We Will Continue to Update This Page as We Collect More": Archiving as Hopeful Pedagogy

Alexandra Gunnells

Abstract: In the face of an increasingly volatile political and social climate, is it possible to locate archives as sources of hope for the classroom? This essay contends that it is possible if we consider the very act of archiving as a hopeful practice that teachers can and should incorporate into their pedagogy. Through a sustained analysis of a group archiving project implemented in a course on the rhetoric of digital archives, this essay explores how students utilized digital archives to preserve the hidden and absented aspects of student life at the University of Texas at Austin for future generations. The essay concludes by considering how this project model may be applied to other courses.

"We are not building [the archive] to remember or understand the past but to think the future."

- Ida Hiršenfelder, "Body archive/the body as the archive," 75

"Stories are powerful. The stories we believe, the stories that we *live into* shape our daily practices, from moment to moment. They have the power to promise some futures and conceal others."

- Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 20

On April 24, 2024, the Palestinian Solidarity Committee at the University of Texas at Austin initiated a student walk-out and sit-in on the campus's South Mall to protest the ongoing genocide in Palestine and to call on the university to divest from manufacturers supplying weapons to aid Israel's war on Gaza. This peaceful demonstration was quickly interrupted by dozens of troopers from the Department of Public Safety (DPS) clad in riot gear. On foot and horseback, the troopers aggressively dispersed student protests, arresting upwards of 57 protestors in the process. On April 29, protestors returned to the South Mall to set up a pro-Palestine encampment. Once again, DPS troopers arrived and in the hours that followed, troopers attempted to disperse the group with flash bang explosives, used pepper spray and zip ties to subdue protestors, and denied water to those who refused to leave the encampment. At least 100 protestors were arrested by the day's end.

Alexandra Gunnells (she/her) is a PhD student and assistant instructor in the Department of Rhetoric & Writing at the University of Texas at Austin. In addition, she is a co-editor for *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal*. Her research interests include digital rhetorics, sonic rhetorics, and archival methods. Alexandra's recent work centers on constitutive rhetoric and Southern identity, as well as how such identities are circulated via digital platforms. Her chapter, "Sonic Porches: Digital Black Counterpublics and Southern Black Women's Podcasting Practices," is now available in the recently released collection *Diversifying the Space of Podcasting: Access, Identity, and Reflective Practices*.

There are no shortages of such events, either - indeed, one feels inundated daily by news headlines. For instance, in the months since the protests at UT, the genocide in Palestine rages on; SB 17, which prohibits diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at Texas colleges and universities, is in full swing; Donald Trump is re-elected as president of the United States. In the midst of these increased attacks on education and the mounting concerns about the new political regime, the work that we do in the academy – particularly for those of us in the humanities – feels increasingly precarious. How do we collect, sort, and make sense of it all? During the Fall 2024 semester, I taught a course on the rhetoric of digital archives; my students and I examined how digital archives – including the Digital Transgender Archive, Documenting Ferguson, and South Asian American Digital Archive, among others – are leveraged to preserve marginalized community identities and histories in the face of structural violence and systemic oppression. As I grade my students' group archive projects, I am struck in particular by one archive, which catalogues student protests and activist movements. The archive's Vietnam War collection includes a photograph from a May 1970 issue of *The Daily Texan* depicting Austin police officers subduing student protestors with batons and tear gas. In their Palestine Protests collection, I spy an eerily similar photograph: an Austin police officer arresting a student protester while a DPS trooper in full riot gear watches nearby. These two photographs were taken over fifty years apart, yet their similarities speak volumes. In their project reflections, one of the group members explicitly names this comparison, noting that many UT students are largely unaware of the long history of student-led protests on campus and the suppression of such protests by university administration and law enforcement.

It would be difficult, at first glance, to locate hope in this anecdote – and yet, that is precisely what I intend to do in this teaching proposal. More specifically, I intend to argue that archiving itself *is* a hopeful practice and that incorporating archival construction in our course designs orients us towards a hopeful pedagogy. By identifying archiving as hopeful, I do not think of hope in a passive sense, as simply *hoping* for circumstances to improve. Hope, rather, exists in the very act of archiving; to *archive* something is to preserve it, to gift it to a future audience. In doing so, archiving has the potential to create a sense of community for its audience or, in other words, a sense of kinship that extends across time and circumstance. This teaching proposal will demonstrate this idea of archiving as a hopeful act through a discussion of the core component of my rhetoric of digital archives course: the "Archiving Student Life at UT" group project. Through the process of building digital archives, students are encouraged to explore the possibility of, in Bibhushana Poudyal's words, "transforming archives into a hospitable space for historically and structurally marginalized, excluded, absented, and oppressed voices and experiences" (179).

The "Archiving Student Life at UT" group project consists of three core components: a digital archive proposal, a digital archive, and individual project reflections. The digital archive proposal provided space for each group to indicate their initial plans for their digital archive, including their intended platform, plans for archive-level and collection-level organization, and the type of materials they intended to collect. Each "final" archive had to abide by particular guidelines; it had to include a landing page, an "About" section, and a minimum of three collections. Following Jana Smith Elford and Michelle Meagher's

work on feminist archiving principles, the "About" section of the archive had a particular function: it introduced audiences to the archive and provided space for students to introduce themselves as archivists, thereby making their positionalities explicit (365). However, before we could embark on the project, the first question that my students and I faced was: What constitutes student life at UT? I wanted my students to have a great deal of agency in determining *what* to archive – the first step in this process was therefore allowing students to define what student life meant to them. I distributed a Google Form to students that included a list of potential topics related to student life to choose from and a space for students to list additional topics of interest to them; based on the results of the survey, the top seven most popular were designated as the group archive themes. The most popular topics represented a wide variety of possibilities, ranging from UT football to student volunteer organizations. Three groups ultimately created archives and project reflections that spoke directly to the idea of hope discussed earlier in this piece: student protests and activist movements, women's history, and performing arts.

The archives and individual project reflections written by students in the three groups listed above illustrate my central claim that archiving is a hopeful practice that can and should be incorporated into our pedagogical practice as writing instructors. For instance, the performing arts archive strove to make visible one of the hidden or absented aspects of student life at UT: the history and performances associated with the Department of Theater and Dance. As one student reflection noted, universities such as UT that boast prestigious sports programs often prioritize such programs at the expense of more artistic endeavors like performing arts. Thus, this archive responds by documenting photographs and videos that relate to three specific components of the performing arts at UT: the Madrigal Dinner, the musical *Ride the Cyclone*, and the dance showcase *Fall for Dance*. In addition to documenting a wide variety of material, it should be noted that this archive contains a contact page including an email address and social media handles where archive visitors can submit materials to the archive. By including this page, the archive speaks directly to the sense of hope discussed earlier in this piece: it establishes a future-oriented ethos and fosters a feeling of community by calling for submissions from users.

Visitors to the UT women's history archive are met with an overwhelming sense of pride; the landing page of the archive is emblazoned with the statement "She Starts Here – Then Changes the World." The (primarily) photographic materials collected for the archive documented crucial moments in women's history at UT from the 1880s to the present in diverse areas such as academics, athletics, and civil rights efforts, to name a few. For instance, the group archived materials related to notable women in UT's history, including Jesse Andrews, the first woman to graduate from UT; Edith Clark, the first female professor of engineering at UT and in the United States; and Gloria Bradford, the first Black woman to graduate from the UT School of Law. In many ways, the women's history archive illustrated the sense of kinship that can be fostered through the act of archiving. One student reflection in particular acknowledged the turbulent fight for women's rights throughout United States history, noting that women today still face the challenges of navigating a male-dominated society. However, this student simultaneously reflected on the responsibility that she and her group mates felt to document the materials they found in a manner that honored the legacy of women at

UT. Through documenting more recent events in UT women's history, such as the campus-wide Women's History Month Celebration, this group gifts additional aspects of women's history to future generations.

Finally, to return to the beginning of this piece, the student protests and activist movements group documented five student protests that occurred at UT, beginning with the Rainey Protest in 1944 – a protest against the firing of University of Texas president Homer Price Rainey – and ending with the Palestine Protests in 2024. All of the project reflections from this group specifically acknowledged the lack of publicly available information regarding the history of student protests at UT. For instance, two students pointed specifically to the 1969 Battle of Waller Creek, where students protested the removal of trees along Waller Creek during the expansion of the football stadium, and the 1999 UT-10 Protest, where ten students were arrested after protesting the university's delay in creating the Asian American Studies Department. As one student explained in her reflection, learning about these protests impacted her understanding of the university and its values; she questioned why such information was hidden from the public eye and fairly difficult to find. On the other hand, in the wake of the university's harsh response to the May 2024 Palestine protests, one student reflection articulated the connection he felt with past student protestors who similarly faced the university's attempts to suppress their activism. Crucially, this group articulated the importance of being able to contextualize the protests they witnessed in May 2024 within a much richer legacy of student activism at UT.

There are certainly limitations and implications that any teacher hoping to assign a similar project must take into consideration. For instance, some student groups, such as the performing arts group, had to rethink their original plan for the archive when faced with a scarcity of materials; thus, considerations about the depth versus the breadth of these archives will be incorporated into my next iteration of this course. Furthermore, the decision to utilize digital platforms – particularly when creating archives that represent marginalized communities or contain sensitive information – is a key consideration, as it can raise significant concerns regarding privacy. Therefore, in addition to guiding students through the process of treating archival materials with care, I also had to contend with how to guide students through the process of selecting an appropriate digital platform. For instance, selecting platforms that allow for privacy settings so that they are only accessible to the instructor was necessary in several cases. While it is of course necessary to address these limitations, I nonetheless maintain that this group archiving project offers students a critical perspective on the importance of archiving. As Ida Hiršenfelder reminds us, the very act of archiving is a gesture towards the future: it is an offering for future users, an attempt to think of future possibilities for our communities. By engaging students in the process of archiving student life at UT, this project reinforces the hopeful nature of archiving while also encouraging students to form a deeper understanding of their university and community. Student reflections frequently reported how the archival materials collected contextualized their own sense of belonging within the institution, as well as the role that they can play to impact the university's future. Finally, students finished this project with a deeper understanding of the living nature of the archive, as well as their own potential to be the ones who take up the mantle of archival hope from those that came before them. After all, there will always be more to collect.

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