

Archiving Blackness: Reimagining and Recreating the Archive(s) as Literary and Information Wake Work

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Cover Page Footnote

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ARCHIVING BLACKNESS: REIMAGINING AND RECREATING THE ARCHIVE(S) AS LITERARY AND INFORMATION WAKE WORK

In her groundbreaking book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Christina Sharpe introduces the concept of “wake” to describe Blackness and Black life in the aftermath of slavery and perpetual anti-Black racism. The word “wake,” as Sharpe understands it, has many meanings including “the keeping watch with the dead, the path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight, awakening, and consciousness.”¹ These conceptualizations of wake are all directly applicable to Sharpe’s interrogation of Blackness. Indeed, by living in the wake, Black people keep watch over those who do not survive it—*it* being the wake itself. In this article, I interpret wake to mean that we live within the paths of slave ships that have traversed the Middle Passage, we exist in this way as a consequence of the transatlantic slave trade, and we remain in the line of sight, always and ever connected to these devastating and life-altering circumstances, many of us awake and conscious of our state of being.

With consciousness comes the work of living and existing in the wake and “insisting Black being in the wake.” Sharpe offers a definition of wake work as a theory and praxis of the wake, or of Black being in diaspora, and as an analytic that we might use to “continue to imagine new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property. In short, I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives. With that analytic we might imagine otherwise from what we know *now* in the wake of slavery.”²

This idea of imagining otherwise is key to understanding wake work, for it is in the imagining that we are able to *do* wake work. Sharpe would tell us that by imagining Blackness, thereby “imagining responses to terror in the varied and various ways that our Black lives are lived under occupation,” we are then able to attest to the various modes of Black life that exist despite the fact of Black death.³ Terrion Williamson would agree with Sharpe. In their book *Scandalize My Name*, Williamson describes Black social life as “fundamentally, the register of black experience that is not reducible to the terror that calls it into existence but is the rich remainder, the multifaceted artifact of black communal resistance and resilience that is expressed in black idioms, cultural forms, traditions, and ways of being.”⁴ It is that rich remainder that Michelle Wright speaks to in her discussion of Blackness in *Physics of Blackness*, where she explains that the best way to locate and define it is through the understanding “that Blackness operates as a construct (implicitly or explicitly defined as a shared set of physical and behavioral characteristics) and as a phenomenological (imagined through individual perceptions in various ways depending on the context).”⁵ Wright’s point echoes similar sentiments from Sharpe about what it means to imagine Blackness

¹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 17–18.

² Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 11, 18.

³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 20.

⁴ Terrion Williamson, *Scandalize My Name: Black Feminist Practice and the Making of Black Social Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 9.

⁵ Michelle Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 4.

and solidifies the idea that the act of *imagining* is germane to Blackness, wake work, and the speculative.

Much of wake work takes place at the site of slavery and its afterlives according to Sharpe, for this is where those who do the work “encounter myriad silences and ruptures in time, space, history, ethics, research, and method.”⁶ The nature of these silences was explained by Michel-Rolph Trouillot:

The presences and absences embodied in sources (artifacts and bodies that turn an event into fact) or archives (facts collected, thematized, and processed as documents and monuments) are neither neutral or natural. They are created. As such, they are not mere presences and absences, but mentions or silences of various kinds and degrees. By silence, I mean an active and transitive process: one “silences” a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun.⁷

Silences occur repeatedly in the archives in the form of absences, erasures, and violences, leaving barely a trace, if any, of Black life while leaving a disproportionate amount of evidence of Black death. Unfortunately, the violence of archives can have a long-lasting and exacting impact, a circumstance that Saidiya Hartman describes in her illuminating essay “Venus in Two Acts”: “The archive of slavery rests upon a founding violence. This violence determines, regulates and organizes the kinds of statements that can be made about slavery and as well it creates subjects and objects of power. The archive yields no exhaustive account of the girl’s life, but catalogues the statements that licensed her death.”⁸

When the archives do tell a story of Black life, it is often incomplete or one of partial truths, leaving Black scholars little with which to “produce legible work in the academy” that does not disregard and devalue Black people.⁹ And as noted by Hartman, “history pledges to be faithful to the limits of fact, evidence, and archive, even as those dead certainties are produced by terror.” But it is Hartman’s concept of “critical fabulation” that allows us to exceed “the constitutive limits of the archive” and disrupt the idea of evidence by imagining “what might have happened to might have been said or might have been done.”¹⁰ As a result, both literary and information wake work, as formulated in this essay, are essential in the mitigation of archives that would have us think there is no Black life, only Black death, and in “collecting the archives of the everyday of Black immanent and imminent death [so that we might track] the ways we resist, rupture, and disrupt that immanence and imminence aesthetically and materially.”¹¹

Literary wake work allows us to imagine and reimagine new possibilities and outcomes that have been otherwise denied and negated by the archives, while information wake work gives us the ability to create and recreate archives that have been absent or incomplete. In fact, Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell contend that “impossible archival imaginaries” and the “imagined records”

⁶ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 12.

⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 48.

⁸ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 10.

⁹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13.

¹⁰ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 9, 11.

¹¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 13.

they produce “offer important affective counterbalances and sometimes resistance to dominant legal, bureaucratic, historical and forensic notions of evidence that so often fall short in explaining the capacity of records and archives to motivate, inspire, anger and traumatize.”¹² Hartman tells us why it is imperative to do wake work, and perhaps in answer to how to manage the potential for motivation, inspiration, anger, and trauma that Gilliland and Caswell refer to, states that “the necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future.”¹³ Wake work, then, leads us to liberation or to “spaces of something like freedom.” Literature is a possible site from which liberation can be obtained, which Sharpe points to as an example of wake work whose purpose is not to resolve the issue of exclusion from the archives “but rather [to] depict aesthetically the impossibility of such resolutions by representing the paradoxes of blackness within.”¹⁴ Essentially, literature is more concerned with presenting the possibilities of Blackness than becoming mired in the limitations that attempt to restrict Blackness. In the next part of this essay, we move to a review of the literature to better understand the archive as a component of literary wake work.

Imagining the Archive as Literary Wake Work

We know now that literature can be used in wake work as a way of representing Black being and as a means of liberation or of creating something like freedom. In fact, Sharpe demonstrates in her book the process of using literature for the purpose of reconstituting the archives, thereby giving voice to Black life where there was none before. Katherine McKittrick reifies this demonstration, suggesting there is a mathematics to the anti-Black violences that exist within the archives and that it is the task of the writer to “write blackness by ethically honoring but not repeating anti-black violences . . . through reading the mathematics of these violences as possibilities that are iterations of black life that cannot be contained by black death.”¹⁵ I am interested in illuminating how Black literature addresses and incorporates the idea of archives in its narratives, what statements Black authors are making about archives, and how these narratives demonstrate literary wake work. To be clear, literary wake work takes place in various forms of Black literature, both fiction and non-fiction. One can turn to the exceptional works of authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, bell hooks, or Cornel West, to name a very few, for evidence of that. But it is speculative writing, and the *futurist* literary wake work it performs, which allows for a greater freedom and a more liberated future, figuratively, that is often unparalleled by other genres. According to André Carrington in his book *Speculative Blackness*, by centering Blackness in discussions of speculative fiction, ideas of Blackness have been refracted “through the meaning-making conventions of [speculative fiction].”¹⁶ In other words, mediations on Blackness via the speculative lens change our understanding not only of the genre but of Blackness itself. Literary wake work is conducted by authors in the construction of narratives that define Blackness while insisting Black being into the future, and in the case of some speculative writers, use the archive and archives as a means for

¹² Anne J. Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 55–56.

¹³ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 13.

¹⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 130, 14.

¹⁵ Katherine McKittrick, “Mathematics Black Life,” *Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 20.

¹⁶ André Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 2.

acknowledging Black life and liberating Black bodies in the wake of slavery. Additionally, there is double duty with both the authors and some of the characters themselves who are conducting wake work *within* the narratives as stewards and/or keepers of the archive. Here, I examine three such literary examples, all of which are Afrofuturist texts that are representative of speculative literature, written by Black authors, and featuring Black protagonists.

An Unkindness of Ghosts.

This novel by Rivers Solomon is the story of Aster, a woman and healer who lives in the slums of HSS *Matilda*, a spaceship organized much like the antebellum South that has hurtled through space for hundreds of years and where its Black residents suffer violations and indignities every day. Aster has grown up without her mother, Lune, who died when she was still a baby, but when she discovers hidden information in her mother's journals, she also finds a way to end the oppression of the *Matilda*. One of the key aspects in the novel is the personal archives Aster's mother left behind—the many journals, notes, and sketches that represent the remnants of Lune's life. These archives detail life on HSS *Matilda*, particularly from the perspective of a Black woman living in the slums of the ship, and ultimately are the crucial component that leads Aster to liberation. Early in the narrative, Solomon imparts to us the importance of archives: “I like to have a written record of all that I do,” said Aster. *Documenting*, her Aint Melusine called it. *Recordkeeping. Memorating.*” And: “Finding this photograph less interesting than the one on the Great Lifehouse, Aster had glanced at it no more than a second before returning to play with the soap bubbles in the tub. *Not everything that's important looks important, child*, said Ainy, smacking Aster once more. *You got to document.*”¹⁷

In this life lesson passed down to Aster, her aunt makes sure she understands the wake work of archiving, even as a child. This lesson likely prepares her for what she will later learn from her mother's personal archives, although it does take some time for Aster to fully understand the importance of documenting. Further into the story, the author utilizes the archives as a means for communicating, mother to daughter, and to give being to Lune who is only present via her archives. This is demonstrated in two instances: “All this time, Lune had been talking to Aster, trying to tell her something important. She kept notes obsessively as Aster did. They were a record of who she was and what she'd done.” And: “Aster had ignored her mother's attempts at communication for so long, and here it was, another chance.”¹⁸

Not only are the archives a conduit for communication but their underlying value lies in how they are used for the purpose of bringing Lune into being, Black being, and as an intervention against the erasures and silences we can be sure are taking place in other spaces on the ship. Perhaps Solomon's view of this wake work is summed up best in these thoughts from Aster: “History wanted to be remembered. Evidence hated having to live in dark, hidden places and devoted itself to resurfacing. Truth was messy.”¹⁹ But Solomon's words are in opposition to Hartman's own statement mentioned previously, begging the question, Just who or what exactly does history and evidence serve?

¹⁷ Rivers Solomon, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (Brooklyn: Akashic Books, 2017), 32, 70.

¹⁸ Solomon, *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, 58, 59.

¹⁹ Solomon, *An Unkindness of Ghosts*, 59.

“Evidence.”

In this short piece by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, an ancestor, Alexis, leaves pieces that were written to her future self, which are later found and read by Alandrix, a Black girl and descendant living five generations into the future. The story features six separate writings (five of which are called exhibits), in the form of letters, poems, and notes that become the evidence of Alexis’s existence and an archive of Black being. The narrative begins with a letter from the elders who talk about legacy as evidence, the act of remembering, and the affirmation that comes from evidence and remembering. Gumbs sets the tone for the kind of wake work she is conducting in “Evidence,” and it soon becomes clear the purpose this archive of exhibits will serve, as stated by the elders: “May the public record show and celebrate that Alandrix consciously exists in an ancestral context. May this living textual copy of her digital compilations and all its future amendments be a resource for Alandrix, her mentors, her loved ones and partners, her descendants, and her detractors to use in the ongoing process of supporting her intentions.”²⁰

The elders acknowledge that this archive is meant to give testament to those who have come before Alandrix while also leaving a record for those who will come after her. One can assume that the wake work in this piece is not only in ensuring that erasures do not occur in this particular archival and historical record but also in imagining the possibilities of Black existence in an unknown future. In fact, it is this latter aspect of the work that has applicability to most speculative works written by Black authors. In exhibit B, Alandrix refers to the time of “silence-breaking”:

It is hard to imagine what it felt like for people to walk around with all of that hurt from harming and being harmed. But I can tell from the writing that people were afraid so much. History was so close. But the amazing thing is how people spoke and wrote and danced anyway. Imagine being afraid to speak. . . . People took those writings and started to recite them and then another generation hummed their melodies and then another generation clicked their rhythms and then another generation just walked them with their feet and now we just breathe it.²¹

This passage relays the power in archiving, in documenting, as Aint Melusine would say, and insisting Black being into the wake. Gumbs does this expertly, thereby breaking the silences that would exist in the archives were it not for this intervention of wake work.

Beyond that, the title of this piece belies the concept of Black bodies as records and as evidence, an idea explored by Tonia Sutherland who, in her research, “grapple[s] with the problem of the dead ‘black body’ as an embodied record and as a symbol of black fear and white supremacy,” and points to another use of evidence as being in service of justice and possessing the ability to right the wrongs of violences committed against the Black body.²² The evidence Alandrix has gathered is in part a result of an accumulation of “dead black bodies,” as Sutherland calls it, the bodies of evidence that are recorded in the archive and that represent those who came before her.

²⁰ Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “Evidence,” in *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown (Chico, Calif.: AK Press, 2015), 23.

²¹ Gumbs, “Evidence,” 24.

²² Tonia Sutherland, “Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 33, 20.

This concept of evidence is not new as it relates to archives, as Sue McKemmish in her seminal work “Evidence of Me” discusses the evidence of the act of personal recordkeeping as a narrative of self that helps one develop a sense of identity and place in the world. Akin to memorializing one’s own life, McKemmish asserts that this evidencing manifests in the form of archival documents such as journals and letters that capture being, or in Alandrix’s case, Black being.²³ But if we disrupt the authority of evidence as Hartman would have us do, it is quite possible that what Gilliland and Caswell describe as a new, impossible, and imagined archive could emerge that would allow Alandrix to tell her own story in her own voice.²⁴

The Fifth Season.

In this literary work, author N. K. Jemisin tells a story situated in a land on Earth called The Stillness where it seems that the end of the world has come, and a woman sets out on a journey to find her daughter before it is too late. Told from the perspective of three different people, it is later revealed that the three characters are all the same woman at various stages of her life. We, the readers, are witnessing the past and the present, as well as history in the making. One of Jemisin’s primary interventions of wake work in this novel is the idea of the lorists as keepers of history and archives and what can happen when gatekeepers such as the lorists practice what Trouillot tells us is the active process of silencing people. The lorists are akin to griots, keeping an oral archive of past events, and are perceived by most citizens as those charged with the vital responsibility of remembering what has happened before, although it is evident that there are many gaps in their knowledge. Still, much faith and trust are misplaced in the lorists of The Stillness. Jemisin describes them as such: “Everyone grows up on campfire tales of wise lorists and clever geomests warning skeptics when the signs begin to show, not being heeded, and saving people when the lore proves true.” And those who may not believe in lorists or the lore are forewarned: “The lorists tell stories of what happens when people—political leaders or philosophers or well-meaning meddlers of whatever type—try to change the lore. Disaster inevitably results.”²⁵

Lorists use the archives to tell lies and lord power over the orogenes, a subjugated people who are at the mercy of a caste system that makes them akin to enslaved people. One such lie is described as “lorists’ tales about orogenes—that they are a weapon not of the Fulcrum, but of the hateful, waiting planet beneath their feet.”²⁶ This particular untruth is one that incites a deep fear and hate of orogenes throughout The Stillness. Because of the circumstances that orogenes endure, it requires very little for one to leap to the conclusion that in this tale, readers are expected to equate orogeny with Blackness. *The Fifth Season* is told from the perspective of the protagonist and powerful orogene, Syenite, with whom the wake work takes place—within her narrative. Jemisin, then, via Syenite’s narration, is able to create a story of Black life that runs directly counter to the anti-Black narrative of the lorists, allowing us to imagine a Blackness that is resistant and resilient in the face of half-truths and silences.

Understanding the Archive(s) in Context

²³ Sue McKemmish, “Evidence of Me,” *Australian Library Journal* 45, no. 3 (August 1996): 174–87.

²⁴ Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries,” 69.

²⁵ N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* (London: Orbit, 2015), 21, 125.

²⁶ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 146.

As I delve deeper into archive(s), it is important to understand counternarrative and its intervention in both literary and information wake work. Counternarratives, or counter-stories as they are sometimes referred to, are an important aspect in the aforementioned literary examples to understand the work of authors who are writing Black being into existence and, more specifically, into the archive. Similarly, the counternarrative is essential to the archivist whose work is to fill the gaps and silences within the archival record that fails to acknowledge Black life. This essay takes a closer look at counternarrative and its theoretical roots, then shifts into the historical context that frames this discussion of Black archives, followed by a brief exploration of community archives, archival activism, and the purposes they serve.

Counternarrative in context.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that emerged from legal scholarship and critical legal studies, formulated by scholars including Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic, and Kimberlé Crenshaw.²⁷ In addition to the field of law, it is now often used by cross-disciplinary scholars to challenge the white normative power structure that upholds society and to critique institutional racism in its various forms. There are several basic tenets of CRT, one of which is the “voice of color” and is essentially the idea that a person of color is uniquely qualified to communicate issues of race and racism as a result of lived experiences in ways that white people cannot.²⁸ This tenet has led to the “legal storytelling” movement, “which argues that the self-expressed views of victims of racism and other forms of oppression provide essential insight into the nature of the legal system.”²⁹ It is this legal storytelling element of CRT, or what Anthony W. Dunbar refers to as a “technique of evidential rectifying” in his article on CRT and archival discourse, that directly informs the use of counternarratives toward the purpose of diversifying the archives. Delgado gives several reasons for why marginalized groups might use counternarratives such as “challenging the status quo” or “opening new windows into reality,” but Dunbar articulates two ways that are notable because of their potential application to archives, one being to “supplement or compliment a dominant culture narrative” and the other to develop a competing or conflicting story.³⁰ While the former might be perceived as collaborative or agreeable, the latter is completely adversarial and in direct conflict with the dominant narrative.

In considering the literary wake work that is done with counternarrative, many examples in literature provide conflicting stories, and in thinking of the information wake work archivists do with counternarrative, we can characterize these archival interventions by either of these aforementioned ways. But in regard to those archives such as community archives “that have non-governmental and more socio-historical missions,” Dunbar explains that there are two “critically laden approaches” for archives to engage counternarrative: “The first counterstory approach within the archives is the development of counternarratives that bring to the surface issues of racial disenfranchisement that are submerged based on a socio-historical archive’s mission which is likely to

²⁷ Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: New Press, 1995); Derrick A. Bell, *Race, Racism, and American Law* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973).

²⁸ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 7–10.

²⁹ “Critical Race Theory,” Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/critical-race-theory>.

³⁰ Anthony W. Dunbar, “Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started,” *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 114, 115.

have been heavily influenced by marginalizing dominant culture realities. The second counterstory approach is a socio-historically [*sic*] archive that exists within itself as a form of counterstory to a dominant narrative.”³¹ So it is with these approaches, and perhaps others not mentioned here, that archivists are using counternarratives to do information wake work toward diversifying the archival record, addressing silences and gaps, and creating contemporary methods while honoring historical methods for documenting Black voices.

Historical context.

Current initiatives in the archival profession have brought attention to the lack of diversity in archives, particularly the collections. But long before this current awareness toward diversifying the archival record, and before an active archiving agenda brought on by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, “there was an established history of documentation and presentation already existed in the African American community [which] dates back to before the Civil War, when early black intellectuals criticized omissions and derogatory characterizations in the master narrative.” This would signify some of the earliest documented beginnings of wake work in the archives. African American archives emerged because Black communities recognized the erasures that were taking place at the expense of their own histories, but there was also a desire to dispel the social myths and exaggerations that proliferated about Black people, and to gather “documented proof that historically racist depictions of African Americans were gross distortions.”³² This documentation is what Kellee E. Warren characterizes as speaking back, or resistance against traditional archives and the “official” narrative, thereby taking part in shaping one’s own identity.³³ Today, African American archivists continue to battle the exclusivity that exists in mainstream traditional archives, which are typically stewarded by universities, government entities, or private institutions, attempting to create a more equitable archival record by preserving and documenting Black being in the diaspora. According to Rabia Gibbs, “African American history and archives have endeavored to create a legitimate historical record and protest social prejudice,” but they also must bear the “responsibility [of being] aware of factors such as class and power within ethnic communities,” and they must question longstanding views of archives as sites of historical truth, when in actuality they are sites of contestation.³⁴ This, then, is where the wake work of Black archives and Black archivists takes place.

An emerging trend in archives is the move toward activism where people are responding to the urgent need to create counter-stories and -narratives through the creation of archives, because without documentation there is no voice, only silences, absences, and erasures. In the same way that Hartman’s intervention in “Venus in Two Acts” is meant to retrieve what was lost, archives are being created out of a fear of losing public discourse that gives voice to Black people and communities. We see this particularly in the social justice movements such as Documenting Ferguson, A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, and the Preserve the Baltimore Uprising archives, all of which seek to use social justice as the “apparatus of the archive” to map the

³¹ Dunbar, “Introducing Critical Race Theory,” 116.

³² Rabia Gibbs, “The Heart of the Matter,” *American Archivist* 75, no. 1 (Spring–Summer 2012): 197, 198.

³³ Kellee E. Warren, “We Need These Bodies but Not Their Knowledge: Black Women in the Archival Science Professions and Their Connection to the Archives of Enslaved Black Women in the French Antilles,” *Library Trends* 64, no. 4 (2016): 778.

³⁴ Gibbs, “The Heart of the Matter,” 200, 203.

everyday of Black lives.³⁵ The call to action by Angela J. Aguayo, Danette Pugh Patton, and Molly Bandonis gets to the heart of why social justice in the archives is imperative wake work: “This process helps document life from the perspective of the most vulnerable. Representation in the archive is essential and necessary but from whose perspective representation emerges must be a question on the table for understanding archiving as a practice for social change.”³⁶

Community archives such as these are doing the work that traditional archives are not doing, which is collecting, creating, and caring for local stories that speak to marginalized perspectives. As Andrew Flinn, leading scholar in the community archive movement, explains, “Community archives . . . seek to preserve and make accessible material that is usually not available elsewhere and either implicitly or, more occasionally, explicitly as in the case of the Black Cultural Archives, they also attempt to actively transform and intervene in otherwise partial and unbalanced histories.”³⁷ He further characterizes these archives as institutions that “help communities not only to remember and document their past but also to understand the present day and its connections to that past.”³⁸

Taking activism in the archives even further, there is a growing movement that believes archivists should become activists in the campaign for Black reparations. This call to action requires that “American archivists . . . recognize their complicity in systemic racism and in doing so, become activists for reparations.”³⁹ One of the ways in which this can be done is through a truth and reconciliation process that privileges evidence and memory. Here is where the work of archivists comes in, but is this really the work of Black archivists, even if they are engaged in wake work in the traditional archives? It is true that archives and archivists are complicit in the violences committed against Black people. Robinson-Sweet reiterates this fact, stating “that in both the archival discourse and in the realities of our repositories, there is a clear sense of an archival injustice committed against black Americans. Our complicity as archivists therefore requires our participation in this struggle.”⁴⁰ Black archivists may find themselves in a strange place as members of both a complicit profession and a race that has been wronged. And yet the wake work would remain the same, archiving Blackness and insisting Black being into the wake. In the case of Black community archivists who are sometimes not employed by traditional archives, there is possibly no such conflict to hinder an activist agenda (although it is worth noting that the examples of community archives projects provided in this article are supported in some way by traditional archives), and as demonstrated in the following case studies, “the urge to collect archives and to write histories is one felt by activists inspired by a political or cultural concern with documenting otherwise under-voiced or less visible communities and challenging the absences and biases in dominant historical narratives.”⁴¹ Black archivists are also having to contend with issues such as epistemic injustice, an idea first posited by Miranda Fricker and what Beth Patin and colleagues describe as

³⁵ Angela J. Aguayo, Danette Pugh Patton, and Molly Bandonis, “Black Lives and Justice with the Archive: A Call to Action,” *Black Camera* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 162.

³⁶ Aguayo, Patton, and Bandonis, “Black Lives and Justice,” 167.

³⁷ Andrew Flinn, “Independent Community Archives and Community-Generated Content,” *International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 16, no. 1 (2010): 40.

³⁸ Andrew Flinn, “Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (October 2007): 159.

³⁹ Anna Robinson-Sweet, “Truth and Reconciliation: Archivists as Reparations Activists,” *American Archivist* 81, no. 1 (2018): 23.

⁴⁰ Robinson-Sweet, “Truth and Reconciliation,” 32.

⁴¹ Flinn, “Independent Community Archives,” 41.

the “type of harm done that impedes recognizing a person’s capacity as someone who is able to know or have knowledge on their own,” and epistemicide, characterized as the “killing, silencing, annihilation, or devaluing of a way of knowing,” both of which ultimately lead “to our own ways of knowing being devalued or silenced, which can also lead to an annihilation.”⁴²

Creating Archives as Information Wake Work

While the first part of this essay takes an in-depth look at how literature, particularly speculative fiction, is used to conduct wake work, I now turn to the information profession to examine how the work of archivists in archiving Blackness is yet another form of wake work and a physical manifestation of the archives featured in literature. The information wake work that Black archivists perform is manifested in at least two ways: through the work that is done to integrate Blackness into traditional hegemonic archival institutions, and in the work characterized by counterstorytelling and counternarratives that takes place in Black archives created for and/or by Black people, which in some cases are stewarded by Black community members who are not always formally trained and have taken on the responsibility of creating community archives that privilege silenced Black voices. In both instances, the archives can become a battleground for inclusion in the historical record, and the very act of archiving itself becomes information wake work in the form of activism and racial justice. Within this vein, I look at the wake work that is emerging from three different community archives that are preserving and amplifying the voices of the people in the communities they serve.

Documenting Ferguson.

Documenting Ferguson is a digital repository created in August 2014 after the killing of Michael Brown by a Ferguson police officer was captured on video. The purpose of the project is to “preserve and make accessible community- and media-generated, original content that was captured and created following” Brown’s death.⁴³ A partnership between Washington University of St. Louis and St. Louis–area universities and community organizations, and stewarded by a team of library and archives professionals at Washington University, the repository is participant-driven. Members of the community are encouraged to contribute content pertaining to stories occurring in neighboring areas in and around Ferguson and St. Louis. Ferguson is a predominantly Black town and “carries historical weight as a representation of racism, police violence, and political unrest,” making it an ideal site for such an archive for documenting Black voices experiencing issues that are happening in cities across America.⁴⁴

⁴² Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Beth Patin et al., “Interrupting Epistemicide: A Practical Framework for Naming, Identifying, and Ending Epistemic Injustice in the Information Professions,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 72, no. 10 (2021): 1307; Beth Patin et al., “Toward Epistemic Justice: An Approach for Conceptualizing Epistemicide in the Information Professions,” *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 57, no. 1 (2020): 2; Tyler Youngman et al., “Epistemicide on the Record: Theorizing Commemorative Injustice and Reimagining Interdisciplinary Discourses in Cultural Information Studies,” *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 59, no. 1 (2022): 361.

⁴³ Documenting Ferguson, Washington University of St. Louis, 2015, <http://digital.wustl.edu/ferguson/index.html>.

⁴⁴ Joel R. Pruce, “Listening to Ferguson Voices, Finding the Courage to Resist,” *Reflections: A Journal of Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing and Service Learning* (2017–18): 59.

A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland.

A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland was created in answer to the increase in deaths across the country of Black people at the hands of police violence, specifically the deaths of Malissa Williams and Timothy Russell in 2012. A group of archivists led by Jarrett M. Drake, digital archivist at Princeton University, partnered with Puncture the Silence, the Cleveland chapter of the Stop Mass Incarceration Network, along with some volunteer community members, to conduct oral histories on the streets of Cleveland with people who had witnessed incidences of police violence and to create a website and digital archive of these oral histories along with videos of a Puncture the Silence tribunal. The Cleveland community members who collaborated on this project are now the "citizen archivists" of People's Archive and maintain the ongoing collection, which is open to all Cleveland community members. The archive was created as an online space for healing, accountability, and justice for as long as the national crisis of police violence persists.⁴⁵ It documents the "rude, aggressive, and violent treatment of local people of color at the hands of Cleveland law enforcers" while exposing the institutional racism Black people are subjected to daily and, according to Dixon, providing a platform that breaks the silence of police brutality.⁴⁶

Preserve the Baltimore Uprising.

Preserving the Baltimore Uprising is an archival project created in the aftermath of the arrest and subsequent death of Freddie Gray in April 2015. His death was attributed to injuries sustained from six Baltimore city police officers in the course of his arrest, resulting in a fatal spinal injury. A collaborative project between "the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore-area university faculty members, museums, and community organizations," Preserve the Baltimore Uprising was initiated by Denise Meringolo, a University of Maryland–Baltimore County associate professor in the department of history and director of public history. Its purpose is "to preserve and make accessible original content that was captured and created by individual community members, grassroots organizations, and witnesses to the protests that followed the death of Freddie Gray on April 19, 2015."⁴⁷ The digital repository invites people to contribute content in and around protests occurring in Baltimore and neighboring areas as long as the content is related to the death of Freddie Gray. One of the outcomes of this project is that neighborhoods, many of them predominantly Black, which have never been part of the historical society's archive are now present and accounted for due to the many images captured and submitted by community members. The archive also provides a way to document the tensions that exist between the police and Black citizens in Baltimore.⁴⁸

Conclusion

In each of these examples, the archives were born out of responses to police violence against Black people. Key actors recognized the need to document the counter-stories that were not being told

⁴⁵ People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland 2020, <https://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org>.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey S. Adler, "A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland," *Public Historian* 40, no. 4 (2018): 191; Virginia A. Dressler, "Archive as Medium," *Preservation, Digital Technology and Culture* 47, no. 2 (2018): 51.

⁴⁷ Preserve the Baltimore Uprising Archive, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, 2015, <https://baltimoreuprising2015.org>.

⁴⁸ Chloe Taft, "A Chronicle of Unrest," *American Scholar* 84, no. 4 (2015): 10.

and in fact were effectively erased by the mainstream. These community archives were founded on activism and a desire to represent the voice of the people. They were not created solely by Black people and required collaborations formed with the help of allies of other races and ethnicities. Still, archivists such as Jarrett Drake and other key Black archivists who worked behind the scenes performed the information wake work required to create or maintain archival spaces that would amplify Black voices and bring Black being to the forefront of public discourses through preservation and documentation.

During this exploration of the concept of archiving Blackness as wake work, both in literature and the physical archives themselves, I have discovered a profound understanding of what it means to do wake work. One thing I am certain of is that there are many ways in which we can do this work as we, that is to say, Black people, navigate this afterlife of slavery. Wake work conducted using the archive(s) as a site of struggle allows us to acknowledge and celebrate Black life, even alongside a terrifying accumulation of Black death. By archiving Blackness, both Black life and Black death, we are able to bring Black voices to the forefront, resisting and fighting against the erasures and silences that plague our history, imagining and creating ourselves into being.