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From the sidelines to the center: reconsidering the potential of the personal in archives

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Abstract

This article seeks to center the personal in archives, both theoretically and methodologically. After briefly reviewing how personal archives have been sidelined in archival theory and education programs, we suggest that whether a record is considered personal or not is best determined not based on who created it but rather on how it is activated. In two separate autoethnographic case studies, the authors activate institutional records that, for each of them, are intensely personal. In doing so, they demonstrate how centering the personal in this way might inform and impact archivists' understanding of their responsibilities to those who create, are captured in and consult the records in our care.

Keywords Personal archives · Personal records · Personal recordkeeping · Autoethnography

Introduction

Hobbs (2010, pp. 213–214) has argued that personal archives are "sidelined" in archival theory, where ideas about what records and archives are and how they should be treated have tended to develop based on consideration of and experience with records created by public bodies. Douglas (2017, p. 89) observes a similar "sidelining of personal archives in archival education." In her examination of archival curricula, Douglas finds that personal archives are "not a significant focus of archival education programs," nor are they addressed in any substantial way in education guidelines published by the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) or the Society of American Archivists (SAA) (Douglas 2017, pp. 96–97). Despite

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calls to reject the idea that there is a binary opposition between personal and institutional archives (McKemmish and Piggott 2013; Barrett 2013), both archival literature and education continue to reflect the types of "silences" identified by Hobbs (2001) nearly two decades ago, with institutional records treated as the "norm" and personal records as exceptions to that norm in some key ways.

In this article, we seek to center the personal, both methodologically and theoretically. We will argue that while personal records have for the most part been discussed as a category of record, defined by how they are unlike institutional records, we should also be thinking about the personal as a way in which records are experienced, or as a type of relationship or orientation between a record of any kind and the person who interacts with it. Whether a record is experienced as personal or not is less likely to be determined based on who made the record or who preserved it, than because of how it is *activated,* a term Eric Ketelaar uses to refer to an individual's "interaction" with or "interrogation" or "interpretation" of a record (Ketelaar 2001, p. 137). This seems to us a fairly obvious observation, but it is not an observation that has been explicitly discussed in the archival literature; here, through our own activation of records, we seek to address this gap.

The article begins with a review of how personal archives are defined, characterized and understood as "other" in the archival literature. Adding our voices to McKemmish and Michael Piggott's (2013) call to reject the binary distinction between personal and organizational records, we look briefly at examples in the literature where institutional records are shown to function as personal records and where personal records are used to fulfill institutional aims. We observe that records can *feel* personal even though they might not be *categorized as* personal records: Personal can be a reaction experienced by the activator, rather than an inherent quality of a record. This observation is further explored through autoethnographic case studies conducted separately by each author that explore the ways in which institutional records can be experienced as intensely personal. Finally, in the analysis that follows the case studies, we discuss how such experience might inform and impact archivists' understanding of their responsibilities to those who create, are captured in and consult the records in our care.

Othering the personal

Early explications of the nature of archives and their treatment focused on the records of government and public bodies, stressing the "official" qualities of records and specifically denying record status to documents and collections created by individuals and families (Jenkinson 1937; Muller et al. 2003). To this day, though they are more likely to be accepted as a legitimate category of record, personal records are regularly defined and characterized in opposition to organizational records. In "Personal Papers: Perceptions and Practices," Caroline Williams defines personal archives as "those created by an individual during his or her lifetime." Personal archives are "generated by people as part of the processes of living, working and leisure, individually and communally" (Williams 2008, pp. 55–56). Here, personal records can include records resulting from a wide variety of activities, pursuits and

preoccupations, but the defining characteristic of a personal archive is that it is generated by an individual or individuals acting communally rather than by a corporate body.

Williams' definition is consistent with earlier ones. For example, Rachel Onuf and Tom Hyry defined personal archives as having been "created for *personal reasons*, be they communication, artistic endeavor, or other activities *not linked to* the production of commodities and services" (Onuf and Hyry 1997, p. 38, emphasis added). Like Williams, Onuf and Hyry distinguish between individuals and corporate bodies as creators of records. However, they also extend the distinction to the types of activities in which an individual engages: The types of activities undertaken by an individual creating a personal archive do not include those typically associated with a corporate or governmental entity, i.e., the production of commodities and services.

Hobbs similarly distinguishes particular motivations for making and keeping records that are more personal than organizational. She explains that "personal archives are formed because of the needs, desires, and predilections of their creators to create and keep documents (not for an administrative purpose or because of a legal requirement)" (Hobbs 2010, p. 213). In "The Character of Personal Archives," Hobbs explores the ways in which personal archives are fundamentally different in nature than organizational archives, arguing that because of their differences archivists need to develop theories and methodologies specific to personal archives; where organizational records are characterized by their "transactionality" and "evidentiality," the essential characteristics of personal archives, Hobbs argues, are the way they reflect the "psychology" and "character" of their creators (Hobbs 2001, p. 127).

Definitions and characterizations of personal and organizational records tend to emphasize not only differences in types of creators and activities, but also in the way archives are created, kept and managed over time. Frank Burke, for example, contrasted archives (by which he meant the records of public agencies and similar organizations) and personal papers in this way: "Archives are methodical, organized and structured, stretching over many generations and pragmatic in their subject matter and the intent of their creation. Personal papers are subjective, idiosyncratic, emotional, contemporary and narrow by focus" (Burke 1997, p. 11). The distinction Burke makes between the order of the organizational archive and the mess and idiosyncracy of the personal is apparent also in the debate between Graeme Powell and Chris Hurley in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Powell suggested that the principle of original order was not as applicable to personal archives as it was to organizational archives since the former are typically either lacking in original order or have become disordered, whereas the latter are carefully ordered during their active life and subsequently maintained in that order (Powell 1995; Hurley 1995). A similar emphasis on disorder can be found in Verne Harris' essay on personal archives, published in 2001, which extolls personal archives' "resistance to functionality" and decries the impulse he finds in traditional archival theory and methodology to "tame [and] destroy" the "wilderness area" of personal recordkeeping (Harris 2001, p. 20).

In addition to making a distinction between the order of organizational records and the mess of personal archives, Burke (1997) further divides the two categories,

suggesting that personal archives are emotional, while organizational archives are pragmatic; that personal archives are subjective and—it is implied—organizational archives are objective; and that personal archives are narrow in scope, relating only to the individual, while organizational archives have broader societal impact and import.

Most of these definitions and characterizations are intended to create a positive space for personal archives, to allow them to be explored on their own terms and to make room in archival theory for what is different about them. It is our contention, however, that archivists should be concerned about how characterizations of records that so precisely distinguish between records of institutional and personal provenance could also work to foster the impression that the personal is contained in and by personal archives. Personal archives are defined based on what they are not; they are "othered," and as Hobbs (2001) and Douglas (2017) demonstrate, their status as other is reflected in the way they are both undertheorized and underrepresented in archival education programs. At the same time, definitions that align the emotional and subjective with personal archives and the pragmatic and objective with organizational archives, circumscribe the meaning and potential of organizational archives.

What else can "personal" mean?

It is for these reasons that we wish to explore a broader interpretation of "personal" in archives. In their article, "Toward the Archival Multiverse: Challenging the Binary Opposition of the Personal and Corporate in Modern Archival Theory and Practice," McKemmish and Piggott define personal archives somewhat differently than the theorists whose work we have looked at so far. Working within the records continuum model, McKemmish and Piggott explain that "within this frame, from the perspective of the individual, we define the personal archive in the broadest sense to include all forms, genres, and media of records relating to that person, whether captured in personal or corporate recordkeeping systems; remembered, transmitted orally, or performed; held in manuscript collections, archival, and other cultural institutions, community archives, or other keeping places; or stored or shared in digital spaces" (McKemmish and Piggott 2013, p. 113). This definition takes a much more expansive view of the personal archive, so that it can include records wherever they are created or encountered by either the individual herself, or by an organization with which she has interacted. The central defining feature of the personal is still the relationship between the individual and the record, but that relationship is here defined more broadly beyond record creation. This type of thinking about what constitutes the personal archive aligns with recent discussions about the overlap of the personal and professional in online spaces—a phenomenon highlighted by Hobbs (2015) in her entry on personal archives in the recently published *Encyclopedia of Archival Science*—and with expanding notions of the principle of provenance (Hurley 2005a, b) that recognize the role that not only the traditionally named creator plays in making the record, but also, for example, the roles played by the subjects of those records (Iacovino 2010; Bastian 2006; Gilliland 2012; Caswell 2014).

In their article, McKemmish and Piggott also argue that "Western archival theory and practice…have privileged and celebrated the physical and intellectual dimensions of recordkeeping and have been blind to the emotional and spiritual." They suggest that these four dimensions are present in *all* forms of recordkeeping—personal and corporate—and that recognizing this might lead to "an enriched and more inclusive recordkeeping and archival practice" (McKemmish and Piggott 2013, pp. 128–129). McKemmish and Piggot's emphasis on the emotional dimensions of recordkeeping calls to mind the recent focus in archival discourse on archives and affect (Cifor 2016; Cvetkovich 2003; Lee 2016). While affect is not strictly synonymous with emotion, the emotional dimension of recordkeeping is highlighted in many of the recent articles on archives and affect; a particular strain of emphasis is on the intensely personal emotions elicited in confrontation with—or, equally, in the absence of access to—organizational records.

Examples of this kind of *personal-in-the-institutional* have been discussed in writings on the experiences of Australian care leavers—adults who were, for various reasons, raised as children in state-run institutions—who seek out the records created by the institutions responsible for their education and care (see Wilson and Golding 2016; Kertesz et al. 2012; McCarthy et al. 2012; O'Neill et al. 2012). Shurlee Swain and Nell Musgrove explain the "deeply personal element" of records that document Australian care leavers' lives. They explain how for many adults, institutional records are the only records that exist to document their childhoods, and how for these adults, the administrative, institutional record needs therefore to function also as—at least in part—the personal record of an individual's growing up; care leavers turn to institutional records "in the hope that they will be able to replace family as the repository of personal histories" (Swain and Musgrove 2012, p. 6). However, Swain and Musgrove describe how the experience of accessing and reading their institutional case files can often be bewildering, re-traumatizing and unfulfilling. Institutional case files, they explain, "were not designed to meet" the personal needs of adult care leavers. Instead, "they were compiled for bureaucratic reasons and preserve the forms and documents necessary to ensure the efficient operation of an organization without making any attempt to tell the story of a life" (Swain and Musgrove 2012, p. 7). Swain and Musgrove suggest that there is a need to "reimagin[e] the relationships between archivists, creators of documents, the records themselves and the people about whom the records contain information" (Swain and Musgrove 2012, p. 8) so that barriers to accessing information are removed and so that even before access is requested, better records are made, records that will meet some of the future needs of those in care for whom case files might provide the only personal record of their young lives.

Another example of the *personal-in-the-institutional* is described by Melissa Autumn White in her discussion of queer migration documents as technologies of affect. White describes the process of "establishing intimacy in queer family class migration archives," where, in pursuit of family class sponsorship, personal archives are compiled to satisfy a bureaucratic requirement to prove intimacy. Documents brought together in application files include "relationship essays, photographic evidence, letters of testimony and support from family, friends and community members." As White explains, these aggregations, as a record of applicants' lives

together, are "profoundly affective archives." They are also archives that act as "a kind of interface between relational migrant desires for recognition and state bureaucracies of calculability"; they are compiled to attest to the intimate nature of a relationship, but in direct response to a state requirement (White 2014, p. 78). In this case, a dossier of *personal* records is compiled in order to serve as an *institutional* record.

A third example of *personal-in-the-institutional* is described in moving detail by Muninder K. Dhaliwal in an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. Dhaliwhal is a medical student studying how to write a procedural medical note and reflecting at the same time on a doctor's note written *about* her following a sexual assault. That note, she explains, is not only a "cold, sterile, cautiously constructed" institutional record, it also tells a particular kind of personal story, whether the doctor who wrote it realizes it or not. "There is," she writes, "beauty behind this seemingly mundane task I will be asked to do day in and day out as a physician" (Dhaliwhal 2016, p. 464). Reflecting on her own experience of being recorded in this routine, institutional record, Dhaliwal recognizes first that alongside the routine and institutional is the personal, intimate story, and second that with the personal and intimate come responsibility on the part of the recorder.

Activating the record as personal

Each of the examples cited above demonstrates the difficulties that can arise when trying to definitively demarcate the personal and the institutional. In each case, what makes a record *personal* is not the nature of the recordkeeping system in which it is preserved, and nor does it necessarily derive from the record creator; however, creatorship is interpreted (Douglas 2018). Instead, the personal is located in what Eric Ketelaar has called the record's "activation." Ketelaar argues that "every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation by creator, user, and archivist is an activation of the record." In this view, the archive is not merely the final, static aggregation of accumulated documents, but is also constituted through "an infinite activation of the record"; in other words, the meaning of the archive derives not only from its contents, but also from the uses to which the contents are put and the motivations for that use (Ketelaar 2001, p. 137).

In the next sections of this paper, we use an autoethnographic approach to recount our own experiences of activating institutional records for personal reasons as a means of further exploring the personal relationships between individuals and records. Our choice of autoethnography as a research method allows us to—as we explained in the introduction—center the personal, and also, by putting our own personal reactions under the microscope, to develop our understanding of the ethical and moral implications of finding the personal across different dimensions of archival materials and practices; just as Dhaliwhal better understands, through her own experience of being documented, the responsibility of being the documenter, we find in the autoethnographic approach an opportunity to explore how, as recordkeepers, our own experiences of the personal-in-the-institutional affect our understanding of

our evolving responsibilities to records, record creators, record subject, record users and any other record activators.

Autoethnography

In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, Carolyn S. Ellis defines autoethnography as "ethnographic research, writing, story, and method that connect that autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political." In autoethnographic work, "the life of the researcher becomes a conscious part of what is studied." Ellis explains that autoethnography has "had an important influence on qualitative research" since the mid-1990s as researchers have sought to "position themselves in their research" and to self-consciously reflect on their subjective role(s) in the research process and their presence in the research product. Ellis stresses, as do other proponents of the methodology, that autoethnography is grounded not only in personal experience but also in a broader socio-cultural context. She explains: "Autoethnographers gaze back and forth. First, they look through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience. Next, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations" (Ellis 2008, np).

Ellis's comments about the "back and forth" gaze of the autoethnographic researcher respond to concerns that autoethnography is self-indulgent on the part of the researcher and that it lacks both rigor and broad social and cultural impact. Many autoethnographers are careful to note how their work is, as Amani Hamdan puts it, "culturally and discursively situated:" "simply put," Hamdan explains, "my 'story' can never be wholly mine, alone, because I define and articulate my existence with and among others" (Hamdan 2012, p. 589). While she situates the autoethnographic firmly within a wider social context, Hamdan characterizes the type of knowledge possessed by the autoethnographer as "privileged knowledge," as it "provides an insider account and analysis of weaved power structures that an outsider cannot dismantle"; this quality, she argues, "makes autoethnography a genre and a way of knowing for the unknown and the rarely spoken of" (Hamdan 2012, p. 587). The ability of the autoethnographic researcher to convey a particularly personal knowledge is key to the method's success. Sarah Wall describes autoethnography as "a form of writing that should allow readers to feel the dilemmas, think with a story rather than about it, join actively with the author's decision points, and become co-participants who engage with the story line morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually." Where the "world of traditional science [and] objective distance" works to "protect researchers and readers from the emotional and intimate details of human lives," autoethnographic methods are especially appropriate when it is precisely those emotional and intimate details with which a researcher wishes to engage (Wall 2008, p. 44; see also Wall 2006, 2016).

In the next two sections, each author undertakes an autoethnographic approach to studying her personal relationship to a particular set of institutional records. We are aware that the experiences we recount below are intensely personal, that some

readers might find them difficult to read and that some might even find them *too* personal to count as research. As noted above, however, we find in the personal nature of autoethnography as a research method an opportunity to consider in a new light the responsibilities of recordkeepers: Autoethnography itself is a means of activating records in a personal capacity and can provide recordkeepers with insights about what it might feel like to—on the other hand—*be kept in a record*.

Two autoethnographic case studies

Case study 1: Jennifer Douglas

In January 2012, my second daughter was stillborn. This was a personally devastating experience as well as a professionally damaging one. When my daughter died, I was nearing completion of my doctoral studies. Following her death, I experienced a profound and prolonged period of bereavement. Grief affected me personally, and it also affected me professionally. I first found it nearly impossible to work. I was in shock. I could not concentrate or think clearly. Unfortunately, the academic world is not forgiving of personal tragedy and in the publish-or-perish, perpetual work cycle of academia I could not afford to do nothing for very long. One way I found to return to work was to incorporate the experience of bereavement into my focus on personal archives and personal recordkeeping. I should be clear: This was not an opportunistic decision. Rather, it was the only way I could continue to function in my professional capacity. I began by studying online grief communities—in which I had become an active participant—as a particular type of archival endeavor, and presented my ideas at several conferences (Douglas 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016). That work has since grown into a broader study of the role of records and recordkeeping in "grief work."[1] The autoethnographic account I include below—that of requesting, receiving and reviewing my own medical files from the hospital where my daughter was born—is part of that larger study.

Autoethnography can be done using a variety of specific methods, including writing personal narrative, remembering and conducting content analysis of texts and documents. Sources of data can include letters, diary extracts, memories, medical records, sketches and photographs. Wall argues that autoethnography might best be considered "more of a philosophy than a well-defined method," and there therefore "remains considerable latitude in the production of an autoethnographic text" (Wall 2008, p. 39). For the autoethnographic work conducted for this case study, I first produced a narrative account (hereafter referred to as "Narrative Account") of my memories of my experience of ordering, receiving, opening and reading medical records I requested from the hospital where my three children were born. I ordered the medical records in the fall of 2016 and received them several weeks later. The "Narrative Account" was produced in May 2017. In this account, I recall the anxiety I felt around requesting my medical records, the anticipation of waiting for them to

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[1] For a description of this project, see: https://blogs.ubc.ca/recordkeepinggriefwork/about-the-project/.

arrive in the mail, the hope I felt when they arrived that they would be able to provide certain types of information, and the bewildering and disappointing feeling of reading them through for the first time. After compiling this retrospective account, I conducted a second close reading of the entire file I received from the hospital. As I reviewed the file, I took detailed notes about my reactions, feelings, questions and reflections (hereafter referred to as "File Review Notes"). After completing my review of the file, I also wrote a brief reflection on the experience of conducting such a close and detailed file review (hereafter referred to as "Concluding Reflection"). File review notes were produced over a several-week period in May and June 2017, and the "Concluding Reflection" was written in June 2017. Finally, I engaged in an iterative coding exercise with these three sets of notes and reflections; just as I would with transcriptions of participant interviews in a qualitative study, I analyzed these documents by identifying what emerged as significant concepts and recurring themes or patterns, refining these as I read through the notes multiple times and revising categories as needed.

I requested my records in the fall of 2016. Over a period of 2 years before doing so, I had thought about requesting the records, had visited the Web site of the hospital to learn what I needed to do and had repeatedly stopped myself at the point of ordering. What was different, I think, in October, 2016, was that I was aware of the fifth anniversary of my daughter's death approaching. I know why I wanted those records: as I wrote in the "Narrative Account," "I wanted to find *her* in those records, something of her that I didn't know…some clue in the records, or some scrap of information about her that I didn't yet know." A period of active waiting followed my request. In the "Narrative Account," I described this waiting as "dread-ful waiting":

> I was full of dread. I'm not sure what the dread was. Maybe dread of feeling the intensity of grief all over again. Maybe dread related to my suspicion – proven true – that there would be nothing that *helped* in those records, that I wouldn't find what I was looking for. Maybe dread that I would find something new that was awful…

When the thick yellow envelope arrived in the mail, it was a disappointment. I had to wait to look at it until the end of the day and then I stayed up late, looking through every photocopied document, "looking for her" ("Narrative Account"). I did not find her. As I wrote in the "Narrative Account," I realized as I read through the records the first time that because she was stillborn, and therefore not requiring medical care, she was never considered a patient. The patient was *me*, and the records were "all about me and my condition, my reactions to the induction drugs, the progression of my labour, my appearance of grieving." The "Narrative Account" notes continue: "She is there, yes: her weight, her gestational age, copies of her autopsy, but there is nothing in the records that I didn't already know, at least not about her" ("Narrative Account"). A closer reading of the file showed me that there were in fact things in it that I had not known. Done as part of this research study, the closer reading—and the recording of my reactions as I read—also allowed me to identify significant patterns and themes that emerged through analysis, some of which I explore in the remainder of this section.

As I mentioned above, I realized after reading through my file the first time that what I wanted the file to do was not what it was intended to do. While I wanted the documents within the file to tell me more than I already knew about my daughter, they were created and compiled to manage *my* care, and therefore mostly consisted of records of my physical and mental state. This fact is not at all surprising when I stop to think rationally about it; I realize, however, that *rational* was not how I was feeling when I decided to request my records. I was feeling *emotional* and I wanted the records to fulfill an emotional need of mine that they could never have been capable of fulfilling, created as they were to achieve particular ends for the people who used them: nurses, doctors, anesthesiologists, coroners, etc. doing their jobs.

Because medical records are created to allow specialists to do their jobs, a difficulty associated with reading them is the specialized knowledge required to make sense of different documents. Unsurprisingly, the language used in many of them was unfamiliar to me; I had to look up words like "maceration," "histologic," "autolysis," but even after finding their definitions in the dictionary, their meanings were not significantly clearer to me. It is not only the specialized vocabulary that prohibits my full understanding of my medical file, but also my lack of knowledge of the types and methods of documentation used in an obstetrics context. The purposes of some documents are clear enough to me (e.g., charts documenting types of medication and times given; the autopsy report; the triage/admission form), but other documents confound me, remaining opaque and useless to me no matter how hard I study them. Also, because I am not generally knowledgeable about the types of records created and the process of compiling a patient's file, I am incapable of assessing whether the file I have been given is complete. The file is full of copies of the same record, interspersed at different places in the file, which is more or less organized chronologically with the most recent records at the top of the file and the oldest at the bottom. This causes me to wonder, too, whether the file I have been sent was compiled from records pulled from various files; if this is the case, I wonder by what means the clerical staff who respond to access requests ensure that they are locating all relevant records? It is not clear how the file in front of me today has taken shape. These types of barriers—the specialized vocabulary and profession-specific record making and recordkeeping policies and procedures—caused me to feel some alienation; although the records in this file are about me, and about my daughter, a feeling of distance characterizes my experience of reading them.

This type of distancing is exacerbated also by the impersonal professionalism of the documents within the file. Quoted below is one of the impersonal statements which—in my personal reading—jarred most significantly with my memory, emotions and grief. The following two sentences extracted from the brief account of our hospital stay in a document titled "Discharge Summary"—a one-page summary of a more than 48-h stay—refer to my arrival at the assessment unit and the start of our story: "On arrival in the Assessment Room, no fetal heart rate could be found. Consultation was made to Obstetrics, and Dr. F—confirmed, with ultrasound, fetal demise." This terse account of the moments (in fact, this occurred over several hours) where I arrived at the hospital, lay in a bed waiting while various nurses and doctors struggled to find my baby's heartbeat, waited longer for an obstetrician and an ultrasound machine to confirm what I already knew by then, do nothing to

convey the intensity of the feelings I experienced in those hours: fear, anxiety, horror, shock, confusion and intense sorrow. Perhaps it is unrealistic of me to expect that such records would reveal a fuller story, but realistic or not, that is precisely what I *wanted* them to do.

I experienced a similar disconnect between the intensity of my feeling and the impersonal professionalism of the records while rereading the autopsy report in my file. The "Narrative Account" document compiled as part of the autoethnographic method clearly demonstrates the pain and anxiety I felt upon realizing that the coroner was describing parts of my daughter's body that I did not ever get to see myself. I wondered, as I read the coroner's assessment of her eyes as "normal," what color they were. I thought, as I read the coroner's description of her heart and other internal organs, about the *process* of an autopsy and about my tiny daughter's body being subjected to that process. In the "Narrative Account," I wonder, "How was she handled once she left my care?" I note that, "I have had these thoughts before, of course, but they come back to me now and it's awful. Awful to imagine her body which [in these records] no one ever seems to have thought of as a person…My body aches again for her. It is not normal for a mother to be separated from her child and I feel it again—the awful awful ache of leaving her in that hospital room" ("Narrative Account").

These reactions to the cold, clinical character of various reports demonstrate that despite the distancing effects of the specialized language and professional tone described above, the documents are incapable of stopping my personal reaction to them. They are, however, capable of making me feel alienated from my own experience. As a trained records professional, I can rationalize the reasons why the file I received in the mail is inadequate to my needs as a bereaved parent. As a bereaved parent, however, I want to rail at the system that produced this cold, alienating and terribly disappointing file. It took so much courage to make the records request, and I spent so many weeks hoping to find something that would help me make sense of a senseless experience, only to be so terribly disappointed by the package of photocopies that arrived in my mailbox; the records let me down completely.

Case study 2: Allison Mills

In 2015, as I completed the second year of my master's program, Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) published their six-volume final report on the Indian Residential School System. The conclusion of the TRC, the launch of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) Web site out of the University of Manitoba and the TRC's 94 Calls to Action, which specifically call on Canadian archival professionals "to undertake, in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, a national review of archival policies and best practices" (TRC 2015, p. 8), had a direct impact on me both personally and professionally. Professionally, the TRC left little doubt that Canadian archivists had to reckon with the way their policies and the inherently colonial nature of archives had impacted Indigenous communities. Personally, many of my family members attended residential school, and my family was—and still is—struggling to come to terms with their impact on all of us.

As a student in an archival studies program during this time, I found myself focusing more and more on residential school records. Although I had originally planned on focusing my work on the impact of racism and colonialism in ethnographic archives, suddenly the work of the TRC and their record collection was front and center in my mind.

As a Cree woman and one of the very few Indigenous students enrolled at the University of British Columbia School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, being part of the conversation about residential school records and archives felt critical, even necessary. There is a long history of decisions regarding records about Indigenous peoples being made without input from the Indigenous people documented in them. As a whole, archives are hostile toward Indigenous peoples. As Crystal Fraser and Zoe Todd argue, they are inherently colonial spaces which usually do not house and care for the records *of* Indigenous peoples and communities, but records *about* us written by non-Indigenous researchers. These are records of surveillance written by people who did not understand or respect Indigenous ways of being, and by agents of the colonial state in which we live. These records are "limited by the overtly biased and one-sided nature of archival records" (Fraser and Todd 2015). This is certainly true when we talk about records of residential schools, which were primarily produced by school administrators, and which are, for the most part, held in Library and Archives Canada and the archives of the United Church of Canada, the Anglican Church and the Catholic missionary order the Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Many of these records were digitized as part of the TRC's record collection process, and the NCTR now hosts digital archives of this material and is in the process of organizing and making records available for communities and researchers.

Students who attended residential school lived hyper-surveilled lives. Intimate details of their experiences are recorded in letters written between school principals and government Indian Agents. Judgments about their character, their families and their communities have been preserved—and now digitized—for prosperity. Many of these records are already more widely available than most archival material in the form of RG-10. RG-10 is the identifier assigned to the Indian Affairs Record Group at Library and Archives Canada. RG-10 contains "the historical records relating to Indian Affairs created by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and its predecessors." It includes "files, correspondence, letters, and transcripts on all aspects of Indian administration for both headquarters and the field offices."[2] It was microfilmed for distribution and later digitized. Even before the NCTR made much of RG-10 available on their Web site, organized by school, you could access a digitized version of the records via Library and Archives Canada's Web site. Contained in these publicly available, government records are records of my family. Four pages, made up of three distinct items, which document the criminal neglect my grandfather's siblings experienced at St. John's, the residential school they attended in Chapleau, Ontario.

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[2] Library and Archives Canada, Indian Affairs Record Group 10 (RG10) Inventory, https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/first-nations/indian-affairs-rg10/Pages/introduction.aspx.

The autoethnography I conducted for this article began by recording what I recalled of my experience encountering these records for the first time (which I will refer to as "Initial Account"). One, a letter from an Indian Agent to the school principal regarding allegations of abuse and neglect brought against him by the parents of students was shown to me by my mother in 2012, after it was uncovered by a cousin. My great-grandmother, Louisa, had five children in St. John's at the time the letter was sent, but it documents only her accusations regarding the neglect suffered by my great-uncle, Charlie. At age five, Charlie's feet were frozen and in bad shape, bleeding and neglected. The school staff did nothing to help him. His 12-year-old brother, Alan, looked after him the best he could, cleaning Charlie's feet and trying to keep him healthy. I discovered the other two records while researching St. John's in early 2016: an affidavit dictated by my great-grandmother that shed new light on the original letter, and a response to the affidavit written by the lawyer who took it, A. G. Chisholm. He was hired by the Department of Indian Affairs and stated in this letter that Louisa's statement was false, that he had the Indian Agent's "assurance that this woman is in the habit of throwing a fit for its dramatic effect" (Library and Archives Canada 1907, p. 244) and she should, it is implied, not be trusted.

After writing out my memories of encountering these records for the first time, I re-read the records and recorded how I think of them now and the feelings they evoke (from here "Secondary Account"). Over the course of several weeks, as I reflected on the records, on archival theory and on my role as an archivist and researcher, I recorded my thoughts (from here "Reflection Notes"). I then went back and read through all three sets of writing to analyze my thinking over time and identify significant themes that arose from this work.

My "Initial Account" is one of mingled anger and pride. Anger at the way Louisa is treated, at the way her concern for the health and safety of her sons is dismissed out of hand as hysterical, and pride over her "throwing a fit" regularly, because I have privileged, insider information about those "fits." I know things that the records do not show. I recall this family story in the "Initial Account":

> I guess the allegation that Louisa threw fits regularly is sort of true. She lived close to the school. Close enough that 5yo [*sic*] Mabel [my great-aunt] could walk back home. Louisa made her displeasure known to the local Indian Agent. She went to the school regularly to complain about the treatment of her children, about the lack of decent education, about their neglect…the stupid, throw away note scrawled in the margin makes me feel so proud of her. I'm angry on Charlie and Alan and Louisa's behalf too, frustrated that everything was explained away, but proud of Louisa for giving them hell.

Although the anger and pride remained in my "Secondary Account," it changed somewhat, informed by my work as a researcher at the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre at the University of British Columbia. This work means I am much more familiar with the intimate details of the residential school *system* than I was when I first encountered these records. In the "Secondary Account," I am frustrated by the bureaucracy that informs the creation and preservation of these records and not others, and by the lack of care evident in these records. I see, in these records, the reasons why Indigenous peoples are reluctant

to work with and slow to trust researchers: "This is why we don't trust outside researchers and archivists, because we know them. We have spent years being accused of being hysterical, of lying, by those with the power to decide what goes in the official record. Why should we?" The "Secondary Account" is steeped in cynicism about the profession I have chosen to be a part of, and underlying that, a deep desire for *more* in the records—more mention of family members, more of their point of view, more written in their hand than the "X" Louisa signed her affidavit with. I am frustrated, beneath the surface level anger, that these do not exist to be found.

The construction of my "Reflection Notes" was informed by these two accounts and the records themselves, as well as Indigenous critiques of the archive (Luker 2017; Mills 2017; Callison et al. 2016; Hunt 2016; Falzetti 2015; Fraser and Todd 2015; O'Neal 2015; Krebs 2012; Smith 2012; Mckemmish et al. 2011; First Archivists Circle 2007; Perry 2005; Russell 2005) and our previously discussed literature review. It allowed me to move past feelings of frustration and anger with the records and to build a connection between my personal experiences and archival theory, to connect how I experienced these records with the work of others.

These three records represent the only account my family has of Alan and Charlie at St. John's and my great-grandmother's attempts to keep them safe. My great-uncles never talked about it, even to their children, and although my grandfather and his eldest sister, Mabel, talked about St. John's shortly before her death, very little of their conversation made it beyond the two of them. Residential school, in our family—as in many others—was a dark secret that could not be spoken about because of the pain and stigma associated with it. It is somewhat galling, then, that for many years researchers at Library and Archives Canada and libraries with copies of the RG-10 microfilm had more access to this history than my family.

The single file of the RG-10 School File Series these records exist in is 342 pages long. That is a single, 20-year span, for a single school out of more than 130 schools—a number which accounts only for residential schools, not for day schools or student residences and hostels. The amount of records produced as part of the system is staggering. The NCTR's collection consists of about 6 million records (https://nctr.ca/map.php). In this vast collection of material, all my family has is three things. This scarcity makes them even more important to us; these few mean everything. They are pieces of our relatives' lives that we will never be able to know in any other way.

The limits placed on organizational archives, which present them as pragmatic and objective, unlike emotional and subjective personal archives, in some contexts—such as records of residential schools—act to naturalize and codify oppression. As with the records of care leavers encountered by Swain and Musgrove (2012, p. 8), these records were created to serve a particular purpose, reflecting a particular, bureaucratic point of view. I can read the silences that exist in the records due to this point of view, but only because of my personal connection to them. If the personal is not here, if these records do not exist in context, then they continue their original function—in this case, to discredit Louisa and the other 15 parents who accused the principal of criminal neglect. The addition of the personal to this record undermines its original intent, it allows us to push back against the past and add all-important

context that is missing from the records, and this context is something that only we, those for whom the records are personal, have.

Reflections on the case studies

Although the two case studies are relate to different personal experiences, some common elements emerge with analysis. In the first place, for both authors, the institutional records—the medical file and the school records found in RG-10—though unsatisfactory in many ways are experienced as material remains and memories of beloved family members. In both cases the records also perform a *present*-ing function in the face of societal erasure. For example, the grief that parents of stillborn babies feel has been described as "disenfranchised grief" and parents report feeling as though they need to keep that grief private and silent; this can result in parents feeling as though the world around them has forgotten their children were born at all (Lang et al. 2011). The file of medical records was used in part by Douglas to affirm the existence of her child, to find physical proof of that existence as the anniversary of the baby's death approached. In the second case study, Mills finds in RG-10 the physical manifestation and proof—in the "X" written in Louisa's hand—of her great-grandmother's resistance to a system that sought to tear her family apart.

As well, each of us refers to how the institutional records—again, as unsatisfying as they might be—are all, or almost all, that exist; each of us *needs* these records as family records that help to understand and continue family relationships. As Mills states: "They are pieces of our relatives' lives that we will never be able to know in any other way." In this regard, both authors also strongly indicate a desire for *more*: more records and more detail in the records. This desire was also reported by Swain and Musgrove, who discussed care leavers' desires to find a suitable replacement for family histories in the institutional records documenting their childhood. Like us, care leavers were often faced with gaps in the record or redactions to records based on access and privacy legislation (Swain and Musgrove 2012, p. 6, 9; on the desire for *more* in records and on the expectations and yearning that people project on to records, see also Dever 2010 and Gilliland and Caswell 2016).

A third common theme, which emerged much more strongly in the second case but is also present in the first, relates to issues of access and control over records, and over the personal stories contained in records. Mills clearly states the frustration of finding in administrative records intimate details of her family members' lives, which are then made available through microform and digitization to anyone who wants to access them, and which have, over time, been more available to staff at LAC than they have been to her family. Noting that children who attended residential schools "lived hyper-surveilled lives," she shows how exposure and surveillance are perpetuated through archival access systems over which those documented in records have little to no control (see also Wilson and Golding 2016).

A final theme we discuss here has to do with the silencing and distancing effects of institutional records and recordkeeping systems. Gilliland and Caswell (2016, p. 55) have written, movingly, of the "meanings and sentiments that might be attributed to or incurred by…absence" in "imagined-but-unavailable records"; in our case

studies, both of us noted the absence of things we had hoped to find in records we knew existed, records that are routinely created. Both of us found that routine, institutional records encoded as pragmatic, objective and impersonal accounts were incapable of telling "whole" stories, but that nevertheless, "whole" stories were what we were trying to reconstruct in our reading of them. Bureaucratic records, written from a particular view point, for a particular purpose, and in specialized language, are full of silences, places where we *know* there is more to the story, but for the purposes of the record in question, those pieces of the story were not relevant or were even, potentially, actively suppressed. There are ways, too, in which information that *is* recorded functions as a barrier to access and understanding; to a certain extent, the records we consulted were hostile to the purposes for which we activated them.

What does this mean for archives?

The division between the institutional and the personal *others* archives classified as "personal" and sets up a disparity in how records are treated. The oppositional distinction between the institutional and the personal also limits the way users and archivists alike imagine institutional archives. The meaning of the institutional records we experienced is circumscribed because of their theoretical positioning as clinical, objective and neutral. Allison Mills' case study shows that the supposedly neutral presentation of records of colonial oppression works to naturalize that oppression; the neutral stance taken by archivists and archival institutions does not allow them to be "impartial," but rather renders them complicit in furthering the records' original purpose. Although institutional records have the potential to be better contextualized through the input of their subjects, this potential may not be fully realized until archives also reimagine how we think about the artificial division between the personal and institutional in our records.

In our literature review, we cited McKemmish and Piggott's (2013) contention that archival theory and practice have neglected the emotional and spiritual dimensions of recordkeeping; although our research did not consider a spiritual dimension to the records we studied, we do demonstrate that there is a significant and intense emotional dimension experienced through the consultation and use—and potentially of other types of activation—of institutional records. This emotional dimension may not have been part of the context of the records' creation,[3] but it is central to the experience of at least some users of archives. In their article "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives" Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor call for archivists to accept "affective responsibility toward radical empathy" across four relationships (Caswell and Cifor 2016, p. 33): relationships between the archivist and the record creator; relationships between the archivist and the record subject(s); relationships between the

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[3] In both cases, record makers may have had to put considerable professional distance between themselves and the human trauma they witnessed and documented; the requirement for dispassionate observation in the *making* of records is beyond the scope of this paper but deserves serious attention.

archivist and the user; and relationships between the archivist and larger communities. Referring to the relationship between archivists and users, they highlight "the affective impact of finding—or not finding—records that are personally meaningful, and the personal consequences that archival interactions can have on users" (p. 37). Archivists, they insist, cannot continue to act as though "users are all detached neutral subjects without a stake in the records they are using" (p. 37).

Adopting affective responsibility to users will require archivists to reimagine (as Swain and Musgrove (2012) put it) the relationships between records and the people who create them, shape them, use them, take care of them and are documented in them. Caswell and Cifor suggest that sometimes, "allowing for affect can be as simple as giving the user space and time to feel" (Caswell and Cifor 2016, p. 37). At other times, a more radical reorientation will be required both to how archives provide access to records and to how records are created in institutions in the first place. Vlad Selakovic (O'Neill et al. 2012) recalls the experience of accessing his state ward file, which documented the five childhood years he spent in state institutions. Referring to the experience of receiving that file in the mail, Selakovic states: "It's not very inviting…to see your whole childhood wrapped up in a little envelope" (O'Neill et al. 2012, p. 32). He describes feeling hurt by the "physical presentation" of his file "in a gray plastic folder, containing pages of copies of documents, secured by a bull-dog clip." He further describes the alienating effect of the passive voice used in the cover letter attached to the file and of the "formal language and jargon" used to explain what he would find in his file. Selakovic also expresses the shock he felt at realizing, as he read through its contents, that the file "was *about* him but not *for* him." As O'Neill, Selakovic and Tropea note: "The records in his 'file' had been created by social workers, police, superintendents and the courts for their own administrative purposes, and without any thoughts to a future when Vlad might come back and read it." The experiences we recount in our autoethnographic accounts are variations on Vlad's; all of us recognized the records we consulted as in some ways inarguably *ours* and in other ways unquestionably *not ours*.

In the 6 years, since McKemmish and Piggott's article rejecting the binary between personal and institutional archives was published, there has been little to no discussion of the implications of this rejection in the archival literature; personal and institutional archives continue—at least in the North American context—to be treated as exclusive categories of record, and archival education—again in the North American context—tends to neglect the study of personal archives (Douglas 2017). In 2012, Swain and Musgrove urged archivists and recordkeepers to "reimagin[e] the relationships between [themselves], creators of documents, the records themselves and the people about whom the records contain information" (p. 8). While some of the work of reimagining these relationships is being undertaken in the context of the records of children in care (Murray 2017; Evans 2017), the autoethnographic case studies discussed here suggest that there is yet more scope for that work; the case studies also suggest that an autoethnographic approach can be one means of reimagining, of engaging in the effort to understand the nuanced personal relationships that individuals might have to a variety of different types of archives.

From the sidelines to the center: activating the personal in archives

This article has suggested that at least part of what makes a record personal is not only its context of creation, but also the way it is activated through time; in other words, personal can refer to the provenance of a record and also to the way its activators experience it. Understood this way, the "personal" is part of not only those records traditionally identified as personal archives but also of institutional records, and part, too, of archival processes. Thinking about the personal this way requires archivists to consider in how many aspects of their work the personal appears. Margaret Hedstrom's (2002) concept of the archival interface is useful here; interfaces exist at each point where the archives or the archivist has contact with a member of the public. Records are activated through a variety of interfaces and archivists could therefore consider how our archival interfaces facilitate or inhibit the personal relationships that might exist between our records and those who create, shape and consult them. For example, we might consider how interfaces like the finding aid (and/or online catalog), with its archival jargon and arcane structure (Scheir 2006; Duff and Johnson 2003; Duff and Stoyanova 1998; Daines and Nimer 2011; Nimer and Daines 2008), or the reference room, with its many—often unfamiliar and sometimes hostile (Rawson 2009)—rules impact the experience of records as personal. Many archival interfaces have been designed with a particular imagined user in mind: the academic historian. But people come to archives seeking more than only historical facts (Etherton 2006). How do people who come to archives seeking the personal—or indeed those who are *surprised by* the personal—experience archival interfaces? How can archival interfaces be made more hospitable to the personal?

If we are to going to make a serious attempt to answer these questions, new considerations of the personal in archives must also take place above the level of the interface. This article began by noting how previous work has highlighted the ways in which the personal has been sidelined in archival theory and pedagogy. It then showed how centering the personal can inform archivists' understanding of our ethical and affective responsibilities to records creators, subjects and users. This type of centering of the personal needs to occur in archival theory and education programs and in archival research agendas. Before we change how we interface with record activators, we need to change how we talk about, teach and value the personal in archives; we need to move the personal from the sidelines of archival theory and pedagogy toward the center.

In 2016, the Council of Canadian Academies published a report on the future of memory institutions in Canada; the report identifies a need to establish "meaningful relationships that foster trust between memory institutions and users," while providing users with "enhanced and valued experience" (xiii). The report recognizes that establishing trusting relationships is complicated by the fact that "it can be difficult for large institutions to make a human connection with their visitors" (66). The need to rethink relationships between memory institutions and the public is also a focus of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's final report and is central to several of the reports Calls to Action (CTAs)

(e.g., CTA 67, 68, 69 and 70). Emphasizing the personal dimension of archives is one potential means of focusing on the "human connection" between archival institutions and those who wish to access their collections. It is also a means of thinking through how respectful and sensitive access is applied to records.

As exploratory research, the research discussed in this article leaves us with more questions than answers. Questions we wish to leave with readers to consider include: How responsible are archivists for the personal, understood in the broader, experiential way we propose in this article? And if we accept responsibility in this regard—which both authors feel strongly we should—what methods and tools do we need to develop to demonstrate respect for the personal, emotional and intimate aspects of record activation, for example, in our record descriptions and access systems? How do we create interfaces with the public that permit people "the space and time to feel" (Caswell and Cifor 2016, p. 37)? These questions are central to both authors research agendas. They are profoundly important questions right now in the Canadian context, where we are in the process of redefining our national descriptive standard, updating our access portals and, perhaps most importantly, considering how to address the calls made to archivists—both explicitly and implicitly—in the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada for a more ethical, hospitable, responsive, empathic archive. The time is ripe to reimagine our responsibilities as recordkeepers by centering the personal in our approaches to the archives and people in our care.

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