

Public Pedagogy and the Archive: Information, Interruption, and Public Things amidst Canadian Housing Activism

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The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC) was a coalition of housing activists active in the years between 1998 and 2012 (Monsebraaten, 2012; Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, 1998, 2012). Their efforts bore witness to the rise of dehousing (Hulchanski, 2000, 2010), and the associated trauma and deaths of those forced to live without housing. Upon their closure, they donated their collective files to the City of Toronto Archives. This paper articulates how the curation and public provision of their collected material operates as a significant form of public pedagogy. First, the TDRC files are what I term a “counter-archive within.” That is, nested within a conventional archive, often figured as a repository for colonial common sense, motivated by the preservation of state power (Stoler, 2002), lies a counternarrative that challenges the epistemic authority of neoliberal logic. Secondly, in tandem with monthly public events, such an archive resists the “re-scripting” (Edkins, 2003, p. xvi) of trauma in commemorative practice; activists as archivists unveil the faults in state-managed temporal arrangements. And finally, the storing of such material in a public institution like the Toronto Archives ultimately foregrounds the archive as a public thing (Honig, 2017) that requires our contestation, care, and attention.

The TDRC and the Activist-Archivist

In 2012, the City of Toronto Archives agreed to preserve thousands of files—photographs, audio recordings, printed letters, posters, and other communications—from what was perhaps the most influential group of housing activists in Canada, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee (TDRC). For 14 years, the TDRC advocated for housing as a fundamental human right, amidst an era of unprecedented dehousing—this included a dismantled national housing program and slashed social assistance rates (Hulchanski, 2000, 2010). This paper examines the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee’s function as activist-archivists who, while facilitating community archives outside of formal institutions (see Burgum, 2022), have also chosen to enlist the very institutions that had previously excluded them. I argue that this archival legacy acts as public pedagogy by 1) operating as a counter-archive that challenges the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the traditional archival environment, 2) insisting on temporalities that trouble commonsense¹ notions regarding the traumas of the past, and 3) encouraging witnesses to coalesce around a “public thing” (Honig, 2017) that can promote togetherness and plurality.

This paper will cite the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee’s archived files concerning the rise of dehousing in Canada. While an examination of archival material from a municipal archive in Canada may seem

¹ I use “commonsense” in the Gramscian sense of the word (see marino et al., 1998; Patnaik, 1988), to communicate the hegemonic applications of how settler states deal with their own troubling histories—“common” in the sense that they are habitual and frequent disavowals and erasures (see Stoler, 2009).

the very picture of boredom, it is in fact a task necessary for bearing witness to a past that is not passed. Indeed, the past “speaks” to our present in what I call the “interrupted archive.” The archive gets interrupted by activists who explore its utility as a site for stories that do more than merely reflect (re-tell) state² priorities, based on state data. Instead, the archive is reconfigured as a constellation of competing narratives about what has happened “here.” Importantly, the interruption also renders a state archive available to those often excluded from such spaces.³ Beyond bearing witness to trauma, I draw attention to the arrangement of material itself; I comment on what such a curatorial endeavour offers in terms of historical record-keeping as well as helping us reconceptualize our own relationship to the past. Over the past two years, I conducted an archival ethnography (Gracy, 2004) in concert with past and present volunteers from the Toronto Homeless Memorial, a monthly event orchestrated in part by the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee, which featured interviews with founding members of the TDRC and an analysis of thousands of documents preserved by this group of activists. In this paper, I comment on the archive as a source of information sharing and intergenerational connectivity for activist movements, but also as a site of resistance against neoliberal temporalities and the decay of public things.

On a final introductory note, while terms like counter-history and counter-archive alert us to educative qualities of the archive, scholars have not considered the state archive as a site of/for insurgent public pedagogy. For understandable reasons, many activist groups develop their own sites and strategies of/for community based archiving. There are many ways to understand and interpret the term “counter-archive.” As it sounds, it is often associated with “anti-archival” work that positions buried or silenced historical accounts against dominant, hegemonic ones. Counter-archives often have a different location—the “community-based” archive—but they also can also exhibit a different materiality. While a simple definition of a “counter-archive” would acknowledge archival material that exists outside of mainstream institutional or state archive settings, there are also particular curatorial practices and artifacts often associated with a “counter-archive.” Such practices and evidence have been described as “archives of feeling” that document the always-present gaps in traumatic histories and necessitate new ways of offering testimony (Cvetkovich, 2003, 2011). Such archives often include the presence of everyday objects, personal items, and ephemeral forms of documentation beyond the conventional formats found in institutional archives (buttons and t-shirts, say, in contrast to “official” reports). In the case of this paper, I argue that the grassroots/community-based archive (such as the Toronto Homeless Memorial Network’s website) is not the only site of/for “counter-archive.” Rather, the state archive can be filled with material that draws attention to the silences, absences, and incompleteness that exist in the archive. The question is, can the state archive be wielded—perhaps seized?—by activist actors intent on revivifying the public realm and inserting “new” narratives into the historical account? In keeping with Gert Biesta’s conception of public pedagogy, I am arguing not only for the archive’s capacity to transmit ideas and knowledges to the public, but for its ability to be used in creative ways that cultivate publicness—via a constellation of readers, users, attendees, and (re)interpreters who might gather around this newly enriched public thing. In the following section, I will elaborate on this notion of public pedagogy.

Framing Public Pedagogy

The archive is an educative environment, capable of reifying a colonial grammar, but also open to interruption and contestation. As Ann Stoler (2018) has argued, the imperial archive is never fully “sealed” (p. 49) from the generative interventions of citizens. Yet, in the various accounts of public pedagogy scholarship that have emerged in the last two decades, archives are rarely mentioned (O’Malley et al., 2020; Sandlin et al., 2010, 2011).

² While writing in/about a Canadian context, and thus a nation that uses the language of “provinces and territories” rather than “states,” I use “state” throughout this paper to signify Canada’s (and Toronto’s) existence as a political entity characterized by settler and capitalist histories and forms of governance (see Panitch, 1977; Whiteside & McBride, 2025 (forthcoming)).

³ Though this work remains incomplete, the interrupted archive assists in informing and mobilizing ongoing public actions, sustaining a history of dehousing that would otherwise be further disappeared. As I explain later, these necessary interruptions require “complementary” sites of action and speech.

Scholars of public pedagogy concern themselves with digital media, film, street art, social activism, and museums, among other examples. In addition, the vast amount of writing that concerns itself with “public pedagogy” can make “hazy” (Savage, 2010, p. 108)—in the words of Glenn Savage—the very meaning of the term itself. Indeed, is everything “educational”? It is necessary, then, to first establish my point of departure for the “public pedagogy” of the activist-archive as drawn from Gert Biesta’s (2012) work. According to Biesta, public pedagogy, aside from the various possible educative projects of and for the public, can be understood as the pedagogical work of cultivating publicness itself. That is, public pedagogy is about more than simply imparting knowledge (or facilitating cooperative knowledge sharing) through various cultural, institutional, or aesthetic mediums. Public pedagogy can create the very conditions that theorists like Glenn Savage hold are untenable in a world of such extreme socio-economic and spatial divides. It can initiate what Hannah Arendt called “the space of appearance” (Arendt, 1958, p. 199), the contingent realm where distinct citizens can “establish relations and create new realities” (Arendt, 1958, p. 200).

It is worthwhile to draw on the work of Henry Giroux, who has been called the “father” of public pedagogy (Pinar, 2010). His work detailed the intersections between cultural studies and the educational, emphasizing the political task of confronting a democracy-in-crisis while influenced by thinkers like Raymond Williams (1966) who identified the “permanent education” we are exposed to in the entirety of our cultural experience. For Giroux, neoliberalism itself is a public pedagogy that we are increasingly shaped by (França, 2019; Giroux, 2010). The “education” we receive as we trade political action for a cheap citizenship—one in which our capacity to “act” is reduced to our ability to consume—is one that, Giroux might say, “instructs” us to ignore our own imagination (Giroux, 2003). The banal, neoliberal public pedagogy is the growing ideological and institutional ensemble that produces a hyper-competitive atmosphere, characterized by self-interest and feelings of insecurity (Giroux, 2010). Glenn Savage (2010) critiqued what he called the “enveloping negativity” (p. 109) of Giroux and other early public pedagogy scholars. By pointing to the corrupting nature of various cultural and political forces, Savage felt such analyses foreclosed the capacities citizens have to re-work and subvert hegemonic cultural forms and sites of imperial knowledge. While “corporate culture” (Savage, 2010, p. 105) does work on us in all kinds of ways, so too can citizens resist and offer new educative environments and communicative events. It is worth noting that amidst Giroux’s seemingly bleak understanding of the educational lies the citizen’s responsibility to assist others in generative interventions in democracy as the site of struggle; by recognizing our capacity for education-as-intervention, we locate ourselves as actors in history, as participants in public discourse, and as those with the capacity for hope in a more just future (Giroux, 2010).

Significant for my argument, while Savage advocates for understanding our divided social and political order through the notion of distinct, siloed publics, Biesta’s Arendtian inflections would suggest the possibility of a plurality of citizens, each capable of asserting their own uniqueness in the public realm. In other words, I, following Biesta, disagree with Savage’s notion that a singular public pedagogy is itself no longer possible. Thus, I read the archive for its capacities to gather plural assemblies in the name of meaningful public exchange, across cultural, socioeconomic, and other divides.⁴ Specifically, Biesta (2012) is concerned with “forms of interruption that keep the opportunities for ‘becoming public’ open” (p. 685). The public pedagogue, in Biesta’s (2012; 2006) estimation, is one who searches for and expands access to sites of/for interruption. They do so by introducing objects⁵ that test the extent to which a space or place is public. In the case of archives, then, it would be through the introduction of unusual or exceptional ephemera that a given archive would be “put to the test.” Such objects inquire: what is the quality of the archive, such that human togetherness and opportunities for freedom are made possible? How public is the public archive? The interrupted archive is one that has had such objects deposited in it.

What this paper does is situate the archive as an understudied and undertheorized feature in/for public pedagogy. The state archive often gets criticized for its functioning as a colonial apparatus (Echevarría, 1998; Schwartz & Cook, 2002), complicit in what Ann Laura Stoler calls processes of “inscription” (Stoler, 2018, p. 49). Stoler (2018) argues it is still the “archons” (see Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995)—the keepers of archival

⁴ Savage and Biesta’s distinct theoretical formulations have also been contrasted in O’Malley et al. (2020).

⁵ Along with objects, Biesta (2012) includes events and experiences that “test” public spaces and places. This aligns with my discussion of the Toronto Homeless Memorial as an event/experience that works in tandem with the idea of a *counter-archive within*.

information and those who ultimately police public access—that need to be subverted. Otherwise, the archive continues to inscribe—assemble and make available—the limiting fictions of empire. The imperial archive constructs a history replete with silences and omissions (Crane, 2021), which reflects the process of empire building as a benign process, or at least one that has overcome a more violent past. Its pedagogical function is, in this case, to preserve knowledges and events that align with the state as the champion of justice and progress. Yet, in my research, I uncovered the ways activists have sought to recover state archives as sites in which to situate their own counter-histories. It is as Stoler (2018) also argues, that archives are never as “sealed” (p. 49) as Derrida imagined. By inserting archival documents into a state archive, activist-archivists trouble the narratives embedded in/through this colonial apparatus. While housing activists have relied on forms of counter-archive, as explored in other contexts (Chew et al., 2018; Motha & Rijswijk, 2016; Thorsen, 2020), they have also embedded what I call a “counter-archive within” the state archive, which presents a complicated (and perhaps risky) possibility for the pedagogical work of the archive. Given that scholars of public pedagogy have recently turned to postcolonial and decolonial approaches that are wary of Eurocentric platforms for knowledge preservation (O’Malley et al., 2020; Zembylas, 2018), I will justify and explain the use of the counter-archive within using examples from my own research. Later, I establish the (pedagogical) need for this “interrupted archive” to have a complementary site of/for action and speech.

The Counter-Archive Within

I will offer an example from the archive. The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee files record a state-led initiative from the early 2000s called “Project TIDE” (City of Toronto, n.d.; Office of the Chief Coroner, City of Toronto, 2000). Project TIDE—Toronto Indigent Death Enquiries—was the City of Toronto’s first attempt at tracking the deaths of those without housing. The TDRC files record the promotional material, research summaries, slide decks, and collated numbers from Project TIDE. At the same time, Toronto Disaster Relief Committee files record the email chains, meeting minutes, protest actions, and alternative sources of data regarding “homeless deaths” that emerged in these same years. Thus, preserved adjacent within the dead archive (Azoulay, 2017; Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995) rests an account that extends or even counters the state-archived narrative. My interviews with Toronto Homeless Memorial organizers attested to the various ways the City of Toronto repeatedly offered an incomplete narrative of dehousing over the years, through initiatives like “Project TIDE.” The narrative was incomplete in two ways. First, it was impersonal and story-less, void of humanizing details that render these deaths meaningful and grievable. Second, Project TIDE methodology (and what “counted” as a “homeless death”) was deeply flawed, which meant that the numbers according to Project TIDE were far lower than what Toronto Disaster Relief Committee activists were recording. This is one of the clever tactics used by TDRC activists—that they preserved the incomplete narrative that City Hall was attempting to offer the public next to a (much) more richly detailed and nuanced testimony of the tragedy unfolding in the city at that time. Instead of preserving strictly TDRC data, they maintained both data sets, juxtaposing their methodological, political, and numerical differences.

While the archival practice that situates Toronto Disaster Relief Committee data next to something like Project TIDE depicts the insufficiencies of City-collected data, it also gets at something much deeper. While the City’s data inhabit a world of anonymity, the TDRC’s commemorative practices attempt to animate story and relationship. The Toronto Homeless Memorial is part of a history of commemorative events initiated by housing activists that date back to the 1980s, to remember those who have died in Toronto without housing. The activist dataset is an “archive of feelings” (Cvetkovich, 2003; Salvio, 2017, p. 56), one that records names, stories, artworks, photographs, and heartfelt messages of family members. As memorial organizer Greg Cook said, the memorial is where “people... in all their humanity, are remembered” (Cook, personal communication, January 26, 2022). Though I will return to the relationship between the memorial and the state archive, it is worth noting here the iterative relationship between the memorial as a site of/for the “birth” of action, speech, and aesthetic objects, which are then retained in the counter-archive within. Conversely, the memorial draws on the work of past “generations” of housing activists whose contributions are sustained in/through the archive. Thus, the two sites can work in tandem. The memories preserved in the archive are enlivened through

speakers at the monthly memorial event; the ever-unfolding story of the memorial is recorded and preserved by the (counter)archival environment.

The pedagogical territory of curatorial practice has perhaps best been described by Roger Simon (2011b, 2011a, 2014) and Mario Di Paolantonio (2008, 2013, 2015). Museum displays and archival fonds open the possibility of an aesthetics that help the viewer re-orient their relation to the past. Through careful curation, past events and “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998; see also Simon, 2011a) are not reduced to milestones in a narrative of linear progress. They can be positioned in such a way to “face” us; curatorial practice can render a more “[hospitable] ground” (Di Paolantonio, 2015, p. 266) upon which to receive the testimony of the past. Rather than an archive-as-catalogue the TDRC files represent an archive as commemorative—or aesthetic—practice that resists colonial reductionism and neoliberal linearity. Mario Di Paolantonio situates such aesthetic objects as “remnant objects.” He writes, “due to the curatorial *mise-en-scène* a remnant-object itself can become an aesthetic image for us to sense and purposefully wonder about, rather than something we simply observe, verify, master and catalogue” (Di Paolantonio, 2015, p. 272). There is a curatorial practice evident in the TDRC files that, I argue, reframes the archive as such an aesthetic (remnant) object.

The TDRC was not the only activist coalition at the time recording the surge of deaths of those without housing: the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty commenced the “Death Watch” (Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, 1997); Bonnie Briggs, one of the central organizers behind The Toronto Homeless Memorial independently maintained an online “victims list” for several years (Briggs, 1999a); and the National Coalition for the Homeless annually marched a coffin, draped in white sheet, adorned with community members’ handwritten names of loved ones who had died, to various government offices (Briggs, 1999b; National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), 2000). Remarkably, in a 2006 report calling for biannual reporting on homeless deaths, Toronto’s Medical Officer of Health, Dr. David McKeown, included the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee’s “death list” in the appendix (McKeown, 2006). In other words, rather than simply note the Project TIDE and TDRC numeric data, as other staff reports had done, he chose to include the list featuring every individual’s name, from 1985 to 2006. Hundreds of names, covering 6 pages (longer than the report itself) were thus added to the staff report. The names begin to humanize the trauma for City Council in a commemorative posture that past memorial organizer Janice Towndrow considers “the beginnings of action” (Towndrow, personal communication, February 1, 2022). The TDRC files preserve such movements toward ontological acknowledgement, and conversely, they depict ongoing instances of absence and erasure. An initiative like Project TIDE, for instance, could be called on to question the reliability of the TDRC (and other “victims lists”) datasets. Yet, the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee files preserve the ways activists reinforced their own epistemic authority. In one Board of Health report draft, TDRC members were described as “a group of homeless individuals and activists” (Gulliver, 2006). Recognizing the stigma associated with such a description, TDRC organizers Cathy Crowe and Michael Shapcott opted for phrasing that described the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee as “an organization that is involved in research, advocacy, and public education” (Gulliver, 2006). It is worth noting that the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee’s collaborative approach alongside state actors meant that such edits were within their purview in advance of such public communiques.⁶

The participatory nature of knowledge creation and dissemination preserved in the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee files challenges the epistemic logics fostered by neoliberal statecraft. Thomas Richards calls the archive a “representation of an epistemological master pattern” (Richards, 1993, p. 11) of imperial powers. Yet here we observe a very different approach to the construction and sharing of ideas and information. To borrow from existing public pedagogy nomenclature, one might assert the counter-archive within as a pedagogy of “relationality” (O’Malley et al., 2020, p. 11). That is, activists have developed pedagogical mechanisms oriented around intersubjective, affective processes, which are enacted in/through the co-production of

⁶ This example shows how the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee’s approach complicated even the categorization of “state” documentation itself, given their capacity to edit/review such reporting. What I will say about this is 1) the authorship of such reports still ultimately was retained by “state” actors—Dr. David McKeown, for example—and 2) that such “edits” (and indeed, any hint of collegiality between state officials and activists) became increasingly scarce over the next 10-15 years. Indeed, the relationship has become more and more hostile (Cook, personal communication, January 26, 2022; Crowe, personal communication, February 1, 2022; Grant, personal communication, March 9, 2022).

meaning. While challenging the top-down narratives of city staffers, coroners, and medical officers, the housing activists of/since the 1990s fashioned their own methods for information sharing, networking, and advocacy. The TDRC files include recorded oral testimonies (Toronto Coalition Against Homelessness, 1996)—and The Toronto Homeless Memorial itself is described as an “oral archive” (Cook, personal communication, January 26, 2022), much of it going unrecorded, while stories, poems, and songs have been passed down through “generations” of activist volunteers. Such public pedagogy was/is relational, playful, and always participatory. For example, on the first day of Winter in 1999, two activists, dressed up as Santa Claus and an elf, delivered a massive (75 x 5 foot) Christmas card to Ontario Premier Mike Harris (responsible for the gutting of social assistance in Ontario, among other policy shifts). The card, like the white sheet draped over the coffin that led the procession nearby, contained over 100 names of those who had died from dehousing, collectively written by members of the community. Like so many public actions from this community, this was an act of protest couched in shared grief. And, in an unsurprising state response to such an affective petition, Santa and his costumed elf were both arrested (National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), 2000). The efforts of Toronto Disaster Relief Committee activists have meant that such interruptive pedagogical acts are preserved in a dynamic “oral archive,” in community based archival sites that the community has “access [to] and shared ownership over” (Sellie et al., 2015, p. 455), and in a counter-archive within that is itself a site of interruption. The counter-archive within re-constitutes the state archive as one touched by the relations between the activist-archivist and the others with/for whom they organize, remember, and grieve.⁷

Trauma Time and Neoliberal Temporalities

For Jenny Edkins (2003), the notion of “trauma time” (p. xiv) disrupts the linearity of what we have come to call politics. This disruption is figured by Edkins as the moments wherein “something happened” (p. xiv). When “something happens,” Edkins argues, it creates a gap in our ability to make meaning—“it doesn’t fit the story we already have” (p. xiv). Our current political regime, characterized by sovereign state power, relies on “linear, homogeneous time” (p. xv). Such a temporal arrangement allows the traumas produced by the creation and maintenance of sovereign power to be recast as part of a linear narrative of “national heroism” (p. xv). Commemorative practice as public pedagogy has the potential to engage in what Edkins calls “resistance to... re-scripting—resistance to state narratives of commemoration” (p. xv). Given what I have already observed about the active memorial event providing a forum for pedagogical relations that complement (and are complemented by) the counter-archive within, it is worth noting the parallels between Edkins’s (2003) notion of “re-scripting” and Stoler’s (2018) use of the word “inscription.” While Edkins points to the state’s tendency to appear as the doorkeepers (and heralds) of justice and progress, Stoler’s term describes the way the “archons” mediate the appearance of any counternarrative in the archival accounts. The counter-archive within, then, provides opportunities for activists to insert an alternate “script” into the archive, upsetting this linearity by introducing a complex story that orients us toward both trauma and resistance.⁸

Activist-outreach worker and memorial volunteer Gigi Grant shares the story of meeting Ontario Premier Doug Ford outside the site of The Toronto Homeless Memorial. The site of the Toronto Homeless Memorial also happens to be adjacent to the office space formerly used by provincial politicians and staffers. In the exchange between Grant and Ford, these competing notions of time are made clear. Ford, in his

⁷ While I invoke Roger Simon’s *The Touch of the Past* (2005), I also want to draw attention to the Elizabeth Ellsworth’s *Places of learning: media, architecture, pedagogy* (2004), wherein her significant contribution was to consider the moments of and spaces for contingent relationality as the process of knowledge in the making, rather than spaces for the transmission of knowledge as fixed entity. While the counter-archive within offers specific data to be transmitted to the reader, it also contains samples from affective aesthetic practices, testimonies and photographs curated to sustain the memory of loved ones, and anecdotes or letters to inspire the contingent acting-together of new “generations” of those who struggle for housing as a basic human right.

⁸ And which de-centers the state’s role as “hero.” Importantly, we are oriented toward contemporary trauma and contemporary resistance, the existence and simultaneity of which complicates the homogeneous temporal arrangements that are the object of Edkins’s critique.

characteristic personable, yet commanding manner, said to Grant, “You know, I would really like to give ya’ll some money to build like a—I envision sort of like a wall with everybody’s name engraved in it, or something like that—something more structural” (Grant, personal communication, March 9, 2022). Grant, in their response, revealed to Ford an example of the resistance to this linear, homogenizing approach—one that claims a kind of absolution from the violence of the past and delineates the trauma as a past event (Edkins, 2003):

It sounds like a war memorial that you want to build. And I think those are built in acknowledgement of the end of a war. But we are still in this conflict. And I would love to build that wall too, but we need to end this conflict first. And I think that’s what we need to invest our time and energy into—into actually working on these issues. (Grant, personal communication, March 9, 2022)

One can imagine that Premier Ford’s idea of a redesigned and state-funded homeless memorial would thus enlist this linear rationality. Such a narrative would rely first on a naturalized, pre-existing “homeless” subject, which was a “problem” subsequently “solved” (by the fiscal efficiencies of neoliberal statecraft, no less), resulting in a form of commemoration that could effectively locate the unhoused dead in some distant past. Moreover, such a memorial would rid the nation-state—the site of sovereign power—of any responsibility for the traumas it has, itself, produced. What would the audience of this proposed memorial make of the citizens they encounter without housing? I argue that the answer to this question is already at play. Even without “Ford’s homeless memorial,” I argue that neoliberal, linear time has already characterized people without housing as post-homeless. The “grievable homeless” is a romanticized character who existed in a pre-neoliberal time. They rode rail cars and picked fruit. The post-homeless subject is a failed individual, one who has opted out of a system that maintains (and is maintained by) the self-sufficiency of its equal, autonomous citizens (Arnold, 2004). The post-homeless are at fault, while the grievable homeless, a product perhaps of The Great Depression or some other period of the linear historical imaginary we have inherited, are capable of being commemorated through this process of “rewriting...traumas” (Edkins, 2003, p. xv). While this can be criticized as an overly facile contrast, I use it to draw attention to the way encampments are now merely described as “urban decay” (Powers, 2023). In other words, contemporary descriptions of dehousing people often fail to even mention their personhood.⁹ Indeed, there is no “homelessness problem” if we rebrand the issue as merely the management of public space (Granville, 2024). And when political leaders are forced to discuss people living in encampments, the strategy used, again and again, is to maintain that they are undeserving (CBC News, 2024).

Following Edkins, then, I conceive of The Toronto Homeless Memorial as a site of resistance against such (real, proposed, and imagined) forms of commemoration. The event introduces “trauma time” in its pedagogical work in/with the public. As an “interruption” (Biesta, 2012), the memorial facilitates an examination of dehousing as past and present violence. It invites participants into relations with “ghosts” (Grant, personal communication, March 9, 2022)—what Dawn Rothe and Victoria Collins call the socially dead (Rothe & Collins, 2016)—to receive their testimony. The testimony of these “ghosts” challenges neoliberal “re-scripting” (Edkins, 2003, p. xv) and underlines the call of the past on our present (de)housing landscape. Indeed, “something happened” and it “demands that we invent a new account” (Edkins, 2003, p. xiv). Di Paolantonio (2015) describes the work of preparing this new account as “judging how to re-compose the past into a living interpretative relation with the present” (p. 272).

Roger Simon noted how the awareness of past events does not always assume there is a “bridge” to the implications for the present (Simon, 2014, p. 34). While the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee’s connection to the present should be obvious, attendees perhaps also need to be provided with the resources, in the form of “pedagogical and political discourse” (Simon, 2014, p. 34) to make sense of these events. This involves 1) cultivating a better understanding of how dehousing came to be cemented in neoliberal policy and 2) by generating an understanding of the grievability of currently dehousing people (Butler, 2016). The TDRC files

⁹ I should also point out that there are examples of contemporary “grievable” homeless individuals who either a) gain status as “grievable” in media portraits once they have died (Fagan, 2024; Loriggio, 2024)—often the result of friends and/or activists—or b) gain access to layers of personhood once they can be presented as productive members of society who demonstrates middle class desires or objectives. The latter I have written about at length in a previous paper regarding media portrayals of dehousing and dehousing individuals (Martin, 2022).

reveal how moments of information sharing—whether at Toronto’s Tent City in the early 2000s (Connolly, 2003; Hardill, 2002), at the rallies aimed at opening emergency shelter spaces (Crowe, 2003), and at The Toronto Homeless Memorial (Briggs, 1999b)—assist in what Gert Biesta (2012) calls the pedagogy of the public. These public gatherings were participatory, educational environments that helped people understand the crisis. But they also fulfil the role of cultivating a space for democratic, public engagement, or what Biesta (2012) calls “becoming public” (p. 693). Such acts of generative togetherness were a pedagogical reminder of the grievability of dehousing citizens. The Toronto Disaster Relief Committee files show that it was often under the conditions of widespread public mourning that political gains were achieved (Hatfield, 2011; Shapcott, 2002). The TDRC archive adds photographic, audio, and textual evidence to “the human artifice,” as Hannah Arendt articulated, the preservation of these files gives these activist movements “durability” (Arendt, 1958, p. 167). Not only does the archival material record such pedagogical interruptions, but it troubles the neoliberal temporality that demarcates these events as irrelevant and past.

The Archive as Public Thing

By committing the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee files to the City of Toronto Archives, housing activists were committed to sustaining the public exchange facilitated by an archive. Despite the limitations of the conventional, state archive, such sites are public. As such, they are open to the plurality and contestation precipitated by public things (Honig, 2017). Bonnie Honig argues that “public things” that are cared for and maintained by citizens have the capacity to gather citizens and sustain democratic engagement (Honig, 2017). Drawing on Arendt, Honig insists that having a thing to gather around opens the possibility for new things to occur. Arendt calls this the capacity for “natality” (Arendt, 1958, pp. 9, 178), arguing that we are born into the world in the togetherness we achieve in the public realm. In our newness, we act and speak, yielding the possibility for new cultural or political arrangements. In *The human condition* (1958), Arendt uses the metaphor of a table to depict that which holds a plurality of different people together in a kind of mediated relationship—mediated by an object, which Honig, following D.W. Winnicott, suggests can function as a “transitional object” of/for democratic arrangements (Honig, 2013, p. 70). In this sense, the public archive and its holdings offer something “to deliberate about, constellate around, or agonistically contest” (Honig, 2017, p. 5). Those who support processes of community-led archival practices insist that it remains a “process where we’re all at the table” (Zavala et al., 2017, p. 209). But, in drawing near to the archive-as-public-thing, as Honig urges us, I am inclined to echo Honig’s inquiry: “What are the properties of such objects? What makes them work?” (Honig, 2013, p. 70) Can the public archive be revived as a site of pedagogical interruption for activists? Is everyone welcome at the table?

Ariella Azoulay (2017) writes about how the traditional archons, placed in charge of the preservation of documents in ancient Greece, were responsible for a kind of temporal dislocation between those who would commit the documents to the archive and those seeking to access the archival space. In achieving this temporal distance between documentation and citizen, the archons ensured that the material was “dead” before it could appear in public, open for critical, contemporary public debate (Azoulay, 2017). The etymology of “contemporary” is important here for its associations of being “with our time” (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2023), in contrast with Azoulay’s figuring of the archival matter being relegated to a distant past (Azoulay, 2017). To what extent can those who contribute to what I call the counter-archive within “remain themselves the archons” (Stoler, 2018, p. 46)? Derrida writes:

There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation. (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995, p. 11)

If it is in fact possible to keep contemporary the archival matter that is contributed to the archive, then indeed such a movement is one that encourages a democratization of public information. Toronto Disaster Relief Committee activists have proved they can act as archons in/for the contemporary archive. In other words, what the TDRC managed to achieve is housing activists’ participation in what constitutes the City of

Toronto Archives, who has access to the archives (and how temporally dislocated they are from the material), and who gets to work with and interpret the material. This contrasts with the recently popularized “archiving activism,” which has not consistently been a “mutually beneficial” arrangement between activists and archivists (Sellie et al., 2015, p. 457). Rather than having archivists selecting and arranging material on behalf of activists, TDRC activists have opted to curate archival fonds that reflect their own political and pedagogical sensibilities, maintaining their own agency to tell a story of a past that is not passed. Perhaps as a result, it is widely observed that the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee files are one of the most publicly sought after collections in the City of Toronto Archives today (Crowe, personal communication, February 1, 2022; Toronto Archives staff, personal communication, September 22, 2022). Thus, the archive is rendered a site for the gathering of a plurality, capable of grappling with an archival record that is very much “alive” and relevant, amidst a (de)housing crisis that is very much with our time.

The Requirements of/for Publicness

The public archive is itself part of “a world of things” (Arendt, 1958, p. 52) that lies between us, allowing for a plurality of citizens to constellate around it, even as we come at it from different positions. It also is capable, to some extent, of being a site of/for interruption (in Biesta’s sense), insofar as activist-archivists can contribute to it. Yet, it falls short, pedagogically, in the ways its atmosphere is shaped by cultural conventions. The archival environment is conditioned to allow only a particular kind of educational experience—replete with its own assumed set of etiquette and behavioural code. And so, the “interrupted archive” requires a complementary site of/for contestation and hospitality—one that invites all manner of creative intervention, and acts as a more inclusive and generative “radical archive of emotion” (Salvio, 2017, p. 59), full of all the affective force that comes from a grieving assembly. In the case of housing activism in Canada, the Toronto Homeless Memorial constitutes such a site.

The Toronto Homeless Memorial, an ongoing monthly event that bears witness to the violence of dehousing in Toronto (and across Canada), ensures that the archival work is not merely a work of cataloguing, but rather is a necessary supplement for this ongoing enactment of publicness. The two are, pedagogically, inseparable—that is, the capacity of each to cultivate an educative environment is amplified by the other. The monthly memorial event materializes the tragic unfolding of the crisis, inviting citizens to appear together and communicate their experience of loss. I have already noted its capacity to disrupt neoliberal linearity insofar as it returns attendees to a crisis that is very much “with our time.” On the other hand, the archive provides historicity for both the crisis and what we might call the intergenerational lineage of the activist movement itself. While many of the early housing activists have themselves become victims of the dehousing crisis (some of their names adorn the memorial’s growing list), their work is carried on, their practices of resistance continued, by the current participants—those who sustain the memorial and its attendant archive today.

The archival material preserves the strategies and ideas of the activists who have died, while memorial organizers—the next “generation” of activists—acknowledge them, adding oral accounts and names to the ever-growing archive. The practices of resistance and strategies for organized dissent continue to appear at rallies and monthly memorials, sustaining the “spirits” of those present, and those who have gone before. Pragmatic wisdom is carried forward to be applied in new ways, like the considerations contained in the questions of long-time housing activist, Bob Rose: “what do you want to do?... Who do you want to do it with?... How do you want to do it? What do you need to do it?” (Rose, personal communication, March 16, 2022) The memorial reanimates the aesthetic contributions of artists and poets who have emerged in the movement. The poetry of Don Weitz and Bonnie Briggs being reimaged in contemporary contexts is an example of what Roger Simon would call an “advent”—that is, “an event defined by the arrival of traces of past events with potential to impact on one’s present” (Simon, 2014, p. 6). The activist-archive preserves these traces, which can then be repurposed by contemporary organizers. Though, I concede that, in some cases, the archival material is incidental to this intergenerational process of activist pedagogy, as activists like Don Weitz personally asked specific people to put his poems and rants to music or otherwise reimagine his contributions. Many of his works are still performed in new ways at the monthly memorial. Weitz died in 2021.

Public Pedagogy and Archival Environments

While much of the TDRC and associated activism afforded opportunities for the acting and speaking of unique human beings (Arendt, 1958), the pedagogical work of archives remains far more muted. It is muted in a most literal sense. In *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's political thought* (2021), Adriana Cavarero concerns herself with the sonority of the spaces of appearance in activist movements aimed at democratic contestation (Cavarero, 2021). Following Cavarero, we might doubt the capacity of an archival environment to achieve the necessary sonic qualities associated with public assembly and the distinctly plural voices gathered there. Archives are indeed quiet spaces. Herein is a remaining area for future work and (re)imagination in cultivating activist archives. Even with counter-hegemonic narratives inserted within, the state archive remains culturally constituted by its inheritance as a colonial site—with colonial conventions that enforce the etiquette and protocols for the accessing of both the space and its materials. In addition, though a more fulsome exploration is the subject of a paper all its own, there are important lessons to be learned from the work of activist archivist projects like Interference Archive (IA), founded in Brooklyn, New York (Sellie et al., 2015). To offer a brief example, Interference Archive ensures the confidential use of materials to protect the identity of activists involved in direct action against the state. Thus, incriminating materials or traces of patrons' personal information is kept from being surveilled. A state archive, on the other hand, records and maintains personal information (of both donors and patrons), which could be used to incriminate users, or, more likely, deter them from accessing archival fonds in the first place (Sellie et al., 2015). As a result, there are questions that remain concerning the pedagogical features of state archives: how might such sites preserve the anonymity of users? Could the City of Toronto Archives provide separate rooms for collaborative resource sharing—made available for loud gatherings of plural assemblies? Can staff at the archives be tapped (and trusted) for knowledge sharing about archival curation and organization? In other words, can traditional archival organizing principles help activists organize?

The activist-archivists depend upon counter-archival spaces and efforts that exist outside of the conventional archive environment, welcoming the insertion of contingent, plural voices. The Toronto Homeless Memorial, which occurs both in public space (Crowe, 2001) as well as counter-archival environments like the memorial's website (Toronto Homeless Memorial Network, 2020) and associated Facebook page (Church of the Holy Trinity, 2023), is such a monthly event engaged in both record keeping and public appearance. The memorial event relies on the contingency of a gathering constituted by sonorous voices appearing together, being birthed into the public realm (Arendt, 1958) even as they grieve the victims of this ongoing crisis. Therefore, it must be in tandem with such practices that the curation of public files can 1) challenge the institutional conventions of their archival environment, 2) contest temporal regimes that propagate the (dehumanizing) myth of the post-homeless subject, and 3) animate the archive as a public thing available for contestation and attention.

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