

Perspective

Radical Empathy in the Context of Suspended Grief: An Affective Web of Mutual Loss

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ABSTRACT

Archivists are inextricably bound to records creators, subjects, and donors not only through the work they do to ensure the preservation and access of these records but through their affective relationships with each of these groups. Managing archival collections about grief, trauma, and death form part of the career trajectories of some practicing archivists, but we leave little space in the academic curriculum, and the profession, to acknowledge how this exposure to traumatic materials affects archival processes, workflows, and each other.

In this essay, I highlight a case study about *suspended grief*. Suspended grief is the doubled grief experienced and witnessed by an archivist who is undergoing simultaneous personal grief and secondary trauma while processing archival collections about traumatic events and experiences. This article explores the affective impact of grieving for the forcibly disappeared and how this type of grieving may look differently from grieving the loss of someone who was not forcibly disappeared. The author makes recommendations on how the framework for radical empathy can help inform archivists' work on collections about trauma, death, and grieving.

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*hace mal que no podás sacar los pies de la tristeza /
aunque es tristeza que besa la mano que empuñó el fusil y triunfó /*

*y tiene corazón y guarda en su corazón una mujer y un hombre pasando como
tigres por el cielo del sur /*

*una mujer y un hombre como tigres enjaulados en la memoria del sur /
besando hijitos que nunca más van a crecer /
compañeros que nunca más van a crecer y ahora cosen la tierra al aire¹*

INTRODUCTION

This year marks the 46th anniversary of the Argentine military coup d'état that put a far-right military dictatorship in control of the country for seven years. Though the government took the official name of "Process of National Reorganization," this period is perhaps best known as the Dirty War (1976–1983), a violent period in the country's history that resulted in the kidnapping, detention, torture, and murder of thousands of activists, militants, trade unionists, students, and journalists. Argentina's Dirty War was a direct manifestation of Operation Condor (1968–1989), a United States-sponsored campaign that provided intelligence operations and military support to right-wing military groups and dictatorships in many parts of the Southern Cone to neutralize Communist, populist, nationalist, and socialist groups. As a result, the Argentine *junta* conducted acts of terrorism against its own citizens largely through the tactic of disappearance which involved targeting individual citizens, raiding their homes, kidnapping and detaining them in clandestine detention centers, torturing, and murdering them at the hands of military death squads. A report authored shortly after the end of the dictatorship by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) estimated that 8,961 individuals were disappeared between 1976 to 1983,² though human rights groups estimate a much larger figure of about 30,000.³

Among those forcibly detained were pregnant women and families with small children. Pregnant women were forced to give birth in detention centers. Most women

¹ Juan Gelman, "Otras partes," in *En abierta oscuridad* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Siglo XXI, 1993), 84–85.

² National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), *Nunca Más (Never Again)* report (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1984), http://www.desaparecidos.org/nuncamas/web/english/library/nevagain/nevagain_001.htm.

³ Carlos E. Cué, "Polémica en Argentina por las cifras de desaparecidos de la dictadura," *El País Argentina*, January 28, 2016, https://elpais.com/internacional/2016/01/27/argentina/1453931104_458651.html.

who gave birth in these centers were murdered shortly thereafter. Approximately 500 babies were either born in captivity or taken as young children from their detained mothers and fathers and given to infertile couples who were sympathetic to or allies of the military dictatorship. Despite the fall of the Argentine dictatorship 39 years ago, the effort to reunite families continues today.

Due in part to investigative efforts of human rights organizations such as the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo, there are a growing number of children (now adults) that have been identified and reunited with their biological family members.⁴ Since I began writing this article in 2016, the number of “stolen babies” found has risen from 119 to 130.⁵

ARGENTINA’S DIRTY WAR (1976–1983) IN THE JUAN GELMAN PAPERS

The first fact that I learned about Juan Gelman is that he was a smoker. I distinctly remember opening the shipping boxes that contained his papers and being met with the unique combined odor of cigarettes and stored humidity. These two smells felt familiar to me as they might feel familiar to all archivists who work to arrange and describe materials that have been stored in boxes for many years or decades. As I got to know Gelman through his records, it became increasingly apparent to me why there was a need to keep these materials safe, but to keep them put away in sealed boxes.

One of the first questions a processing archivist asks herself when unpacking a new archival collection is: *Is there a working original order?* In Gelman’s papers, there was an immediate and apparent order, but it was one unlike I had never witnessed before. Ten of the twenty boxes reflected material an archivist would expect to receive from a poet’s papers, such as collections of poetry, drafts, loose notes, and correspondence. The boxes were neatly labeled with printouts of full-page descriptions that were affixed to each box.

The other ten boxes were marked with the word “*Investigación*” and contained testimonials, legal documents and correspondence, and the names of clergy members and members of the Argentine military. As I unpacked the materials, I slowly learned the second fact about Gelman. These ten boxes contained records relating to multiple human rights campaigns that Gelman, together with his partner, Mara La Madrid, organized to uncover the truth behind what happened to Gelman’s son, Marcelo, and his pregnant daughter-in-law, María Claudia Iruretagoyena. I learned that Marcelo and María Claudia,

⁴ Matthew Wills, “The Stolen Children of Argentina,” *JSTOR Daily*, August 22, 2018, <https://daily.jstor.org/stolen-children-of-argentina/>.

⁵ Natalie Alcoba, “Argentina Group Identifies 130th Person Taken During Dictatorship,” *Al Jazeera*, June 13, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/06/argentina-group-identifies-130th-person-dictatorship-190613202509099.html>.

who was seven months pregnant at the time, were two of the thousands of *desaparecidos* who were kidnapped by the Argentine military regime, and their baby was one of the 500 children who were taken from their families.

What Does Grieving for the Forcibly Disappeared Look Like?

Gelman's search for truth and the pressure he put on the Argentine and Uruguayan governments to expose the fate of his deceased and missing family members is evidenced in his archival collection. His papers include 164 3.5-inch floppy disks that contain Microsoft Word documents and email files dated between 1995–2004 that detail conversations Gelman had with other human rights activists, lawyers, forensic anthropologists, and victims of torture.⁶ In both the digital and paper-based files are Gelman's documented efforts to work with other human rights groups like the aforementioned Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo and the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF) to prosecute the murderers of his son and daughter-in-law. There are also files relating to Gelman's search for his missing grandchild, Macarena, whom he successfully found living in Uruguay in 2000.

What I understood immediately while I inventoried the collection is that Marcelo and María Claudia's disappearances altered Gelman's life in a deeply profound way; details of both of their disappearances are scattered throughout the entirety of his archive, not just the "*Investigación*" boxes. For example, court documents and appeals to judges about his son's case were in folders and boxes titled "*Obras*" or "*Escritos sueltos*" ("Works" and "Loose drafts") that were reserved for his creative work. In a "drafts" folder for a book of poetry Gelman published, I found an unpublished letter to his son. In the letter, Gelman addressed Marcelo directly and updated him about his own investigation to find Marcelo's remains.

Gelman utilized the format of open letters often in his work and in *Interrupciones* (1986) published a series of short poems titled "Carta abierta." In "Carta abierta XIII," Gelman communicates his mourning directly to his audience, which include his readers; his mother, who died in 1982; and his disappeared son, daughter-in-law, and grandchild.

⁶ Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, "Invisible Defaults and Perceived Limitations: Processing the Juan Gelman Files," (presentation, Preservation and Archiving Special Interest Group (PASIG) meeting, New York, October 28, 2016), <https://medium.com/on-archivy/invisible-defaults-and-perceived-limitations-processing-the-juan-gelman-files-4187fdd36759>.

have you come and I don't see you? / where
are you hidden? / will nothing ever distract me
from you at last?⁷

There is significant weight in the last part of the quote above: *will nothing ever distract me from you at last?* With it, Gelman offers readers a glimpse into his survivor's guilt and possibly his regret. His political activism and his involvement with various groups such as the Partido Comunista de la Argentina (PCA), the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), and the Montoneros, made him a political target and forced him into exile in early 1976. Later that same year, Marcelo and María Claudia were kidnapped; though it is unclear whether they were targeted because of Juan Gelman's political activities or their own. In other "Carta abierta" poems, Gelman reveals that his mother died while he was living in exile before he was able to secure permission to return to Argentina.

Gelman utilized the format of open letters as sobering confessional pieces. In "Carta abierta XVII" he addressed his reader directly and confessed what he knows about his disappeared son, daughter-in-law, and grandchild. He starts,

*el 26 de agosto de 1976 mi hijo marcelo ariel y su mujer, claudia, encinta,
fueron secuestrados en buenos aires por un comando militar.
el hijo de ambos nació y murió en el campo de concentración.*⁸

In this open letter, Gelman assumed his grandchild died in a concentration camp. But on December 23, 1998 (actually written on April 15, 1995), Gelman published an epilogue titled, "Carta abierta a mi nieto o nieta," in *Brecha*, a daily newspaper publication in Montevideo, Uruguay. In the letter, he revealed what he learned of his son's disappearance and grandchild's birth. In 1990, Gelman found his son's remains with the help of the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense. The letter reveals gruesome details of Marcelo's demise: Marcelo was shot at close range on the back of the head about a month after he was kidnapped. His remains were subsequently thrown into a 200-liter oil barrel filled with cement and sand. The oil barrel was then thrown in the San Fernando River where it was recovered decades later. The whereabouts of María Claudia's remains are still unknown. I know these details because they are collectively scattered, told and re-told, throughout the archive. Not only are pieces of these facts present throughout the archive, they are found repeatedly in copies of the same

⁷ Juan Gelman, "Open Letter XIII" in *Unthinkable Tenderness*, trans. Joan Lindgren (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 33.

⁸ Gelman, 35.

documents and similar but different records that are filed and organized in distinct folders.

I detail this to answer the following questions: *What does grieving for the forcibly disappeared look like? What does this type of grieving look like in the archives that are created by those in search of their disappeared loved ones?* The multiple copies of records present in Juan Gelman's archival collection that tell and retell the stories of Marcelo, María Claudia, and Macarena were presumably created to gain national and international attention to prosecute those responsible for committing acts against humanity. But these records are also demonstrative of grieving for those who were forcibly disappeared. This archival collection, besides being an archival collection of an internationally acclaimed Latin American poet, is as Michelle Caswell defines, a human rights archive that was created as a response to grief, an instillation of hope, and because of a lack of an official government record.⁹ There is something to be named and recognized about the perpetuation of sustained trauma by family members who lose a loved one through forced disappearance. Gelman's poetry was forever shaped by his personal loss and can arguably be considered a response to the *archival imaginary*. The concepts of the *archival imaginary* and *imaginary records* help broaden the definition of human rights documentation to understand the affective needs of human rights survivors and victims' families since the *archival imaginary* always holds a promise of something that is withheld.¹⁰ All disappeared persons become subjects of the *archival imaginary* since victims' families are left to speculate if the victims are still alive, if they suffered, and where their bodies are. In *Say Nothing*, a book about The Troubles (1968–1998) in Northern Ireland, Patrick Radden Keefe helps draw a parallel to the phenomena of grieving for the disappeared. Radden Keefe details that after years of silence, family members felt "relief, if not catharsis, in being able to speak openly with others about the enduring trauma of this kind of loss," some of who describe the persistent loss in stages from feeling a nagging sense of uncertainty, a refusal of not moving on (i.e., "she had refused to change the linens of her son's childhood bed"), to accepting that their loved one is dead, but being unaccepting of not having a grave to go to.¹¹

⁹ Michelle Caswell, "Defining Human Rights Archives: Introduction to the Special Double Issue on Archives and Human Rights," *Archival Science* 14, no. 3–4 (2014): 208–209. DOI 10.1007/s10502-014-9226-0.

¹⁰ Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, "False Promise and New Hope: Dead Perpetrators, Imagined Documents, and Emergent Archival Evidence," *International Journal of Human Rights* 19, no.5 (2015): 625. DOI: 10.1080/13642987.2015.1032263; Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 53–75. DOI:10.1007/s10502-015-9259-z.

¹¹ Patrick Radden Keefe, *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland* (New York: Doubleday, 2018), 216.

Imagined records retain their psychological power over time through the lack of official documentation and/or admission of involvement by the perpetrator (i.e., state or other government-sponsored groups) and the sense of ambiguous loss. This ambiguous loss may alter or prolong the grieving period of family members; several studies attempt to link ambiguous loss experienced by relatives of victims of human rights abuses to prolonged grief disorder (PGD).¹² In Gelman's case, we see both an instantiated archive in response to the *archival imaginary* in his "Carta abierta" poems, "Carta abierta a mi nieto o nieta," and a prosecutorial archive as evidenced in the court documents and legal correspondence he had with lawyers in an effort to bring those who committed crimes against humanity to justice.

What Does Witnessing the Grieving for the Forcibly Disappeared Feel Like?

As the processing archivist for Gelman's papers, the best way I can describe the collection's affective impact is through the process of experiencing and witnessing grief in suspension. The act of suspension—to be catapulted, jostled, and thrown from one place to another—is the closest to what I affectively experienced while processing the Gelman papers. Every time I found documents about the ongoing human rights investigations in places Gelman reserved for his creative work, I was catapulted from whatever thematic content I was working on and immediately placed back into the heaviness of Gelman's grief. Records that document grief demand a certain affective urgency from those who bear witness to their evidence. Much like how archivists have reported experiencing secondary grief or vicarious trauma as they process emotionally taxing collections,¹³ these documents demanded my pause both intellectually in terms of whether I should re-organize them in folders and boxes that best matched their content, and emotionally; each instance demanded my affective response and care. What I was able to infer from the existing original order is that grief over the disappeared can

¹² Theo Hollander, "Ambiguous Loss and Complicated Grief: Understanding the Grief of Parents of the Disappeared in Northern Uganda," *Journal of Family Theory & Review* 8, no. 3 (September 2016): 294–307, DOI:10.1111/jftr.12153; Carina Heeke, Nadine Staamel, and Christine Knaevelsrud, "When Hope and Grief Intersect: Rates and Risks of Prolonged Grief Disorder Among Bereaved Individuals and Relatives of Disappeared Persons in Colombia," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 173 (2015): 59–64; Nadine Staamel, et al., "Prolonged Grief Disorder Three Decades Post Loss in Survivors of the Khmer Rouge Regime in Cambodia," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 144 (2013): 87–93.

¹³ Samantha Winn, "Secondary Trauma & Self-Care for Archivists" ("unconference" presentation, Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, Roanoke, VA, 2015), https://docs.google.com/document/d/12ulhGyUwuLiVORtjemlBxkk259LgFcttI7-YrvNEQ_M/edit; Wanett Clyde, "The Unexpected Emotional Impact of Archiving" (WITNESS blog), August 2015, <https://archiving.witness.org/2015/08/the-unexpected-emotional-impact-of-archiving/>.

manifest in the way I detail above—living, working, attempting to be otherwise purposeful but in what feels like perpetual and suspended mourning—without evidence or an official story to anchor grief. Mara La Madrid, who was both the donor of the archive and partial record creator, tried to order the papers in a way that separates the human rights investigations from Gelman’s work as a poet. However, what is also apparent is the overflow of grief onto all facets of the archive. The original order of the archive is a cathartic demonstration of evidential *suspended grief* lived, re-lived, re-experienced, and re-consulted in the absence of closure in facts, truth, and justice. With *suspended grief*, the grieving period is warped and stretched for those who cannot put a bookend to their loved one’s life. The grief that is located as evidence in the records themselves is re-experienced by the record creator or donor every time they revisit the records and experienced vicariously by the archivist and the user who are left to interpret their meaning.

SUSPENDED GRIEF AND THE AFFECTIVE WEB OF MUTUAL LOSS

In preparing to relive processing the Juan Gelman papers for this article, I looked through the Photo Album feature on my phone. I took photographs of the shipment on the day it arrived in order to transcribe the page-long descriptions comfortably back at my workstation. As I scrolled back to fall 2015 in my Photo Album, I realized something for the first time. There, before and after the photographs I had taken of Gelman’s boxes, were screenshots of conversations and photographs I had with my friend Marcy. Marcy suffered a terrible car accident that had left her in a medically induced coma for months before her family decided to take her off life support. I do not remember the exact date she had her car accident or the exact date she was taken off life support, though my phone tells me that it happened between September and November 2015. What I do remember is feeling desperate and asking the universe, God, all the powers that govern our human lives, to save Marcy.

About halfway through processing the analog portion of Gelman’s papers, and less than two months after Marcy passed away, Heidi, my ex-partner, the person who had just accompanied me on a cross-country road trip from California to New Jersey to relocate for my position, died after a sudden illness.

Like the grieving I witnessed in the Gelman archive, the best way I can describe grieving alone is like grieving in suspension—lacking the proper community to grieve, process, and mourn with as a congregational act. In pursuit of securing a permanent archives position, I left my home base in California because that is frequently expected from early career archivists if they wish to get ahead in this profession. I said yes to my dream job of working on the manuscript and personal papers collections of Latin American writers, but I also said yes to a job that plucked me out of my home and community. Little did I know that months after I started the job, I would need the support

of my community like never before. When Heidi died, I was so new at my job that I had not accrued enough vacation or sick time to attend her funeral.

How Does It Feel to Process an Archive About Grief and Trauma When You Are Simultaneously Also Grieving?

I can say that without the comfort of family and mutually grieving friends nearby, processing the Gelman archive while I was undergoing my own grief process felt like the closest approximation to comfort. Like Gelman, I was far away from my family and friends when I was grieving, and I connected with what I inferred was his alienation and loneliness. I found a deep solace and catharsis in our mutual grieving as I sat with his thoughts, his poetry about his murdered family, and his unwavering fight for justice in their names. His archive gave me much needed purpose and occasional escape from my own grieving to focus on his and Mara La Madrid's grieving. But I can also say that there were days that the mutual grieving experience felt too heavy to bear; there were days I moved like molasses through files and paused over particularly painful revelations in the archive. The emotional processing of suspended grief certainly became part of the process of archival processing—processing the entire collection from start to finish took about a year and a half to complete, which is a comparably long time to spend on a 30-linear-foot (and 5,060 born-digital folders) collection.

How Can Archivists Utilize the Framework of Radical Empathy to Work on Collections About Trauma, Death, and Grieving?

Previous to Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor's framework of radical empathy in archives, there was little in the archival literature that engaged archivists' affective responsibilities and relationships to record creators, subjects, users, communities, and donors, and even less so in relation to grief and death. In 2009, Geoff Wexler and Lisa Long wrote that archivists have a responsibility not just to records creators, but to widows and widowers, lovers and partners, siblings, relatives, and friends.¹⁴ Although Caswell and Cifor originally did not include donors in the four affective relationships, others in the profession have made space to include this important relationship in the framework.¹⁵

¹⁴ Geoff Wexler and Lisa Long, "Lifetimes and Legacies: Mortality, Immortality, and the Needs of Aging and Dying Donors" *American Archivist*, 75, Fall/Winter (2009): 478.

¹⁵ Itza Carbajal, "Centering Donor Consent: Assessing Donor Perspectives on Donating Archival Materials," in "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," eds. Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3.

In Western, European-based cultures, the subjects of grieving and death are avoided as much as possible; however, archivists are constantly reckoning with these life events because we often work with record creators who are near the end of their careers, lives, or donors who have recently lost a loved one.¹⁶ In academic curricula and discourse, there are few opportunities to prepare future archivists on how to navigate donor relationships, work with grieving donors, or balance emotionally taxing work with the technical. In our professional discourse, we are still questioning and dismantling our feigned responsibility to neutrality and have just begun to center our affective responsibilities on the very humans we encounter as donors, record creators and subjects, users, and communities. With a framework that centers a feminist ethic of care, Caswell and Cifor ask, “What happens when we scratch beneath the surface of the veneer of detached professionalism and start to think of recordkeepers and archivists less as sentinels of accountability... and more as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual responsibility?”¹⁷

To process my own grief and the grief evidenced in the Gelman papers, I relied heavily on centering the relationships I engaged with the record creator, Juan Gelman; the record subjects, Marcelo and María Claudia; and, particularly, the donor, Mara La Madrid.

La Madrid’s own existing grief over her husband’s recent loss tied me directly to her as someone who had also just experienced the loss of a partner. Caswell and Cifor write that archivists have “an affective responsibility to engage in radical empathy with others, seen and unseen.”¹⁸ This “seen” and “unseen,” represents the act of seeing what has traditionally been unrepresented in official government efforts and rights-based approaches to human rights reparative work, and in the context of our standard practices, archival description practices. In our traditional archival canon, the lives and stories of those who have been the least surfaced are those of women, poor people, Indigenous people, Black and Brown people, and other people of color. We are also terrible at acknowledging spouses and partners—their role, impact, and influence on the lives of those whose records we deem notable enough to collect. In enacting a feminist ethic of care, *who* I saw was La Madrid and the role and impact she had on the creation and care of the human rights portion of the archive.

La Madrid and Gelman married in 1992, making her Gelman’s second wife and not the biological mother of Gelman’s two children. Together with Gelman she published a tome of first-person testimonies they collected from the children of disappeared parents titled, *Ni el flaco perdón de Dios / Hijos de desaparecidos*. As I processed Gelman’s

¹⁶ Wexler and Long, “Lifetimes and Legacies,” 478.

¹⁷ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives” *Archivaria*, 81, Spring (2016): 25.

¹⁸ Caswell and Cifor, 42.

papers, it was evident that Mara not only encouraged him, but was instrumental in leading the human rights investigations that led to the discovery of Gelman's missing grandchild, Macarena. Acknowledging this, I did my best to highlight La Madrid's contributions to the archive and made sure she was "seen" in various fields of the finding aid including the collection-level Abstract, Biography/History, and Scope and Content notes and the Scope and Content notes at the series/subseries levels.

Addressing Precarity and Tendency Towards Efficiency in the Archival Profession and How These Impact Care

Had I not been going through my own grief process would I have processed the collection differently? Would I have been more efficient, timewise? I do not feel comfortable affirming this, but I do believe that because of the subject matter and my affective connection to the record creators, donor, and subjects, I took extra care and time to ensure that we (archivists working in a US-based repository) honored the materials and the stories they evidence. As detailed elsewhere, our profession's nascent digital accessioning and processing practices threatened to cause major erasures in the collection's folder and file names when I sought advice on troubleshooting issues with Spanish diacritics.¹⁹ Indeed, that case study was a call for archivists to prioritize ethical responsibilities over efficiency and to question current best practices, but it was also an enacted and affective demonstration of care for the relationships these materials document to ensure that we (archivists) do no harm in a situation where so much harm had already occurred. If I was not as affectively connected to the content, did not read Spanish, or had handed this portion of the work to another colleague who did not have the opportunity to get to know the sensitivities of the material, would we have been more likely to commit more harm to these records? Possibly.

How can we as a profession be better about centering our affective relationships with each of these groups and be better about recognizing the emotional impact our profession demands of us? I mentioned earlier that I had not accumulated enough vacation time to attend Heidi's funeral, though I was fortunate enough to have been able to ask for bereavement time off from work. Had I been on a contract or hourly position, as so many colleagues in the profession, would I have access to bereavement benefits? Would I have had to take time off without pay? At best, I would have had to make up the hours I did not work so that my financial well-being was not adversely impacted. If I had the pressure of meeting a grant deadline or been on a term position, would I have been

¹⁹ Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, "Invisible Defaults and Perceived Limitations: Processing the Juan Gelman Files," (presentation, Preservation and Archiving Special Interest Group (PASIG) meeting, New York, October 28, 2016), <https://medium.com/on-archivy/invisible-defaults-and-perceived-limitations-processing-the-juan-gelman-files-4187fdd36759>.

able to affectively and carefully do my work to ensure that our preservation and descriptive practices did not introduce harmful workarounds for the sake of efficiency? We must acknowledge how the pervasive precarity in our profession directly impacts individuals who may be experiencing suspended grief or secondary trauma. In 2019, a Canadian study on archivists who reported to have experienced secondary trauma identified several barriers to accessing support services that include organizational culture, workplace precarity, and stigma associated with admitting to being emotionally affected at work.²⁰

Lastly, I was able to lean on my colleagues as my surrogate family and support system during this difficult time. Without them, my day-to-day would have surely felt bleaker and less manageable. This is one of the reasons why it was so important for the speakers of the 2017 Society of American Archivists panel, “Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,” to name the fifth relationship, of archivist to archivist, as part of the affective relationships we must manage. I cannot fathom to think of how isolating it might have felt to grieve and work on a collection about grief as a lone arranger with no one else nearby. I was able to get through this difficult time because I was given certain privileges that I know are not in place for all archivists. These affordances and considerations are necessary to help archivists process their own grief or vicarious trauma experienced while processing emotionally difficult collections.

CONCLUSION

Our work as archivists inextricably binds us in our affective relationships to record creators, donors, subjects, users, communities, and each other, and we should ground the work we do in the relationships we build with each of these groups. At the root of what we do as archivists is the preservation and documentation of relationships. What we preserve and provide access to is the evidence and documentation of relationships between people, and peoples’ relationships with organizations and institutions; the “stuff” itself is merely the artifact that allows us glimpses of what these relationships were like. Our services and spaces are dependent on the relationships we invest in with our donors and the users and communities we want to reach. With radical empathy, we place less focus on the records themselves and centralize our relationships with the records’ creators, subjects, users, and communities, and each other as archivists.²¹

²⁰ Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Jennifer Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle’: Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, 6, (2019): 21. <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol6/iss1/20>.

²¹ Jasmine Jones and Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, “Applying Radical Empathy Framework in Archival Practice” (webinar, Society of California Archivists, September 17, 2018).

As archivists and collecting repositories work to not only respond to, but in some cases help document, traumatic events and human rights violations like mass shootings, racially motivated police brutality, #metoo, the incarceration of underage children and under-documented families, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, more research focused on the affective impact of our work is necessary to help guide course offerings, services, and training on the subject. Much like a curator is expected to have a subject background in the area she collects, archivists (and curators) should be required to have training or coursework that focuses on the process of emotional attachment, grieving, and its traumatic effect on people. The Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas study on secondary trauma found that the emotional effects of working with people—creators, subjects, and users of records—require training for archivists and education around how to work sensitively and respectfully with people and records in difficult situations.²² How can job descriptions and responsibilities better reflect archivists’ affective relationship building as a central responsibility? Moreover, the profession needs to also acknowledge how an archivist’s own affective connection or identity to documented communities can positively help shape the ways in which archivists can be better stewards and care providers to donors, records creators, subjects, users, and communities.

²² Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle’: Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists,” 20.

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