

FROM SALVAGE TO STRATEGY:

A Conversation with Paul Yee on Archival Consciousness and the Chinese Canadian Archival Record

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THIS ARTICLE REPRODUCES a series of conversations about Chinese Canadian archives between three people: author and historian Paul Yee, archivist and professor Jennifer Douglas, and archival graduate student and community organizer June Chow. The dialogue recorded here is compiled from two interviews that Douglas and Chow conducted with Yee in February and May 2022, and from conversations between the three during a visit to City of Vancouver Archives (CVA) in September 2022. The interviews and site visit were conducted as part of a larger research project led by Douglas that focuses on archival creators and on archival and recordkeeping work as relational care work. The Getting to the Heart of the File project explores the relationships that exist between creators and their records, and between creators and archivists as they work together to determine the nature of the archive that is eventually available to the public.¹ Centring the personal and intimate contexts of recordkeeping, the objective of the project is to determine how care is understood by archives creators and how archivists can honour these concepts of care through their archival practices. As a graduate research assistant, Chow brings a Chinese Canadian perspective to the project. Chow entered the Master of Archival Studies Program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) with an interest in archives and their role in community activism, heritage preservation, and cultural redress work happening in Vancouver's Chinatown. Chow's concern for archives created in and around Chinatown and Douglas's focus on archives creation as a particular kind of care work led them to approach Yee and to ask him to participate in the project.

¹ The Getting to the Heart of the File: Toward a Person-Centred Theory of Archival Care project is funded by a 2019–20 Insight Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

For generations, Chinese settlers on the unceded traditional territories of the x^wməθk^wəy'əm (Musqueam), Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations have called Vancouver's Strathcona and Chinatown neighbourhoods home. Yee grew up in the first generation of Chinese born in Canada following the repeal of the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, and he came of age amid the dying out of turn-of-the-century Chinese immigrants. Through the 1970s and 1980s, as a graduate student at UBC, budding historian and writer, and archivist at the City of Vancouver, Yee was engaged in Chinatown's cultural and social activism, trying to reconcile the fragile, scattered records that had been left behind. His life and the lives of fellow Canadian-born Chinese were new and fragile; the legitimacy they sought through self-representation and Chinese Canadian identity construction grew out of the Asian American movement that contested the erasure and misrepresentation of those marginalized within the historical record. With peers, Yee was an active member of the Pender Guy Radio Collective, Katari Taiko, Asian Canadian Writers Workshop, and Chinese Cultural Centre of Greater Vancouver. His work culminated in the centennial exhibition² and publication³ *Saltwater City*, which consciously brings together artifacts, photographs, oral histories, and written records of immigrant and native-born Chinese Canadians living in Vancouver in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to tell the broader story, which he found was missing from the city's archives and from BC history. Shortly after *Saltwater City*, Yee moved to Toronto to work at the Archives of Ontario and then with the Ontario government before leaving public service to pursue an award-winning career writing Chinese Canadian history and fiction. Yee participated in the two interviews from Toronto, where he has lived since 1988 and where he continues to write full time.

In this article, we (Chow and Douglas) have decided to largely preserve the interview format. Sections of our transcribed conversations are presented interspersed with commentary connecting the interview to archival literature and drawing out key themes that relate to our interest in how archives are created, what they mean to their creators, and how they are cared for over and through time in the particular contexts of Yee's personal archives, the Paul Yee Fonds,⁴ housed at CVA, and his

² Yee served as chair of the organizing committee for the *Saltwater City* exhibition mounted by the Chinese Cultural Centre to celebrate Vancouver's centennial in 1986. "Saltwater City" is a direct translation of the term used by the early Chinese to refer to Vancouver (鹹水埠).

³ Paul Yee, *Saltwater City: An Illustrated History of the Chinese in Vancouver* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1988).

⁴ Paul Yee Fonds, City of Vancouver Archives, Vancouver, Canada, <https://searcharchives.vancouver.ca/paul-yeec-fonds>.

efforts to document Chinese Canadian communities and experiences. We explore these themes in three sections. The first section focuses on the concept of *salvage archiving* and the development of *archival consciousness*, while the second section shifts to exploring the potential impacts of doing salvage archive work. In the final sections, we reflect on different relationships and responsibilities between and among communities and public institutions involved in documentary heritage work, including possibilities for new models of archival stewardship that take into account the power dynamics between mainstream archival institutions and community archives. This article does not attempt to survey the entire history of collecting in Vancouver's Chinatown or of Chinese Canadian histories and experiences; as part of the Getting to the Heart of the File project on creators and care, it provides a case study of archives creation that helps to illuminate key issues related to the archives of historically marginalized communities. Our hope – as archivists, scholars, writers, and organizers – is that the conversations shared and elaborated upon suggest new ways of thinking about archival care and about the complex relationships between archives creators, communities, and mainstream archival institutions.

“GRAB ANYTHING!”: SALVAGE ARCHIVING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ARCHIVAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Yee is a strong advocate for the value of collecting and preserving archives. As a trained archivist, he distinguishes between archival fonds and collections. Fonds are systematic aggregations, the whole of the documents (in any form or media) created by an individual, family, community, or organization over time. Collections, on the other hand, may consist of materials of varying provenance, brought together on the basis of some common characteristic(s) by a collector. Both types of aggregations may have historic value, but the kind of evidence they provide – or the way they tell the story of how things happened – is different. In Yee's view, there has been a lack of attention paid to archival fonds created by Chinese Canadian individuals, families, associations, businesses, and organizations. While there have been efforts in Vancouver to preserve documentary remnants and ephemera in well-known special collections such as the Wallace B. Chung and Madeline H. Chung Collection at the

UBC Library, to date there has been no systematic or wide-scale effort made to preserve the archival record of Chinese Canadian experiences.⁵

Yee's own archives, the Paul Yee Fonds at CVA, consist of records created as part of his writing life, family records, and materials he collected during his early efforts to document Vancouver's Chinatown. The first part of our conversation focuses on processes involved in the creation of archives and reveals the importance of *archivalization*, a term Eric Ketelaar coined to help describe "the conscious or unconscious choice to consider something worth archiving."⁶ As Ketelaar explains, this type of archival consciousness precedes preservation and requires some shared social or cultural recognition of the value of archival materials. Yee discusses how this kind of consciousness was not widely shared – either by the Chinese Canadian community whose archives he was concerned for or by archival institutions in Vancouver in which, to this day, Chinese Canadian records remain underrepresented.

What archiving Yee was able to do in the 1970s and 1980s was mostly salvage work, trying to save what he could. As an archivist at CVA, Yee found Chinese Canadian materials physically "scattered" across different record groups; he pulled these materials together intellectually, listing materials located in different collections together to create a research guide that would ensure items could be found and used within the context of the history of Chinese people in Vancouver. In his spare time, through photography and collecting abandoned documents and artifacts, he and his peers made similar "happenstance" attempts to capture Vancouver's quickly changing Chinatown. At the time, few were looking out for this material; Yee's salvage missions, his efforts to keep minutes of meetings and to find places to store materials no one yet valued (in his brother's basement and, eventually, in his fonds at CVA)

⁵ In 2016, the Toronto Public Library launched its Chinese Canadian Archive. This community-built archive reflects the activities and community involvement of Chinese Canadian individuals, families, and businesses in the Toronto and Greater Toronto area. See Chinese Canadian Archive, Toronto Public Library, <https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/chinese-canadian-archive/>. In 2019, the University of Toronto announced the establishment of the Richard Charles Lee Chinese Canadian Archive, whose purpose is to collect, preserve, and digitize cultural and personal records and stories from the Chinese diaspora in Canada. "U of T Receives \$4 Million Donation to Create Chinese-Canadian Archive," *U of T News*, <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/u-t-receives-4-million-donation-create-chinese-canadian-archives>.

⁶ Eric Ketelaar, "Archivalisation and Archiving," *Archives and Manuscripts* 27, no. 1 (1999): 57.

ensured that “a sliver of a sliver” of documentary evidence would survive in the public record.⁷

Michelle Caswell and her colleagues at the UCLA Community Archives Lab have researched how seeing oneself or one’s community represented in public archives can counter the mainstream “symbolic annihilation” experienced by marginalized communities and foster a sense of “representational belonging.”⁸ Yee’s encounters as a young archivist with the city’s fragmented records of its Chinese people would inspire not only *Saltwater City* but also his lifelong writing of Chinese Canadian fiction for young audiences who were experiencing similar impacts. In these first sections of our transcribed conversations, we see how the capacity to create archives that can contribute to feelings of representational belonging depends first on the archivalization of a person like Yee – in Rebecka Sheffield’s words, a “founder” acting on a “spark of consciousness about the importance of preserving the material culture” of a community.⁹

JD: Can you tell us a little bit about the kinds of records you create?

PY: I guess I see two kinds of records [that I] generate. I’m a writer, so there’s all the drafts and outlines and whatever that comes out of my writing. Added to that would be the records that come out of groups and things that I belong to – activities in a larger kind of context, not me personally. And then on the flip side, [there’s] the part of me that consciously set out to create archival documents; that is, I went through Chinatown taking pictures of things that I thought would vanish, just the facades of buildings and things. Or if I got lucky, I’d get inside and take pictures. Back in the eighties, it wasn’t so easy to walk into a Chinatown building or business or association and start taking pictures.

JD: How did you get involved in working at the [City of Vancouver] archives?

⁷ Verne Harris, “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa,” *Archival Science* 2, nos. 1–2 (2002): 84.

⁸ Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing’: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives,” *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 67.

⁹ Rebecka Taves Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times* (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2020), 172.

PY: Oh, it was absolutely serendipitous. In my second year [at UBC], I was taking a course in western Canadian history. It was taught by David Breen and he was sitting on the advisory council for CVA. They had applied for grants and were looking for student workers. He asked me if I'd be interested, and I said, "Oh, very much so." So that's when I discovered the City of Vancouver Archives, as a summer student.

JD: What kinds of things did you work on there?

PY: Well, the first year, it was very open. The city archivist, Sue Baptie then, said, "We're looking for guides into the collection because people come here and they can't get into the records. So anything you think you can do to help improve access, we'd be interested." So she left it up to me. I didn't really know what to do. I started thinking, "Well, maybe I should look at business records," because those were pretty plentiful. But I couldn't do it, and I finally said to Sue, "You know, what I'm really curious about is the history of the Chinese." And she said, "Why not, why don't you see what we have on the Chinese and see if you can provide some sort of a guide into it." And, of course, that was right up my alley. I [would] just leaf through different kinds of fonds and record groups to see what was available, and wrote it up as a guide.

JD: Did you find much?

PY: They were all scattered. You'd find one letter in a record group. The city clerk's correspondence was pretty voluminous and you'd find a letter here or a letter there. But for that time, it was enough, it was very exciting. Just to find those documents, because there hadn't been any kind of use of archives to talk about Chinese Canadian history in Vancouver.

JD: Yeah, or probably in a lot of other places either, at that time.

PY: That's true, that's true. I had this complaint about the historiography of the Chinese in Canada then. And my complaint was that, at that time, in the eighties, the only things I could find in the literature were either accounts of racism – which is about what was done to the Chinese – or

there was this huge amount of literature on Chinese associations.¹⁰ And this was coming from anthropologists and sociologists who were amazed at how the Chinese brought over these traditional community structures to the New World, to the diaspora. And they were fascinated with it. And that was it. There was nothing about us doing work, or doing anything. So I was desperate to find anything that would tell a broader story. And so that was me, both as a historian and as an archivist, saying, “Okay, let’s see what we can do here.” A budding historian [with] my own kind of personal mission versus the archival world.

JD: What about your own archives at the City of Vancouver? How did that come about? When did you start thinking about the Paul Yee Fonds?

PY: Well, what happened was, in 1988, I moved to Toronto. And I had a lot of stuff. I didn’t move it all. I left it [with] my brother and all these boxes – thirty, forty boxes of stuff – just sat in his basement. And he was good; he understood what I was about. So we left it for a long time. And then, finally – I can’t remember who made the first move, but it was a very positive kind of connecting [with CVA]. Both sides were agreeable. I wanted [the boxes] to move, they wanted them. And so everything I had in Vancouver went. Stuff that I had brought to Toronto, I shipped that back. And I continue to make deposits there.

JD: And the records that are in your fonds are records of your writing life, and of your work documenting, and your personal stuff as well?

PY: Yeah, because my aunt, who came from a very old Chinatown family, had photograph albums that I inherited. So her family items became part of my fonds. And the archives was very happy to receive that because it was pretty old stuff and in pretty bad condition. And there’s my personal stuff about, I guess, a kid growing up in Strathcona, Chinatown. [*pause.*] I don’t know if I ever thought of my records as being useful as a research collection. I see now that they are. And I’m delighted that they’ve digitized the photographs. Although I thought they’d be more selective. They kind of digitized *everything*. And there are some

¹⁰ Overseas Chinese formed membership-based social service and mutual aid societies organized by surname or clan and home villages or districts. These associations provided support in the areas of housing, employment, banking and loans, immigration and legal services, political organizing, English language services and education, and burials. The network formed by these organizations served as protection against the anti-Chinese racism that was government policy in many countries to which early Chinese migrated. The organizations are referred to variously as Chinese (benevolent) associations, societies, clans, and/or tongs.

really bad photographs of me in it [*laughs*] that really don't need to be in the public domain.

JD: What do you think it's for, your fonds?

PY: I think, for me, the most important thing is to show that – you know, from about the seventies and eighties, there was this rising consciousness of a generation of Chinese Canadians wanting to carve a new trail around community and identity. It was to say, “We don't want to be assimilated, we want to think differently, we want to find a place for ourselves in the community.” That's what my early involvement was, and that's what I think those early papers are useful for. For capturing that particular generation.

And then, by extension, I grew out of that community and kind of took it to its farthest reach, which was to research and push the envelope and say, “Okay, if we want to talk about identity and history, what are we going to do about it?” Well, we need to [make] the stuff more accessible somehow. So that led to exhibits, to books. So it was, I guess, a way of community building. And I like to think that I was not always on my own. That the [*Saltwater City*] exhibit and things like that were always done in concert with others. Pender Guy [Radio Collective] was a co-op.¹¹ And so there was always a group of people. And I guess I've always wanted to make sure that *they* would get documented. I would take minutes at meetings, you know [*laughs*]. But people came in, came out. It was very exciting but – as you and I know, people don't keep records. And then we were faced with some sudden deaths in our community of young people, which scared me. Which [made me say], wow, they're not leaving behind a lot. And these were valuable, valuable, valuable members of my peer group.

JD and JC: Can you tell us a little bit more about your work to try and document Chinatown? To save its archives?

PY: I felt very bad when I was in Vancouver in the eighties because there weren't very many people interested in history then. The people at the Chinese Cultural Centre were encouraging, but it wasn't [its] goal to

¹¹ The Pender Guy Radio Collective produced a volunteer-run co-op radio program from 1976 to 1981. The program offered a way for young Chinese Canadians to gain community media skills and counter mainstream media stereotypes of Chinatown and Chinese Canadians. Its fonds was donated to the City of Vancouver Archives in 2018. See <https://searcharchives.vancouver.ca/pender-guy-radio-collective-fonds>.

do archival work. So what I did was very, very on the fringe. I guess I always thought that I couldn't do it all. And here's my great confession: my great regret was that in the year [1986] that I was doing *Saltwater City*, the exhibit, Yucho Chow's studio was still there.¹² And I – we – missed it. We blew it. And it's a horrible thought that goes through you. You think, "Okay, I was there, thinking history, doing it, and – what happened? I missed it."

JD: Is there something that in contrast you felt really good about saving?

PY: [*laughs*.] The only thing that comes to mind is this very slim photo album. It's from the New Westminster Chinese Benevolent Association. And how I got that was Jim Wong-Chu and I heard that the building had been abandoned, was going to be torn down, so we went in there one night and grabbed things [*laughs*]. And that little photo album is full of photos I think by Leong Ding Bong 梁定邦, photos from I think the war years, during the Second World War. That was a delight to me because it was an album, it had a purpose, it was one discrete unit, it didn't rely on a lot of extra contextual materials. And I just thought, "Wow, this is really cool!" So that one album comes to mind.

JD: So you just snuck in there, at night?

PY: Yeah, we did [*laughs*]. It was illegal, I'm sure. Yeah, we did it. We were young and crazy and whatever [*laughs*].

JD: And you think that the stuff that was in that building would just have been gone?

PY: Yeah, and what we saw was mostly publications. And some of them were from the fifties and sixties when the organization had been more active. I didn't see any original papers, which I would have grabbed,

¹² Yucho Chow 周耀初 (1876–1949) was Vancouver's first and most prolific Chinese photographer. He operated a studio in Chinatown from 1906 until his death in 1949, after which his sons ran the business. When the studio closed in 1986, all of the negatives and prints, spanning almost eight decades, were discarded at the city dump. Some six hundred images by and of Yucho Chow were recovered through a decade of community collection by Chinatown historian and curator Catherine Clement. The images were used by Clement to produce her 2019 exhibition and publication, *Chinatown through a Wide Lens: The Hidden Photographs of Yucho Chow*, and were subsequently donated in 2021 as digital reproductions to CVA as the Yucho Chow Community Archive Collection. See <https://searcharchives.vancouver.ca/yucho-chow-community-archive-collection>.

right? I knew that much. So we came away with fairly slim pickings. I can't remember exactly what [but] they're all in the fonds. But to answer your question, that's one item I remember very clearly from that kind of a scavenging raid [*laughs*].

JD: Yeah, but I mean the fact that you had to sneak into a building – it's an exciting archival story [*laughs*]. But it's also a really good illustration of how precarious things were.

PY: Well, it pointed to how little interest there was. We had no one to go to, there was no help. I mean I worked in the archives too, but there was nobody I could reach out to [to] say, "Hey, can you help me, can we do something, can we intervene?" There was no such thing. So, you know, Jim and I look at each other and we go, "Okay, let's do this." We felt very helpless. I think I felt reassured that we went, because at least I saw [what was there], and I didn't think that there were original ledgers or membership books or things that were of intrinsic value that were lost. If I saw things there that needed to be protected, I probably would have squawked a lot more.

JD: So in your sort of quest to document what was vanishing, did you have a methodology or were you just going out and trying to capture something that you felt was disappearing or in danger?

PY: There was no methodology. It was all pretty much happenstance. Whatever was available, what events were going on in the street, which door was opening, which store was closing. It was very reactive. I had no plan. And I suspect, even if I had [had] a plan it would have been hell to achieve [*laughs*]. There were enormous barriers that I was working against. The historical consciousness back then was so minimal.

I suppose the only plan that I had was when I was actually doing the *Saltwater City* book, after the exhibit, because then I could say, "Okay, I need this information," and I'd go out and find a person who could give me that. And so that would include an interview or taking a picture, and for that purpose, it was clearer. I'd say to the person, "I'm writing a book, and I need you to help me, and can you give me this, this and this?" And they'd go, "Oh, happy [to]." So that was a very different experience for me. You know, once there was this kind of focus – and I think it has to do with, again, this notion of historical consciousness. A book makes sense. Archives? What's an archive? [*laughs*.] It was impossible to

explain. Even my own family didn't know what I was doing for a living: "You work for the city *archives*? What do you do?" Try explaining it to Chinese people. No go.

But by the time 1988 came along, I was really ready to leave. Because I couldn't bear the pressure of being the point guy on Chinese Canadian history and Chinese Canadian records [any longer]. It was just too humongous a burden. For any person to carry.

JD: How were you experiencing that, what was happening?

PY: Oh, it's this anxiety, and this kind of desperation to go and grab anything that you hear about [*laughs*]. So we wound up collecting the stupidest things. I remember a friend and I – we heard that this billiards parlour on Hastings Street was closing and there had been a Chinese cook there, and he used to write his menu on the blackboard. So we said, "Oh, we should get the blackboard." So we truck up there, and we bring home this humongous blackboard. And it was all for naught. Because [there was] nothing around it. It was a kind of a document of something the Chinese were involved with, but not enough [context for it to tell a full story]. And it was this kind of chance – you know, these chance encounters with documents that just scared me, because it just seemed, "This is no way to document a community's history. By chance. It is wrong." But I couldn't do anything about it.

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The materials Yee salvaged in and around Vancouver's Chinatown became part of the Paul Yee Fonds; his archives were quite agreeably acquired by CVA as the records of a celebrated author and historian, and of a former archivist-employee. The value of the archives of the wider Chinese Canadian community, however, has not been as readily recognized, either by archival institutions (including municipal, provincial, national, and university repositories) or by the community itself. There has, as yet, been no focused acquisition of the types of larger, systematically generated archives of businesses, societies, organizations, and families that provide comprehensive archival documentation of Chinese Canadian histories and experiences. Materials that have been preserved fall within what Yee refers to as "collector's collections"; that is, when records have been valued, they are acquired piecemeal, creating collections of interesting documents and objects of disparate provenance,

while the comprehensive archives Yee would like to see preserved remain out of focus.

The Chung Collection, donated to UBC in 1999, nearly a decade before Yee donated his fonds to CVA in 2008, is an example of a “collector’s collection.” Born a generation before Yee during the *Chinese Exclusion Act*, Dr. Wallace Chung began collecting Canadian Pacific steamship and railway memorabilia as a child, becoming known as a serious collector among booksellers and dealers. His interest in tracing his father’s and grandfather’s journeys from China to Canada led him to expand his collecting to include Chinese Canadian migration. Chung relied on the same methodology of salvage archiving in the Chinatown communities in Vancouver and Victoria. However, as an established professional (vascular surgeon), he had the financial means to purchase items from private collectors, and, as a well-respected leader of the community, he was often entrusted with its records. Yee and Chung served together as directors of the Chinese Cultural Centre through the organization’s formative years in the early 1980s. Looking back, Yee says, “Unfortunately, our paths never crossed in terms of archival interests. We existed in separate worlds, divided by, I think, age, class, and academic differences.” Yee and Chung were both actively salvaging traces of the past; however, these collecting activities remained personal, outside the realm of archival institutions and not part of local history.

“I FELT THIS WEIGHT”: THE AFFECTIVE BURDEN OF COMMUNITY ARCHIVING

Research suggests that community archives initiatives often begin through the efforts of one (or a small number of) passionate individual(s) whose energy and enthusiasm propel the project forward.¹³ Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd describe how, while this personal, individual dimension is often crucial to the dynamism and continuing functioning of community archives, it has significant consequences. On the one hand, it is a source of immense dedication, enthusiasm, and personal energy; on the other, in the longer term, the responsibility and effort can be exhausting and ultimately draining.¹⁴ In her book *Documenting Rebellions*, Sheffield charts how community archives can develop from the “spark” contributed by a passionate

¹³ Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9, nos. 1–2 (2009): 79.

¹⁴ Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, 79–80.

“founder” to long-term stability. Notably, Sheffield finds that, for an archival project to achieve long-term sustainability, it needs considerable support, including financial support and human resources. The “founder” needs “champions” who contribute to the labour, administration, and finances of the archives.¹⁵ Yee acknowledges that he “was not always on [his] own” in his salvage work; however, there was no one present at the time championing the systematic preservation of Chinese Canadian archives in Vancouver. Over time, the responsibility Yee felt to salvage Chinatown’s history, combined with his sense of isolation, culminated in feelings of being unable to “bear the pressure.”

The affective impact of archival work is increasingly acknowledged within the scholarly and professional literature; it is a central concern in the scholarship on community archives, which recognizes that feelings of “unbelonging”¹⁶ and disenfranchisement are forces that move people to begin collecting and preserving histories that are neglected in mainstream archives.¹⁷ Affect has been discussed within the context of the long-term value of archives (that is, to acknowledge their affective value in addition to their historical or administrative value)¹⁸ and in relation to the impact encounters with archival materials and spaces can have on researchers and, especially, on individuals and communities whose histories have been neglected by mainstream institutions.¹⁹ The affective impact experienced by those who seek to preserve archives of their own communities has received less attention, though as Jamie A. Lee, Bianca Finley Alper, and aems emswiler’s research on the “origin stories” of community-based archives shows,²⁰ the experiences of archives founders shape the development of community collections. In the next section of our transcribed conversations, the affective dimensions of community records and of doing archival salvage work are explored as Yee discusses

¹⁵ Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions*, 174.

¹⁶ Gracen Brilmyer, “‘They Weren’t Necessarily Designed with Lived Experiences of Disability in Mind’: The Affect of Archival In/Accessibility and ‘Emotionally Expensive’ Spatial Un/Belonging,” *Archivaria* 94 (Fall/Winter 2022): 120–53.

¹⁷ See, for example, Marika Cifor, “Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7–31; and Michelle Caswell, “Affective Bonds: What Community Archives Can Teach Mainstream Institutions,” in *Community Archives, Community Spaces: Heritage, Memory and Identity*, ed. Jeannette Bastian and Andrew Flinn, 21–40 (London: Facet, 2020).

¹⁸ Cifor, “Affecting Relations.”

¹⁹ Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing’”; Marika Cifor, “Stains and Remains: Liveliness, Materiality, and the Archival Lives of Queer Bodies,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, nos. 91–92 (2017): 5–21.

²⁰ Jamie A. Lee, Bianca Finley Alper, and aems emswiler, “Origin Stories and the Shaping of the Community-Based Archives,” *Archival Science* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-023-09413-x>.

feelings of loneliness and the weight of responsibility he felt to preserve his community's history.

JD: [When we visited your archives, we found ourselves interested in] all the partial or hidden stories. Like, sometimes you would open a file and there would be a photograph of someone that – you know, who is this person, and how did they get caught up in this archive? We were thinking about the way a personal fonds captures or collects up these other stories as well, and wondering if you had any reflection on that happening in your own records?

PY: It's a very sad situation when I think about it. Because, as a collector, you want stories. As you say, people want to give [me] stories or I want stories from them. [Sometimes] when I want stories from people, that person doesn't want to tell me the[ir] story. The key example being my aunt Lillian who raised me but still would not reveal her own story to me, as much as I tried to get it out of her. So, it was just what it was, I couldn't do anything about it. But then the other situation that I encountered was, during my research, I would meet people, and they would want to give me things. They would give me a photograph and say, "Oh no, no, no, you keep that." And then there's a kind of expectation built up that I'll come back to do more research on them and that was not fulfilled. Either I didn't have the time, or [I didn't need anything more]. So that's the sad part of these sorts of stories. They're never fully completed. And I think – when I left Vancouver, I was probably very relieved that this burden was lifted from me, because I felt like, I don't want to be the only person doing this because it's not working, I can't do it, and the pressure is killing me. So here I have a handy out [to Toronto] and so I'm gone. So I think this kind of pressure still exists today in terms of [how] we worry about the past, we worry about losing stuff, and yet capturing it – it's so hard. It's such a huge task, you know. Unless you have lots of money and lots of people – you're struggling.

JD: I'm thinking about that kind of burden of being the point person and [the idea of] that archival consciousness. [Back in the eighties], you have the archival consciousness, and you have no resources, you have no leadership, you don't have enough people around you with archival consciousness – that *is* a terrible burden to carry.

PY: Yeah well, as you see, I left town. To escape the curse.

JC: You mentioned Pender Guy [Radio Collective]. Its fonds was cared for by others right through to its donation to the Vancouver Archives. How did it feel to be in that role reversal? For you to be part of those who were cared for versus being the caretaker?

PY: Oh, I felt enormously relieved and enormously grateful that people like Barry [Wong] and Ramona [Mar] stuck it out all these years.

JC: These emotions that swing the whole pendulum from relief and gratitude all the way to crushing burden and responsibility ... I think that everybody deserves to feel relief and gratitude, even if it's like, "we took a look and it's okay if this isn't saved." How can everybody have that without the cost of somebody, [one person] carrying the burden? Is there a way to take that burden away or just to distribute it a little bit more evenly? Because the relief and gratitude that you felt having the Pender Guy Fonds being taken care of by Barry and Ramona? I'm pretty sure that was quite a burden on them, right?

PY: It was.

JC: And they were not archivists.

PY: No.

JC: They were pulling every favour, every connection they had to try to figure this out and it took a lot of years.

PY: It did.

JC: And by all intents and purposes, those [archives] should not have survived.

PY: Yeah, somebody would have given up and said, "Enough of this, I can't carry this around." Somebody's getting mad, the landlord is getting mad, whatever.

JC: The building is leaking. It's gone, get it out of here ...

PY: So what happens in those situations? People have to know that they've tried. I guess if you were to say, so how do I live with it? How do

I live with that crushing guilt? I would say I tried, I really tried [*laughs*]. I really tried, and then I couldn't try anymore. You could apply that to my night at the [New Westminster Chinese Benevolent Association]. I tried that night. And if you look at my entire life up to 1988, well, I tried. I gave it everything I had, and then I left. So that's what gives a bit of relief. So for [people in the community who are trying now], if [they have] to leave, [they] can say "I really tried," too. And there will be people like me and you saying [they] really did try. And it's really up to the rest of us to support [them], right, in any way we can. And it's the rest of us meaning the community. And somehow the story has to get out. That here's this [person] labouring away – you know, just for the love of it. Why can't [they] get – why can't [someone from our community] get the stature of Major Matthews? Why can't we build them up like that? *Our* tragic hero, doing this for the love of it, sacrificing, getting up at all hours on top of a regular job. You know, get the hankies out? As you say, it's really an emotional journey, and I think you've probably seen with [our] conversations, it is very emotional for me. And I think it's the emotional people who are probably the caretakers – like Barry and Ramona, because they were, at the very end of the program, very emotional about it. And that carried into their resilience to move those tapes around.

JD: The research project that I've been working on for a few years is about recordkeeping and grief work and the ways that recordkeeping is a part of the way people grieve. There's a lot of grief as an emotion in this as well, right? Grief over the endings of lives, the endings of programs, associations, families, stores, schools ...

PY: Yes. It's about loss, right? When we grieve, we've lost something, or we're losing something. And it's horrible. It's really horrible. And I think we're just people. I mean, grief is now becoming more important – people are really trying to figure it out, give people time, help people work through it, which is really good.

But the problem with community and grief is that it's easy to hand it off to somebody else. Because there isn't that blood tie. Even though [there's] a blood tie to their [family or district] association and their records, they'll say, "Well, you know, I'm not the president. So-and-so is the president. And he wanted to be president. So he should take care of it." So people get to worm out of it. Whereas with families, you don't get to avoid the grief with a loss. You have to deal with it. And, you

know, if we could translate that into the community sense – that would be a way of building that connection between archival consciousness and, you know, the people who have records. What would you do if you were faced with the loss of this – if a fire broke out, how would you feel? Could you live with yourself?

* * * * *

In her autoethnography of doing community archives work in a profession that “has never collectively acknowledged the legacy of erasure, violence, and genocide in the United States or their role in this crime,” queer Latinx archivist Nancy Liliana Godoy describes how “on a daily basis, my heart aches as I deeply mourn the loss of archival material and stories our ancestors could have left behind.” She adds: “I frequently fall asleep with this heaviness in my chest, racing thoughts, and an urgency to preserve history.”²¹ Godoy’s reflections demonstrate the affective impact on archivists of doing community archives work in an environment that is not entirely receptive. Like Godoy, Yee feels a “heaviness” related both to knowing what has been lost and to bearing some responsibility to stem *ongoing* loss. The pressure Yee felt to document his community is palpable. “I felt this weight,” he told us, “that if I didn’t do it, nobody would.” These words allude to the isolation Yee often felt in his attempts to capture his community’s history, and they highlight the need for support – for “champions.”

A model for archives work that recognizes its affective impact and, in response, centres care for those involved is found in Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor’s research on an archival “ethics of care.”²² Grounded in feminist scholarship, Caswell and Cifor’s model stresses the ways people are linked to each other and larger communities through webs of mutual affective responsibilities.²³ Drawing on the work of Carol Gilligan, who advocated for greater attention to be paid to care – what it is, who does it, who needs it, and how it is distributed and circulated²⁴ – Caswell and Cifor define care as “both the often bodily labours of providing what is necessary for the health, sustainment, and protection of someone or

²¹ Nancy Liliana Godoy, “Community-Driven Archives: *Conocimiento*, Healing, and Justice,” in *Radical Empathy in Archival Practice*, ed. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021): 4.

²² Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 28.

²³ Caswell and Cifor, 28.

²⁴ Caswell and Cifor, 29.

something, and the feeling of concern and attachment that provokes such acts.”²⁵ Yee’s fonds reflect these obligations of care and their resulting affective labour: care for his aunt Lillian whose family items he inherited, care for his peers by documenting them in meeting minutes, and care for a wider community in his “scavenging raids.”

“Archives are about life,” Yee asserts, “not just mine but others.”²⁶ His words echo Genevieve Weber’s call for archivists to recognize “the intrinsic humanity of archives,”²⁷ which requires practices centred on care not only for records but also for the people who create, use, keep, and are documented in them. Caswell and Cifor describe archivists as caregivers in a web of responsibility: the act that creates the record binds the record creator with the record subject, the subject with the larger community, and the archivist with all involved parties.²⁸ In community archives, the role of archivist, creator, subject, user, and community often blur, overlap, and can be one and the same all at once, as we see in Yee’s case. All are responsible; all need and deserve care. Yee identifies the role of community – or of “the rest of us” in the community – as champions, with functions based on care for founders: to support founders in any way we can, to get their story out, to build them up. The same “radical empathy” asked by Caswell and Cifor of archivists is invoked by Yee within this web of community.²⁹ “What would you do?” he asks. “How would you feel?”

IMAGINING A NEW MODEL OF CARE FOR CHINESE CANADIAN ARCHIVES

Our discussions on the affective impact and the preservation risks involved in salvage archiving lead us to the final part of our conversation; in this section, we discuss ideas about who has responsibility to care for community archives and muse about potential models of stewardship as issues related to autonomy and sustainability surface. The earliest attempts by archival scholars to characterize community archives assert that their defining feature is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their commonality *on their own terms*.³⁰ Flinn acknowledges that community archives exist

²⁵ Caswell and Cifor, 31.

²⁶ Paul Yee, meeting, 20 September 2022.

²⁷ Genevieve Weber, “From Documents to People: Working towards Indigenizing the BC Archives,” *BC Studies* no. 199 (Autumn 2018): 97.

²⁸ Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 41.

²⁹ Caswell and Cifor, 41.

³⁰ Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, “Whose Memories,” 73.

on a spectrum of autonomy, where some might have close relationships with government or other mainstream archival institutions and others might refuse those relationships to maintain their status as what Shaunna Moore and Susan Pell call “autonomous archives.”³¹ As most scholars point out, however, the relationship between its autonomy and its sustainability becomes one of the biggest dilemmas of a community archives. For example, of the three archives they studied, Moore and Pell note the differing places they occupy on this spectrum and how the archive with the least institutional affiliation, the Friends of the Woodward’s Squat Archive, “is in the greatest jeopardy – both physically because of its lack of a permanent dwelling place, and intellectually because of potential public inaccessibility.”³²

The considerable support needed to sustain a community archives is explored by Sheffield against the perceived “inevitability” of their donation to mainstream institutions that have the required financial and human resources.³³ In addition to space, professional care, and ongoing funding, Yee also identifies the accountability of public institutions as an asset available to counter a “hidden danger” in community archives work: public archives, he suggests, can be held accountable for their actions and decisions in different ways than can community archives, and he worries about the risks of leaving community-based materials in private hands. Much of the salvage archiving Yee was able to do was of materials already abandoned, their ownership forfeited by the community and private associations. “If I didn’t take them,” he explained, “they would be lost. At that time, there was no second resource or second chance.” In Yee’s experience, public archives bear responsibility to respond to communities with records and can be held to account when they do (or don’t).

The archival literature cites examples of community archives across the spectrum, from those closely aligned with mainstream archives to those that are fully autonomous. Sheffield recounts the kinds of difficult decisions archives like the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA, now the ArQuives) considered over the years as they sought stability and their own space, as well as the fierce independence asserted by the Lesbian Herstory Archives.³⁴ Marika Cifor describes the conflict within the ACT UP/NY (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power/New York)

³¹ Shaunna Moore and Susan Pell, “Autonomous Archives,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, nos. 4–5 (2010): 255–68.

³² Moore and Pell, 260.

³³ Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions*, 194.

³⁴ Sheffield, 194.

organization over decisions to move their archives to the New York Public Library.³⁵ Fears expressed by ACT UP/NY members of losing control over the physical care of their materials, as well as the stories that would be told about them, are similar to those experienced by the CLGA.

Well-functioning community archives that operate autonomously in relationship with mainstream archives do exist. According to Stevens, Flinn, and Shepherd, when these relationships work, it's because communities retain control (even if not necessarily custody) over their materials. The "handing on" of knowledge is emphasized through the community's ongoing involvement in and/or direction of key archival functions, including appraisal, description, access, and curation.³⁶ The ONE Archives is a notable example of a strong institution-community relationship. ONE negotiated the donation of its collections to the University of Southern California Library, redirecting its priorities away from collections management to become an independent community partner. With the collections owned by and housed at the university, ONE's new mandate is to support them as a resource for education, community outreach, exhibitions, and public programming, ensuring both the continued use of the archives and community control over decision making.³⁷ Fear of "handing over," "losing control," or the "swallowing up" of their collections remains a legitimate concern for community archives given the long history of white supremacy and the erasure of non-hegemonic histories in mainstream institutions. Still, the types of post-custodial practices in which community archives like ONE Archives have engaged may offer a more equitable model for stewardship.³⁸ Some of the "serious constraints" that prevent Yee from envisioning a different kind of relationship between the professional archival community and Chinese Canadian community records may no longer exist now, decades later, under a post-custodial framework. However, for post-custodial models to work in ways that are equitable and truly beneficial for

³⁵ Marika Cifor, *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS* (Minneapolis and St. Paul: University of Minnesota Press, 2022).

³⁶ Mary Stevens, Andrew Flinn, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "New Frameworks for Community Engagement in the Archive Sector: From Handing Over to Handing On," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, nos. 1–2 (2010): 59–76.

³⁷ Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions*, 218.

³⁸ Post-custodialism as an archival strategy was first posed by F. Gerald Ham in response to the growing demands of preserving electronic records. Rather than happening after records are transferred to a repository, preservation begins while records continue to be retained by their creator, with archives providing oversight and support. One of the most popular post-custodial models has been the digitization and donation of digital surrogates to archival institutions, while donors retain custody over the original records within the context of their respective communities.

communities, considerable political will on the part of mainstream archives is needed. As Jimmy Zavala et al. argue, there is no reason mainstream archives could not “engender post-custodial practice, foster community autonomy and promote shared governance, *if only they are willing to share power and authority with the communities they have historically left out.*”³⁹

At the time Yee was salvaging materials, there was “no one to go to.” “There was no help,” he explained. “I mean, I worked in the archives too, but there was nobody I could reach out to to say, ‘Hey, can you help me, can we do something, can we intervene.’ There was no such thing.” The emerging scholarship on post-custodial models presents possible models for intervention; it describes or imagines situations in which community archives and mainstream institutions work in genuinely mutually beneficial relationships with each other. This post-custodial and power-sharing mindset is particularly important as mainstream archives increasingly seek to engage marginalized communities and to diversify their collections. In this final section of our conversation, we mull over possibilities for intervention and consider who should be involved.

JD: We’ve spoken about the importance of historical consciousness, and how it was very low at the time when you were starting to collect these materials. We were thinking also about archival consciousness and whether it’s a separate thing. How does it develop, or where is the community at in terms of archival consciousness?

PY: Very few people [have archival consciousness yet] in Chinatown. They’re usually people who have used archives to a large extent, and really appreciate them. And then other people kind of see archives as part of a museum, as part of that whole world of collecting interesting things and you go to them when you have a project. That kind of consciousness is not conducive to collecting systematic materials.

JD: What do you think you would have needed to be able to do something different?

PY: Well, I guess, from the institutional point of view, leadership from the archival community would have really helped. But, you know, there

³⁹ Jimmy Zavala, Alda Allina Migoni, Michelle Caswell, Noah Geraci, and Marika Cifor, “A Process Where We’re All at the Table: Community Archives Challenging Dominant Modes of Archival Practice,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 45, no. 3 (2017): 213 (emphasis added).

were all kinds of other things going on. I mean, back then BC history was struggling to get a handhold in academia. So it wasn't just us. It was a whole number of outsiders, trying to get in.

I think the most important thing that's going on now is this rising historical consciousness in the community. People seem to be coming out of the woodwork with *stuff*. And hopefully, these people will kind of look around a bit more at the groups they belong to.

JD: [Asks a very roundabout question about how attitudes towards archives and collecting archives have changed in the Chinese Canadian and Chinatown community.]

PY: Well, it seems that the community has advanced on both fronts. Because there are private collections, the family collections that seem to be emerging. The Lee family, you know, the Cumyows, et cetera. The families have put out their papers and they've been [acquired], which is really great. At the same time, I think, from a research point of view, it's the infrastructure groups that are important. Because their coverage of the community is much wider than one family. I mean, a family can be old and they can have many, many kids and, you know, a tremendous business collection – but they don't have the reach. But all the other associations do. They could literally document everybody living in Chinatown in say the forties or fifties. I mean, that blows my mind. If you could pull all that together and digitize it: wow! The work that I've seen to film particular organizations and say this is what they're doing, you know, to kind of normalize them and to bring them out of their own little shell, I think that's been very encouraging. Because it shows that the leadership is open to opening up. If they're opening to let people come in and take pictures, then the next step is maybe they'll show you what their records are like. It's these kinds of baby steps that have to be taken. But to answer your question, I fall on the side of the institutions like the Chinese schools, the family, and district associations – I think those are the ones who need to be encouraged about all of this.

JD: Because they have broader documentary coverage of a community?

PY: Yeah, yeah. And the associations may have been more systematic. For political reasons, they might have wanted everybody of a surname to be there, simply because it showed power [and] cohesiveness. They're also donor records. It's about who has money and how those groups were

funded. I mean, the possibilities of those records shedding light on how communities survive are tremendous.

JD: So there's a real difference in thinking about the archives of associations and showing how communities survive, how they were funded, how they were organized, how they operated – versus a museum's focus on storytelling around an object or a series of objects?

PY: Mmhmm, yeah. Because the museum – well, they're selective [in what they collect], right? They're very selective. Archives are selective too, but motherlodes of documents can trump valuable objects because the research possibilities are much bigger. And that's where the archives have kind of a trump card to play.

JD: [There's a lot of discussion in the archival studies field right now about who should have custody and agency over community-created records. I think a lot of people in this field right now are] very mistrustful of public institutions.

PY: Oh wow. Yeah?

JD: They're not sure that public institutions are the place where access should happen to community records, so that's an interesting kind of tension, maybe.

PY: Wow. Huh. How interesting. I guess I've had the benefit of working within government, and also seeing community groups and how they function. So from the community side, I see a lot of ad hoc groups. There's an issue, people rally around, and they deal with the issue, and then the issue is [re]solved, and they disappear [*laughs*]. And the records are all gone. So that's a downside to the community. [*pause.*] I guess this is [also] when you want to move the word “community” into “what is the community?” These are people with egos, these are people with agendas, these are ambitious people. And, you know, we don't normally have to talk about this level because a community is a very broad, safe concept. But below that, what's actually happening? I see the public institutions as a way of moving these precious archives [into safe spaces, away from the whims of individuals].

JD: So what you're highlighting is that inside a community there are people with different intentions for the records and the records are connected to their own egos and stories and identities. And the [institutional] archives then becomes this objective space and that's the appeal for you?

PY: Mm hmm, absolutely. Yeah. I've also been involved in community organizations. I was on the board of the Chinese Cultural Centre which actually built a museum and archives as part of its complex [though its vision was never fulfilled]. And it's because, as a private society, it is run by whoever gets elected to the board. And if they have different priorities, the museum and archives fall to the back. And for that reason I think it's very, very risky for community groups to try and get into the business of collecting archives. Because of the way societies are, they change. It's part of this democratic process we have in Canada to empower groups to do their own thing. But when you let them do their own thing, they will – and it's not always archives [that they choose to prioritize]. So, I have always fallen on the side of institutional leadership for community archives. I think that's the only way to guarantee [their] ongoing professional care.

Maybe it's different in the future. I'm aware that different things are going on in [Vancouver's Chinatown] community. There's [a Chinese benevolent] association with huge archives and they're slowly putting it all together. They have somebody who's really dedicated to it. There seems to be leadership in the association to encourage this kind of "let's take better care of these archives." But even then I worry. Simply because boards are at the whim of the economy, at the whim of politics, community politics. It's just a scary place to entrust historical records. We truly need a neutral body that has strong, clear-sighted leadership. You know, I'm sorry to sound so negative about community stuff, but it is a concern about professionalism and ongoing funding. Those are the keys to archival development. Despite all the goodwill in the community, they can only go so far.

JD: Can you say a little more about what you mean by "professional care"?

PY: Professional care meaning honouring the integrity of records, honouring access, equal, equitable, non-harmful access. I respect archives because they are public institutions, and as public government institutions, they have an obligation to be open, and transparent. Things that do not apply to the private sector. So I think becoming part of the

public sector is important. There's just a whole set of accountability that makes sense for records.

But if ongoing funding for a kind of community archivist role could be accessed, that would be great. If it was an endowed position, you know, some foundation, or university-dedicated [position]. I mean, didn't there used to be an archival advisor that went around to the [small archives]? Advising them on how to better maintain their collections, because all these little [places] really didn't know what to do. That role was terrific because the [institutions] loved it, they benefited, everybody seemed to benefit.

JD: What would you like to see, in a perfect world? What would you like to see the professional archival community do in relation to Chinese Canadian community records, and their role in saving, preserving those?

PY: I've always been a very pragmatic person. I don't have raised expectations simply because I know what the constraints are – in community work, volunteer work, all of that. What would I imagine? You know, it's sort of a way of looking at me as to how oppressed or internally colonized I am as a person. That people like me grow up knowing that we live within very serious constraints and we can only go so far, so let's not push the envelope, because we're not going to get it. So I think that's what's stopping me from [answering] this. Because it calls for imagineering something that's way beyond what I'm comfortable with. It's a good question, and when I hear it, I think, "Well, I should be able to answer that, I care about the community, I care about the archives. I really do." But, you know, honestly, I just can't say the words. I can't even get my mind to wrap around that. I guess I'm trying to explain why I'm evading your question. I'm so sorry.

JD: No, I think that's a really good answer. Because it's hard to imagine outside of how things are. You do know the constraints, right? You understand the constraints that exist and are in place. Those aren't always well understood by other people who can imagine a different reality but don't necessarily have a really strong grasp of the serious constraints that are also in place.

PY: Whatever is doable for private or public groups, all the more power to them. When [mainstream institutions] decide that Chinese Canadian archives is doable, that's fabulous. I could never imagine that.

Several organizations in Toronto want to do Chinese Canadian archives. And [the Toronto Public Library] has gone about it in a very big way.⁴⁰ They have a dedicated archivist, or staff, to look after this special collection and they've collected stuff, and they are very professional about it. The access very much follows [the] library philosophy of access above all. And so I get the sense that good records are being gathered and made available. I think it's wonderful because this is coming very much from the top. [It is wanted.] It is being done. It's legitimate. It's being taken seriously.

I default to the institutional recourse [because] the institution has resources, it has access, it has expertise, it has everything. It stands. And I don't feel that the state is intervening [in] or misinterpreting my material when I put it there. I feel pretty much that all important community archival things should probably be in public hands over the long term, after I'm dead. I think [it's] the only continuity that can be guaranteed. Really, you know, I weep when I have to say this, but really – I see the good things that are happening [with some community initiatives] – it's really great. But again, if the leadership changes ... I shudder –

JD: You've seen it.

PY: Yeah, yeah, and it's – we're almost there. It's within reach. It's a new model. But there's a hidden danger to the model. That stuff can vanish so easily. And the community has no right to it. It can't make any claim to it, in terms of copyright, history, whatever. They're in private hands – it's a private society that owns them. So, you know, if they don't assign rights to the public, it's like game over.

But, it's a *good thing* that [things are being developed] in the community context because it sets up a model of what can happen. If a society [emerges] that believes in its own archives and will fund its own archives, and other Chinatown groups say, "Yeah that's a great idea, I think we should do the same." Hallelujah! Hallelujah! And then those groups can maybe band together and start talking about broader issues around, you know, we need to have protocols, so that they're standardized. If we recognize all of our resources [and] somehow tie into [something] bigger. It's only when [the issue] gets bigger that I think you can impose some sort of new structure, a new kind of model, with some sort of new

⁴⁰ "Chinese Canadian Archive," Toronto Public Library, <https://www.torontopubliclibrary.ca/chinese-canadian-archive/>.

mission statement to go forward. I mean, we're looking for bodies to speak out.

We're all looking for ways to move the conversation ahead. I think there's a lot of good intentions around, there are a lot of activities going ahead. But the archival – it's this huge white elephant in the room that we can't ignore but it won't leave the room, right? It's so big. Once you start talking about it, the practical matters rear their heads right away and we fall back [again]. A good strategy session would be useful between all the people who have the interest, access to resources, some experience. We need something to move this ahead. And maybe – I don't know – are we at a good time now?

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Yee's question is posed as community-based institutions in Vancouver such as the Chinese Canadian Museum and the Chinatown Storytelling Centre are beginning to collect and exhibit stories and artifacts. To move the conversation on archives forward – the next needed step – attention must turn, also, to the kind of systematic documentary record Yee sees as imperative. As he advocates for the collection of full fonds of Chinese associations, schools, businesses, and families, Yee knows that there is no one person, organization, or institution that can solve the problem of Chinese Canadian archives.

NEXT STEPS? FROM IMAGINING TO ENACTING NEW MODELS OF CARE FOR ARCHIVES IN VANCOUVER'S CHINATOWN

The conversations recorded and analyzed in this article reveal the attempts of one person to salvage the records of a complex and important past, present, and future. They show the passion that propels this salvage work and the emotional toll on the individual responsible when archival consciousness is not shared more widely. Yee left Vancouver to escape this burden, but his attachment to Vancouver's Chinatown is not severed by distance and his concern for its records – its archival heritage – remains: in our conversations, he continued to grapple with questions about the continuing care and long-term sustainability of this heritage. For Yee, one model for archival care would be for institutional archives – archives like the CVA, UBC Library, BC Archives, and Library and Archives Canada – to demonstrate leadership in prioritizing Chinese

Canadian archives.⁴¹ Public archival institutions, he believes, have both the resources and the mandated responsibility to be accountable for the ongoing care of records, ultimately making them a safer place for long-term preservation and access. And yet, it is nearly impossible for Yee to imagine a world where this is a reality. He yearns for Chinese Canadian archives to be seen by mainstream institutions as “doable” and “wanted,” to be “taken seriously” and legitimized. The systems of oppression and colonization in which Yee grew up and which he internalized – as well as his first-hand understanding of the numerous claims on public archival resources from all sectors of society – have conditioned him to believe “we’re not going to get it.” Ultimately, archival work and its distribution of care and resources is an issue of equity.

As an equity-seeking group, in recent decades, the Chinese Canadian community has sought and won formal apologies from multi-level government “gatekeepers,”⁴² leveraging what few records of the Chinese in Canada exist in public archives as evidence of the institutionalized racism designed to keep them out. Whereas in much of the community archives literature, the relationship of community archives with academic institutions is emphasized, in the Chinese Canadian context, particular attention must be paid to relationships with government archives. Created through discriminatory legislation and policies, throughout their histories, Chinatowns have been sites of violence and destruction, targeted by expropriation, rioting, and razing. Pressing contemporary struggles within these neighbourhoods continue over community representation, racial justice, and displacement and gentrification. In Los Angeles and other areas of Southern California where such struggles continue, case

⁴¹ Other models for community archives sustainability that deliberately focus on securing funding from community members rather than relying on resources from mainstream institutions or grant programs are discussed by Michelle Caswell and Samip Mallick and are central to the work of the Shift Collective, an organization that aims to “support and design community-driven initiatives to boost social, cultural and resource equity.” While Yee is keen to see mainstream, public institutions take greater responsibility for the preservation of Chinese Canadian archives – and sees this as a matter of equity, as we discuss below – there might also be ways to resource preservation through community fundraising initiatives, as Caswell and Mallick have achieved with the South Asian American Digital Archive. See South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), “Against Precarity: Towards a Community-Based Notion of Fiscal Sustainability,” *Medium* (blog), 30 July 2018, <https://medium.com/community-archives/against-precarity-towards-a-community-based-notion-of-fiscal-sustainability-815d1d889309>; Shift Collective, <https://www.shiftcollective.us/collective>.

⁴² In 2006, the Government of Canada issued a full apology to Chinese Canadians for the head tax and *Chinese Exclusion Act*. In 2015, the Government of British Columbia issued a formal apology to Chinese Canadians for the historical wrongs imposed on them by past provincial governments. In 2018, the City of Vancouver issued a formal apology for historical discriminatory legislation directed against residents of Chinese descent.

studies of community archives show the important role occupied by archival materials that can be activated – as inspiration, as evidence, or as strategy – in the fight to preserve a neighbourhood’s history and culture.⁴³ As Chinatown communities grow and change, often under the pressure of city planning processes, preserving and promoting their long histories and building bridges to new residents and community members are likewise being prioritized to ensure that those histories are not lost along the way. As Yee reminds us, the community’s records reflect the role of Chinatowns as sites of internal growth, evolution, and resilience capable of countering symbolic annihilation and its narratives, particularly through culture, education, and small business entrepreneurship. The failure of mainstream archival institutions to prioritize Chinese Canadian archives documenting this role demonstrates a serious lack of care not only for the records but also for their creators and source community.

Yee recognizes that good things are happening through community initiatives in Vancouver’s Chinatown – indeed, good things are happening in Chinatowns across Canada. The first step of raising historical consciousness has been achieved, and he senses a chance to move the discussion forward towards developing deeper archival consciousness. Such work requires not only recognition of the value of preserving archives but also examination of where, how, and by whom this work should be done, through the lens of social justice. One possible model for stewarding Chinese Canadian records that Yee *can* imagine involves public funding of a community archivist who works to benefit community archives and community records creators. A community archivist in such a position would possess the archival consciousness needed to liaise and negotiate equitable relationships with public archives that centre community and the community’s control over the care and treatment of its materials. The kind of relationship envisioned in this scenario resembles the partnership between the ONE Archives and University of Southern California Library described in the previous section.

Calls to the archival profession to address the inequity of its relationships with marginalized communities are not new. More than a decade ago, Flinn argued for “a fundamental review of [mainstream] archival practice,” including “a re-evaluation which leaves behind the idea of the archivist as a neutral, passive, reactive figure and instead

⁴³ Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, and Noah Geraci, “What We Do Crosses over to Activism: The Politics and Practice of Community Archives,” *The Public Historian* 40, no. 2 (May 2018): 90.

embraces a much more active or proactive role.” The archival profession, he continued, must “become more flexible and outward facing, working in partnership with, and supporting the creators and custodians of community archives and heritage materials, considering postcustodial models and relationships.”⁴⁴ Some recent scholarship, however, has troubled the idea of “partnership,” pointing out that the inequity between public institutions and communities means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve reciprocity.⁴⁵ Bergis Jules notes that mainstream archival institutions “can be tremendous partners with and supporters of community-based archives by leveraging the vast resources available to them in more intentionally caring ways.” He adds, however, that “partnerships with community-based archives should not jeopardize their independent existence, the security of their collections, or the values they uphold as part of their responsibility to the specific communities they serve.”⁴⁶ He calls for such relationships, furthermore, to be rooted in a critical analysis of how power is held, experienced by, and operates between involved parties.⁴⁷ As Flinn and others, including Zavala et al., point out, calls for mainstream institutions to assist communities and community archives require and assume a certain altruism on behalf of the archival profession that can be read as patronizing. Yee, like Jules, sees enormous potential for mainstream archival institutions to help resource the work and goals of community archives; however, this has to happen, as Jules puts it, in “intentionally caring ways” that include acknowledging and addressing power dynamics.

In this article, our discussions on care show that archival work is relational and symbiotic. At present, mainstream institutions and community archives function as different species living together within archival practice; their long-term interactions can range from being mutualistic, with benefits to both parties, to being parasitic, in which one lives off of the other resulting in harm to its host. The conversations shared here suggest a need to make explicit the relationships that exist – and to explore the relationships that *could* exist – between mainstream Canadian

⁴⁴ Andrew Flinn, “Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007): 168.

⁴⁵ Michelle Caswell, Jennifer Douglas, June Chow, Rachel Bradshaw, Samip Mallick, et al., “Come Correct or Don’t Come at All: Building More Equitable Relationships between Archival Studies Scholars and Community Archives,” *UCLA*, 2021, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7v00k2qz>.

⁴⁶ Bergis Jules, “Architecting Sustainable Futures: Exploring Funding Models in Community-Based Archives,” *Shift Design* (February 2019), 11. <https://shiftdesign.org/content/uploads/2019/02/ArchitectingSustainableFutures-2019-report.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Caswell et al., “Come Correct or Don’t Come at All.”

archives and Chinese Canadian records; to specify the responsibilities of mainstream archives to redress the consequences of an archival mindset that has typically been more parasitic than mutualistic; and to create an equitable space where mainstream archives not only acknowledge harms but also work towards actively benefiting equity-seeking historically marginalized communities and their archives.⁴⁸ Exploring and eventually enacting the new models that are only hinted at in our conversations must be founded upon power-sharing relationships that prioritize collaborative development of equitable practices and protocols, and allocation of public funding and other resources to community archives work.

Arguably, the timing could not be better in Vancouver's Chinatown to consider such strategies. Significant commitments to the area have been realized by the community from multiple levels of government "post-apology,"⁴⁹ within academia,⁵⁰ and from the private sector.⁵¹ These commitments could include the resources available to pursue a sustainable, equitable, shared model of archival acquisition, preservation, and access – should the community agree to centre this work together. Interest from repositories like CVA and UBC Library is growing and new relationships are under way, building on key acquisitions and poised for courageous conversations.⁵² As Yee's testimonial makes clear, recordkeeping communities cannot continue to defer the conversation about what to do to ensure that Chinese Canadian archives are identified and preserved – a conversation started more than three decades ago and that remains unresolved. "It's this huge white elephant in the room that we can't ignore," he says, adding: "but it won't leave the room, right?" Embracing the elephant means finding a way, together, to transform our spaces and practices.

⁴⁸ Mainstream archives have come a long way in acknowledging harm towards some communities and their archives, as is evident in the National Film Board documentary *Unarchived* (2022), in which representatives from CVA and the BC Archives confront institutional omissions and disavowals.

⁴⁹ The Chinese Canadian Museum of British Columbia was incorporated in 2020 through funding from the Province of British Columbia, with further funding to establish and open its permanent physical location in Vancouver's Chinatown in 2023, including federal and municipal funding. The City of Vancouver's Chinatown Cultural Heritage Assets Management Plan was passed by city council in 2022.

⁵⁰ Academic commitments made at UBC to counter anti-Asian racism include the Asian Canadian and Asian Migration Studies minor program that offered its first courses in 2014. A further Centre for Asian Canadian Research and Engagement was established in 2022.

⁵¹ The Vancouver Chinatown Foundation opened the doors of its Chinatown Storytelling Centre in 2021.

⁵² See Paul Yee Fonds, Pender Guy Radio Collective Fonds, and the Yucho Chow Collection at CVA. At UBC Library, see the Chung Collection, Jim Wong-Chu Fonds, Peggy Lee Fonds, and the Paper Trail collection.