



Abolitionist
Archival
Imaginaries





INTRODUCTION



This zine was created by me, Anna Robinson-Sweet. I am an archivist, oral historian, community organizer, and currently a PhD student at UCLA. My research looks at archives that collect and preserve stories, artwork, writing, and other materials created by people with first-hand experiences of incarceration. I am interested in how these archives help us imagine and enact non-carceral futures. As an abolitionist, I consider these efforts as a vitally important transformative archival practice. I strive to uplift and build this archival practice alongside the many others doing this work inside and outside prison walls. I found my way to this work through converging experiences in the streets and in the archive, where I witnessed how the state silences people and erases the violence it commits against them. I made this zine to give a short description—as I see it—of the role of archives in both dismantling those carceral systems and imagining a future filled with freedom, care, and collective healing.



ARCHIVES



Archives are the storehouses of our memory—physical, virtual, or embodied spaces where the traces of our lives and activities are preserved. Archives can be collections of written records, cultural traditions passed through generations, oral histories, and much more...

Governments, schools, religious, and cultural institutions often have archives. Many of us maintain personal and family archives. Communities have their own archives. These **community archives** are created by people with some shared identity or experience who come together to document themselves on their own terms.

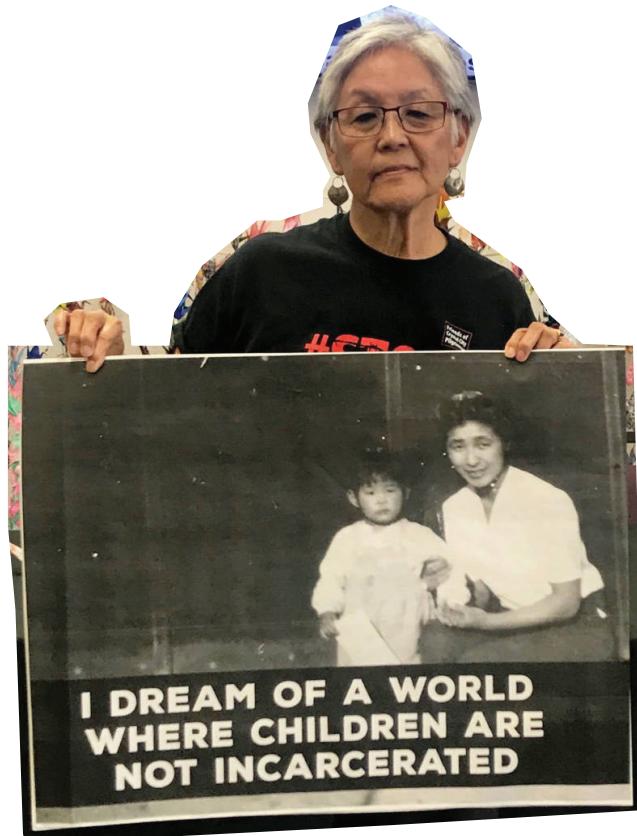
This last bit, “on their own terms,” is especially important for marginalized communities that face erasure or misrepresentation in dominant archival institutions. As stewards of their own pasts, communities create their own visions of the future, their own **archival imaginaries**.





"In collecting archival traces of struggle and rebellion, we forge new narratives of resistance and solidarity that feed the activism of the present and fundamentally alter our vision of what will be possible. Through the lens of the archival imaginary, we can redeploy archival records...as tools for empowerment."

(Michelle Caswell, "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries," 50)



Satsuki Ina, born in the Tule Lake Segregation Center in 1944, holds a photo of herself and her mother during a protest against the detention of migrant children in 2019.



CARCERAL ARCHIVES

The criminal legal system—prisons, police, courts, etc.—uses records to criminalize and dehumanize people. Those who are subjected to this violence are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, Latinx, immigrants, poor, queer, and gender nonconforming. Just as the slave state used records in an attempt to turn people into property, today the carceral state uses records to turn people into criminals.

These records form an archive, what archival studies scholar Tonia Sutherland calls ***the carceral archive***. Sutherland explains how the carceral archive is used to create narratives that justify imprisonment:

"What follows the construction of carceral archives... in the modern criminal justice system is a process of narrative construction and storytelling: the transformation of evidentiary information, data, and metadata into legal evidence, and the furnishing of that evidence in hearings and trials in support of carceral outcomes."

(*"The Carceral Archive,"* 10)

The carceral archive produces death and erasure. A stark and horrifying example of this came in the days after Breonna Taylor was murdered by police in 2020. The incident report released by the police stated that Taylor had suffered "no injuries" despite being struck by multiple bullets. This record was created to help the state avoid accountability for their violence. The mass protest movement that emerged afterward refuses Taylor's erasure and continues to fight for justice in her name.



Division: 3 DISTRICT
Beat: 322

Agency: LMPD

Incident/Investigation Report

Case Number: 80-20-017049

Case Status: OPEN ACTIVE

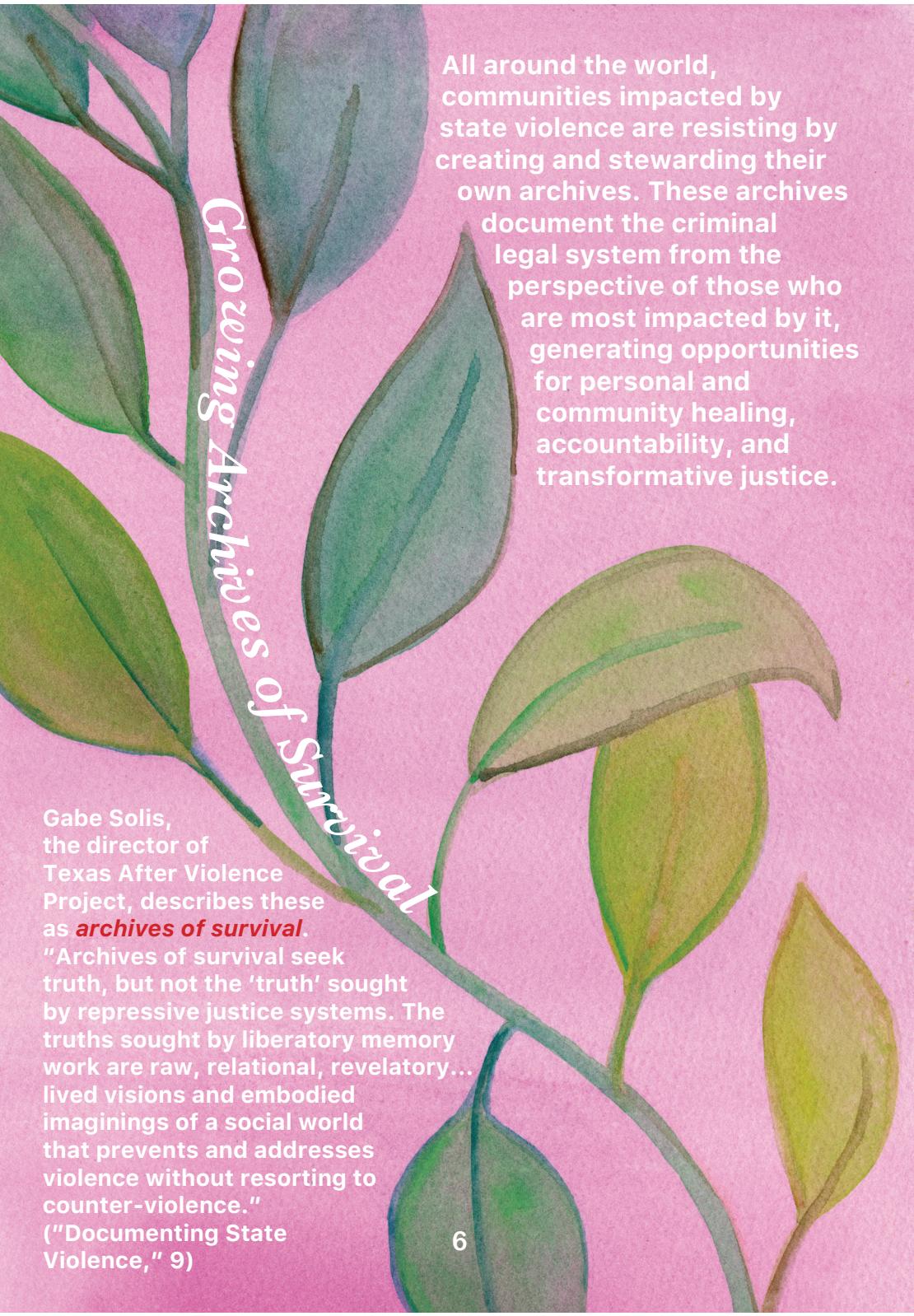
Incident Information

Date/Time Reported	Date/Time From	Date/Time To	Officer
03/13/2020 00:43	03/13/2020 00:43	03/13/2020 00:43	(2686) LEE, OMAR A
Incident Location			SPRINGFIELD DR Apt. LOUISVILLE, KY 40214

The victim had no injuries. Because that one empty document, meant to account for the police killing of a Black woman, was willfully blank. It demonstrates the reach of state power and the archives' complicity in blatantly erasing the violence against Breonna Taylor. This document will remain part of the official archive that future scholars will have to confront. We are witnessing, in real time, how archives silence and eradicate Black experience and impose doubt on Black testimony.

-Marisa Fuentes, "Attending to Black Death," 120

Victims					
Seq. #	Type	Injuries	Residency Status	Ethnicity	
1	INDIVIDUAL	None	Resident	Non-Hispanic	
Name(Last, First, M)		TAYLOR, BREONNA SHAQUELL	Race	Sex	DOB
			B	F	Age
Address		Home Phone			
Employer Name/Address		Business Phone			
Victim of Crimes		Cell Phone			



Growing Archives of Survival

Gabe Solis, the director of Texas After Violence Project, describes these as *archives of survival*.

"Archives of survival seek truth, but not the 'truth' sought by repressive justice systems. The truths sought by liberatory memory work are raw, relational, revelatory... lived visions and embodied imaginings of a social world that prevents and addresses violence without resorting to counter-violence."

("Documenting State Violence," 9)

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Abolitionist Archival Imaginaries

Creating space to imagine is crucial for building abolitionist futures. Abolition asks us to envision the possibility of a society built on healing and accountability rather than violence and punishment. For this reason, the organizer, writer, and librarian Mariame Kaba calls abolition "a jailbreak of the imagination." (*We Do This Till We Free Us*, 25).

Archives are accomplices in this jailbreak. They testify to the harm inflicted by the far-reaching prison industrial complex, demonstrate the power of resistance and survival, and call on us to create non-carceral solutions to the problems we face in our communities. I refer to these abolitionist archival imaginaries.

**Abolitionist archival imaginaries:
those visions of futures free from state
violence that we make possible through
preserving memories of the past.**

In my research, I study the abolitionist archival imaginaries found in the stories, art, writing, and other materials created by those who have been impacted by incarceration. How do these archives help us imagine and move us toward a future free from carceral violence?



ATICCA MEMORIAL ARCHIVE





Below, I offer my own abolitionist archival imaginary, a vision of the archive in a post-carceral future.

The year is 2100, and the last prison has just closed. The records from this institution have been transferred to Attica Rebellion Memorial Archive, housed in the former carceral complex on Wenrohronon and Ho-de-no-sau-nee-ga land. This archive is one of the largest, holding the records from obsolete police departments and thousands of shuttered prisons, jails, and detention centers. The first records that were archived are those of the California Correctional Center, which closed in 2023. Alongside government records are materials from communities that fought for many decades to achieve abolition.



Not everything from the old police departments and prisons has been saved, however. Each time a new set of records arrives at Attica, archivists look through the boxes and computer files to remove documents pertaining to individuals targeted by the prison industrial complex (PIC). These survivors or their descendants are contacted and given the option of having their records kept in the archive, sent to them, or destroyed. In the place of those dehumanizing documents, survivors can submit a testimonial about their experience, a piece of art or music or writing, or nothing at all. They can also decide whether they want their own name or the name of their family member to be added to The Book To Console the Spirits, a tradition learned from the Japanese Ireicho, which commemorates the struggle of millions of individuals who suffered violence at the hands of the now-abolished carceral state.

Attica Rebellion Memorial Archive not only holds physical and digital documents but is also home to the memory keepers. The memory keepers are elders who experienced the PIC and witnessed the long fight to end state-sanctioned harm. Visitors to Attica are welcome to listen to the memory keepers and engage them in dialogue. Anyone can decide to become a memory keeper simply by showing up at Attica and announcing themselves.

All of the materials at Attica, whether physical, digital, or oral, are open to the whole community. Anyone can contribute, and anyone can borrow. The archive is not concerned with theft because robbery, as such, ceased to exist along with capitalism in the preceding decades.



When capitalism was crumbling, libraries and archives provided a model for the world, as they were some of the first systems created apart from the profit model, even while capitalism was still flourishing and seemed invincible.

As the world changed and structures of power fell, archives were established to ensure repair of past harm. They gathered testimonials from people who had suffered under the PIC, assuring that these community members would have access to healing therapies and the resources needed to rebuild their lives and relationships. The archives were also designed to maintain memories of pain and violence caused by the PIC in order to prevent these systems from taking hold again. While there are many horrors contained in the archives at Attica, there is also great beauty. Attica holds countless books, artworks, and songs created during the reign of the carceral state, many of them made by those who suffered long terms of punishment behind bars.

Speaking of bars, all of the carceral architecture has been gutted from Attica. The space is now airy and bright, with soft couches and gathering spaces everywhere. There are also private rooms for people to grieve and reflect on their own. The land around Attica is verdant, planted with edible crops and vibrant flowers. The Ho-de-no-sau-nee-ga and Wenrohronon people steward the area and assure that Attica Rebellion Memorial Archive and its resources are available and accessible to all. In this way, knowledge of the past is shared so that the future can be created communally.





FURTHER READING

The words and ideas shared in this zine draw on the knowledge of numerous scholars, writers, memory workers, and organizers. Below are some of the works that have inspired me as I engage in this research:

- *Tip of the Spear: Black Radicalism, Prison Repression, and the Long Attica Revolt.* By Orisanmi Burton. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023.
- "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries." By Michelle Caswell. In *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada*. Litwin Books, 2013.
- *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* by Michelle Caswell. Routledge: 2021.
- "'Graveyards of Exclusion:' Archives, Prisons, and the Bounds of Belonging." By Jarrett Drake. *Medium* (online), March 27, 2019.
- "'Attending To Black Death:' Black Women's Bodies in the Archive and the Afterlife of Captivity." By Marisa J. Fuentes. *Diacritics* 48, no. 3 (2020): 116–29.
- *We Do This Till We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice.* By Mariame Kaba. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021.
- "Documenting State Violence: (Symbolic) Annihilation & Archives of Survival." By Gabriel Daniel Solis. *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 2 (November 29, 2018).
- "The Carceral Archive: Documentary Records, Narrative Construction, and Predictive Risk Assessment." By Tonia Sutherland. *Journal of Cultural Analytics* (2019).



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