in 2020.<sup>43</sup> The members of that panel, all mid-career professional archivists, discussed the high rates of professional isolation, job precarity, and lack of structural support for the emotional aspects of their work. Several pointed out that the impact of the stories and feelings embedded in records is not often discussed in archival education, leaving students and early career archivists unprepared for the emotional weight of the work. This affective weight operates in multiple directions: it can impact researchers and community members as they access records and impact archivists as they both process records and provide access to them. Genevieve Weber, a participant on the panel, pointed out that the framing of archives as a science leads to stigma around discussing the emotional impact of the work.<sup>44</sup> In this fraught working environment, gossip, as laid out by Yousefi, can be a productive space to network, share experiences, and push against isolation. This is especially key for archivists at smaller organizations, who may be among a handful or even the only staff members in charge of entire operations. In Vancouver, a group of archivists connected to various artist-run centres and art spaces came together between 2018 and 2021 to organize *Recollective: Vancouver Independent Archives Week*.<sup>45</sup> This was a yearly series of events highlighting collections from their archives and professional concerns. Through the process of organizing and attending these events, I have had the chance to connect with other archivists in similar positions and chat about the challenges and concerns of working simultaneously as archivists and art workers, two fields with their own labour challenges. While this part of my work can perhaps be called “networking,” I have found that the most generative conversations I have with peers resemble good gossip sessions: stories are told, feelings are worked through, and affinity between us is built. This connection with peers outside the individual workplace is an important way to support one another and to learn how to navigate the affective weight of archival labour together.

43 Jennifer Douglas, Elizabeth Bassett, and Noah Duranseau, “‘A Change in the Narrative’: Talking with Archivists about the Emotional Dimensions of Archival Work,” *Hard Feelings* (blog), September 4, 2020, <https://blogs.ubc.ca/hardfeelings/2020/09/04/a-change-in-the-narrative>.

44 Douglas, Bassett, and Duranseau, “‘A Change in the Narrative.’”

45 *Recollective: Vancouver Independent Archives Week* (website), accessed December 10, 2021, <https://archivesweek.ca/>.

When left unexamined, the mundane maintenance work<sup>46</sup> of daily information practices can become essentialized and invisible. But through the frame of affective information practice, these communication skill, which are developed through daily work, become just that – skills, actions that each individual is responsible to practise in order to improve.<sup>47</sup> Gossip is one tactic, one space, to practice listening to one another. Often, gossip is framed as unethical or corrosive because it does not rely on “proof”; but what exactly does proof look like when we are talking about our stories? What does proof look like when we are sharing how insidiously misogyny and white supremacy shape interactions? Gossip can be a way of discussing around and under and past systems that want us silent. So much of gossip rests on affects – hunches, uncomfortable feelings, passing exchanges that feel “off,” conversations that require boundary-setting, and labour we are uninterested in repeating. If we respect emotional labour, then we could consider that gossip exists as a record of these emotional processes. Gossip operates on this scale as a piece of inter-relational work. It helps us practice navigating the lingering feelings of our work while pushing around and under and past the systems we are working within, which might prefer silence.

## Gossip in the Archive

As the CDMLA has grown through the years, so have the methods and interventions regarding how it is organized and described. Newer fonds have been arranged and described using the more common standards, *Rules for Archival Description* (RAD) and Dublin Core, while older collections are organized according to their own internal logic, with an eye toward the needs of the organization as an active arts space. An entire wall of the physical archives is dedicated to the Time and Space collection, in which magazines, newsletters, and artist’s books sit in magazine folders, arranged first by year of publication and then by ever-tightening geographic categories of publication (international gives way

46 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “Manifesto! Maintenance Art – Proposal for an Exhibition,” Queens Museum, 1969, <https://queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukeles-Manifesto-for-Maintenance-Art-1969.pdf>.

47 Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, “A Modest Proposal for a Fair Trade Emotional Labour Economy,” *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 143.



to Canadian, then British Columbian). The records that constitute the institutional fonds have been arranged, pulled apart, and rearranged at least twice. Browsing through the subject tags on the Video Out collection of videos, one can trace certain historical shifts: “Lesbianism [sic]” and “Gay Men” bring forth a plethora of options from the 1970s and ’80s, then start to give way to “LGBT” and “queer” in the mid-1990s. “Domestic Violence” and “Domestic Abuse” both exist as options – and it is unclear whether this documents a political shift or the preferences of individual cataloguers. A side effect of this cacophony of organizational standards is that the more time one spends within the CDMLA, the more its rhythms and shifting histories emerge.

One recent archival intervention is the finding aid *Every Queer Thing*, a guide to queer material in the space created by archivist-in-residence Sophie Roberge.<sup>48</sup> In this project, Roberge went through the Archives and charted out the legacies of queer and trans history and art production. As part of this process, Roberge enhanced the existing metadata of videos with queer and trans themes. This process involved watching each tape and enhancing the metadata with the names of the producers and actors involved; she also noted any names that appeared in the credits in extra acknowledgements or thank-yous. It is in this detail that I find a rich example of how gossip, metadata, and care can intertwine. The relationships between those thanked in the end credits and the finished work are most often unclear and underdefined from the sources themselves. It is not information that would be guaranteed inclusion under *RAD*. In this archival intervention, Roberge is paying attention to the ephemeral – to the gossipy affect of gratitude, to the traces left behind by the communities who moved through the CDMLA – and is making sure these names are recognized and noted within the official archival record. When I sift through the enhanced records housed within the *Every Queer Thing* project, names pop up again and again, helping me to reconstruct the queer art networks that led to the creation of the works at hand.

48 VIVO Media Arts Centre, “*Every Queer Thing: A Guide to Archival Materials on Queer Identity & Experiences*,” VIVO, accessed December 10, 2021, <http://archive.vivomediaarts.com/every-queer-thing/>.

A similar kind of networking happens when tracing the staff and cultural workers at the organization. Like many art scenes<sup>49</sup> (of any era, but perhaps more so in the 1970s and '80s), the scene itself was dominated by the art practices of individual men, with women often taking on roles as cultural workers or collaborating on works as collectives without singular authorship assigned.<sup>50</sup> In my own time at the CDMLA, I have learned to pick up on the nudges from these networks of quieter labourers. Someone who curated a show in 2004 pops up as a former staff member in meeting minutes from the 1990s. A book of short stories by Helen Potrebenko turns out to have made its way into the Archives because she was VIVO's bookkeeper all through the '80s. There are also the overt traces of gossip that Cifor, Holmes, and Horn have argued for – the tidbits of drama found buried in the professional records of fonds and the stories that can be traced through terse, official correspondence and unofficial organizational changes. Like many archives, the CDMLA has a backlog of collections waiting to be processed. Traces of arguments and schisms, which exist in the meeting minutes in the organizational fonds, can complicate the shape of some collections and give the processing archivist a heads-up regarding the kind of care that will need to be navigated when arranging them. When I reach the moment in the processing workflow where I am ready to write scope notes, the writing process feels a bit like collecting all the gossip I have heard from the boxes and wrangling it into a story others can access. A piece of my work is translating the archival holdings for researchers, artists, and the rest of the VIVO staff when they are conducting research. To do this work well, I need to know the rough stories behind all the collections in the space. Gossip is a useful tool in this aspect of the work, too; it is a way to categorize the glimpses of stories I have come across and to connect them with interested researchers. Through these various activities – metadata creation, processing, arranging, writing scope notes, visiting with researchers – gossip provides both a way to pick up and pass on moments to others and a frame for creating records that more fulsomely embed affect and relationships within them.

49 Cifor, "Acting Up, Talking Back"; Horn, "Of Gaps and Gossip"; Holmes, "What's the Tea?"

50 Abbot, *Making Video* "In."

## Gossip as Care

If you scan the stories one way, gossip risks being read as synonymous with trauma, most concerned with traumatic ripples and silences. And an overlap exists; learning to talk through hard feelings creates space to acknowledge the impact of hard stories within archives and hard experiences we may hold.<sup>51</sup> In thinking through these implications, I return to Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*.<sup>52</sup> In her study on the intersections of trauma, affect, and lesbian public cultures, Cvetkovich argues for depathologizing the affective traces left behind by trauma. She argues for an understanding of "traumatic feelings not as a medical problem in search of a cure but as felt experience that can be mobilized in a range of directions, including the constructions of cultures and publics."<sup>53</sup> Applying the narrow medical definition of trauma to stories can inadvertently flatten lives and obscure the larger political mechanisms at play, stripping away agency, joy, and resistance.<sup>54</sup>

Intertwined with this impulse is the question of silence. When looking at archival silences, seeing only violence and lack can reinscribe violence and lack.<sup>55</sup> As noted by Indigenous and Black scholars, sometimes the silence is a reasoned choice.<sup>56</sup> Saidiya Hartman, thinking through the absence of visual representations of young Black women at the turn of the 20th century in New York, writes that, given the unequal hand dealt by white record-makers, "they refused the terms of visibility imposed on them. They eluded the frame and remained fugitives."<sup>57</sup> A

51 Kirsten Wright and Nicola Laurent, "Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 91 (Spring/Summer 2021): 38–73.

52 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

53 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 47.

54 Vikki Reynolds, "Trauma and Resistance: 'Hang Time' and Other Innovative Responses to Oppression, Violence and Suffering," *Journal of Family Therapy* 42, no. 3 (2020).

55 Rodney G.S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* 61 (Spring 2006).

56 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019); Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "R-Words: Refusing Research," in *Humanizing Research: Decolonizing Qualitative Inquiry with Youth and Communities*, ed. Django Paris and Maisha T. Winn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014).

57 Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 47.

presumed absence of young women from the archives is reinscribed as a refusal to be captured on anything but their own terms. In “R-Words: Refusing Research,” Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue that “a refusal to do research, or a refusal within research” can be “a way of thinking about humanizing researchers.”<sup>58</sup> By rejecting research proposals that do not serve community or that contain stories not meant to be shared, refusal creates a generative space not for damage-focused projects but for desire-focused projects.<sup>59</sup> This may lead to “gaps,” but gaps that are chosen with agency and against colonial logics of extraction. Maandeeq Mohamed looks into the records of Black experience in Canadian archives and thinks through methods of making sense of the absences in these archives, which have affects other than negative ones.<sup>60</sup> As Vancouver-based researcher Tara Robertson points out, feminist ethics and Indigenous knowledge systems both teach again and again that “not all information wants to be free.”<sup>61</sup>

As of the writing of this article, the CDMLA is undergoing a large-scale data migration of its disparate archival records into one centralized, publicly available online database. The issues I have raised in this article are informing choices I and my collaborators at the CDMLA are making around how we build and manage our new system. We are thinking about questions of naming practices and privacy – how to treat the records of artists whose names have changed with flexibility and care. Questions of how to surface the works of artists of colour, without minimizing the overwhelming whiteness of the collection, are front of mind. We are working on protocols to allow artists the autonomy to indicate their personal identities and affiliations within their biographies and to provide their own keyword tags for videos. We are looking at options for linking authority records of individuals to art works and events, and we are taking a maximalist approach to try to capture a rich data set of relationships. Older, out-of-date, and in some cases deeply inappropriate and harmful subject tags on videos are being updated; the previous tags are being recorded with very specific privacy controls so that they are available to the Archives’ staff and researchers but are

58 Tuck and Yang, “R-Words,” 223.

59 Tuck and Yang, 242.

60 Maandeeq Mohamed, “Somehow I Found You: On Black Archival Practices,” *C Magazine*, no. 137 (Spring 2018), <https://cmagazine.com/issues/137/somehow-i-found-you-on-black-archival-practices>.

61 Tara Robertson, “Not All Information Wants to Be Free” (keynote address at LITA Forum, Fort Worth, TX, November 17–20, 2016), <https://tararobertson.ca/2016/lita-keynote/>.

no longer in the public-facing record. We are looking at what objects we may not have permissions for – either because their provenance is unclear or because they capture sensitive stories from communities without clear permission – and making plans, on a case-by-case basis, for how to treat each one.

Some of this work is truly corrective, focused on making changes in response to previous harms and attempting to move forward with more responsible relationality. And some of this work results from learning to listen more closely to the records – from learning to think about relationships, labour, affect, and information in new ways. In taking on this work, I hope that the record we leave behind in the CDMLA is expanding, becoming more cognizant of the histories that shaped it and more legible for people who see themselves within it. When we are learning to work with affects and silences in archives, there is a risk of those spaces being essentialized and misread. At its most generative, gossip gives us a method for entering the space where connections can be drawn between political realities, public cultures, and private stories. It helps us to weigh stories, examine them against structures of power, and synthesize what is left. It gives us space to practise sitting with ambiguity and to move away from modes of shame and punishment. Learning to gossip well necessitates talking to one another and taking the affects of records seriously. It requires committed relationship building, strong networks, and generosity. It gives space for archival workers and researchers alike to see the nuances and humanity within the archives and within ourselves. Gossip as relational accountability, gossip as practice, gossip as care.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the Archival Education and Research Institute in 2017. My thanks to Karen Knights, Sophie Roberge, s.r., and everyone else I have worked alongside at the CDMLA. Deepest gratitude and love to CM, MC, TK, and CF for hours and hours of conversation while I teased out these ideas. I am a sharper and more thoughtful writer for knowing all of you.

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