

The Miracle is an archival and artistic project that aims to bring queer literature, records, ephemera, zines, music, porn, and many other kinds of cultural artifacts to viewers, readers, and participants in the city. It functions much as a bookmobile does, bringing culturally relevant materials out to places in the city where they can be enjoyed by whomever happens upon them. Unlike a traditional bookmobile, The Miracle gives away all of its collections: users agree to read what they have taken and are asked to share the work if they so choose in any manner that is convenient to them rather than return it. It also borrows heavily from Latin American traditions of street performance, employing theatricality to disrupt the spatial hierarchy of the city. The Miracle claims urban space to create an event for its viewers and volunteers, an experience that centers on the transmission of cultural information to the various community constituencies it serves. These acts of cultural transmission take place in parts of the city that have been home to minoritized communities currently facing gentrification, deportation, economic exploitation and other forms of violence including transphobia, homophobia, racism, and sexism. While The Miracle focuses on queer people and their unique cultural history, its founders reject a sense of community based on essentialized notions of identity and instead embrace a way of forming community that focuses on using urban space to bring different kinds of people into close contact. The project has involved dozens of volunteers, hundreds of donors, and thousands of readers over its decade of operation.

The Miracle also enacts a critique of community-based archives, those that center on preserving the queer cultural heritage. Community-based archives pose a number of ethical and intellectual challenges to the broader archival and recordkeeping community in terms of archival theory, archival practice, and professional organizations. Andrew Flinn et al. (2009), writing in particular of archives in the United Kingdom, describe community archives as being engaged in an ongoing project that counters the pervasive marginalization of various kinds of self-identified groups, including labor organizations, feminist groups, diasporic ethnic communities, and sexual minorities. These grassroots, politically motivated community groups involved in collective memory projects adopt a number of strategies for depicting, capturing, and presenting their collective histories, often motivated more by affective concerns and desires for self-representation than by any particular orientation toward such ideas as archives, records, or provenance. While these ideas are certainly of considerable importance, the vocabulary of archival theory and the sites of the field's discourse — i.e., scholarly journals, academic publishers, and professional conferences — exclude organizations and individuals who may wish to engage, but have not been acculturated or educated to do so. People involved in community projects might reasonably calculate that optimal use of limited resources precludes participation in any of these fora. Others, for political reasons and a widespread assumption of elitism, exclusivity,

and bias in archival institutions, might assume, with no small amount of history to support such a conclusion, that the archival establishment will consider their contributions invalid and unimportant *a priori*.

Given the challenges of initiating a conversation that could be mutually informative, we read with great pleasure “Love and Lubrication in the Archives, or rukus!: A Black Queer Archive for the United Kingdom,” the collaboration of Ajamu X, Topher Campbell, and Mary Stevens (2010). In its description of the black queer community and its records, of the process of addressing identity through play and memorial, and of the constant threat of loss or erasure, we found quite a bit that we recognized from our own work, a certain kind of family resemblance between our own motivations for participating in community organizing and what was recounted by the authors. While there are many differences between the project described in the article and our own work, we were particularly taken by the experimental form of the article and the way it presented a conversation as something of importance to all audiences concerned. This article is our attempt to continue that conversation.

We present this work as co-authors and as participants in our own community memory project, The Miracle . IRINA CONTRERAS, an artist, organizer, and former teacher based in Oakland, California, founded the project in 2004 while studying at Otis College of Art and Design. KELLY BESSER, a former LAUSD schoolteacher, an organizer, and a professional archivist, joined the project in 2008 at which point the previously unnamed project was named The Miracle. RODERIC CROOKS, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Information Studies at University of California Los Angeles, first participated in a Miracle event in 2009. Over the course of the project, approximately 50 volunteers have contributed to or supported Miracle events. Like the work of X, Campbell, and Stevens, our attempt to engage with archival thought takes the form of an open-ended conversation wherein we revisit some of the topics of the original article and explore new ones. We hope that this contribution might inspire others to engage with queer community memory projects in any form, wherever they might crop up, as part of The Miracle, as part of a self-determined project, or in collaboration with other individuals or groups.

Identifying our work within the context of community archives is a tricky business, since the concepts involved in defining community and archives are equally amorphous. As Elizabeth Crooke (2010) observes in the context of heritage work in Northern Ireland, the idea of community is socially constructed and constantly shifting, marked by concepts, ideas, or statuses that are themselves determined by the group and subject to change, reinterpretation, or challenge on a number of grounds that are intelligible only to group members. The Miracle is adamantly community-based, with a number of implications for our funding and operation, but also for scholarly conceptions of community. Founded in Los

Angeles, California, The Miracle now operates there and also in Oakland, California. Whereas some community archives proceed from either LGBTQ(lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer)identity, or geographically bounded community, The Miracle combines many of these aspects. Vishanthie Sewpaul (2013) argues that the lens of intersectionality provides an avenue to translate everyday lived experience into an alternative to androcentric and patriarchal hegemony; for that reason, we resist an essentialist notion of what our community is and where it exists. We find these definitions of identity and community difficult, but we prefer them to any banal concept of diversity, with its presumed, implicit reference to some normal and normative status (Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group, 2011).

We simultaneously memorialize and recreate a community through our work. Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith (2010) argue that a condescending and essentializing conception of community reinforces “status inequality,” through, among other factors, racial inequity in the attribution of expertise, failure to acknowledge conflict or complexity within communities, and the implicit association of white middle class values as mainstream. They argue instead for a more nuanced version of community as “an ongoing process in which identity is explored and (re)created” (p. 12).

We acknowledge that most of our practices involve creating experiences and taking over space in urban streets, activities that do not necessarily fit with traditional, institution-centric views of archives. Community-based archives collect all manner of material that may or may not be considered records and engage in a number of activities that might or might not be considered recordkeeping. In the case of The Miracle, the collection involves thousands of books, a system of notecards, a database, some photographic evidence of its existence, and most importantly for its founders, stories and conversations. While defining a record is not a straightforward business, even relatively loose and open definitions are troubled by The Miracle’s insistence on interaction over documentation. Summarizing this move toward more inclusive definitions in the context of community-based organizations, Flinn (2007) writes:

[M]aterial objects, paper and digital records, audio-visual materials and personal testimonies, all created or collected and held within the community... might engender some debate as to whether these ‘created’ or ‘artificial’ collections are archives, but the movement has chosen, correctly I believe, to use the broadest and most inclusive definitions possible. (p. 153)

In terms of institutional orientation, The Miracle is profoundly non-institutional. A number of community archives have formed successful partnerships with more established institutions, but some groups view such arrangements as incompatible with the identities they are seeking to represent through their archival work. LGBTQ community archives such as ONE Archives and the Mazer Lesbian Archives have partnered with educational institutions

(University of Southern California and University of California Los Angeles, respectively) to form mutually beneficial financial and custodial agreements (Wakimoto et al., 2013). For community organizations, such a partnership might grant access to the superior resources, expertise, and prestige of the larger institution; for the larger institution, the partnership addresses historical inequities in collection development or appraisal policies and gives university research communities access to previously unavailable archival material. While we applaud these efforts, we also recognize that these kinds of arrangements, while appropriate for certain groups at certain times, cannot be taken as a panacea to the consistent, ubiquitous marginalization of queer people, trans people, poor people, and people of color everywhere in society. Such partnerships threaten to become totalizing and normative, as if any reason that might inspire minoritized communities to pursue community-based, collective memory projects can be addressed by a cozy relationship with a more established institution. To the contrary, the archival multiverse includes many projects that are incommensurable with this kind of partnership. In particular, a number of trans projects have contentious relationships with traditional institutions such as non-profit organizations and have turned to alternative, community-based modes of funding and governance out of a principled belief that community autonomy requires such action (Mananzala & Spade, 2008).

Two main themes emerge from the discussion of The Miracle's practices: foremost is the idea of memorializing and combating the disappearance of community space. The Miracle was founded partly in protest of the closure of a number of community spaces such as independent bookstores, gay Latino bars and trans nightclubs, increased deportation of students and their families such as those executed by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), and the gentrification of queer and Latino neighborhoods, primarily in South and East Los Angeles. A main goal of The Miracle is to commemorate this absence. By creating ad hoc community meeting spots, it The Miracle reclaims space for interaction and solidarity.

The second major theme of The Miracle's work is "distribution/redistribution." While this idea does not pertain only to books, it holds that all members of the community deserve access to information, literature, culture, and space. By taking materials donated from one part of the community and giving them away in another part, The Miracle project aims to change consciousness, foster community engagement, and valorize intersectional solidarity.

Finally, we hope that the form of this article and the way it responds to some of the same questions posed by X, Campbell, and Stevens' "Love and Lubrication in the Archives, or rukus!: A Black Queer Archive for the United

Kingdom” can continue the conversation between community groups and archival professionals.

RODERIC CROOKS:¹What’s the name of the project? How did you start?

IRINA CONTRERAS: The project is called The Miracle. It started in January 2004 when I was an undergraduate at OTIS College of Art and Design in Westchester. I was enrolled in a class with Meg Cranston who is a local established artist and an educator. So within the course of this class I decided I wanted to do a reading room. At the time I was living in Watts. I grew up in Pacoima and so I was really interested in the idea of a space where people could read books.

In that time period, all these major bookstores were disappearing in L.A. Not having really ever lived in places that had adequate libraries or bookstores, I was very interested. We didn’t have a car growing up, so books were very far away. I saw the same thing in Watts. There were a couple bookstores, but they were all religious. Watts is in the proximity of so many important, strong political roots, like the Watts Labor Community Action Center, but there was nothing like a reading room anywhere. It didn’t take me too long to reconceive of doing the project as a bookmobile.

I worked for Los Angeles Unified School District in cultural affairs for several years. In any given week I might be in San Pedro or teaching in Canoga Park. So I was in my car all the time. I just devised this crazy system in my Volvo out of cardboard and old suitcases. Whenever I got bored on my commute, I would pull over and set up shop. Sometimes friends came with me, sometimes it was just me. I would say that I did it roughly 40 or 50 times in that period.

One of the things that changed when I met Besser was that I stopped taking anything that came my way. At first, I just took anything so I ended up with every copy of *MacWorld* ever printed. The death of that first part was when the LAPD took my car over registration issues in 2006, almost exactly two years after I’d started. They took the car to Viertel’s, the impound lot. I got the Volvo for free but they wanted \$1,500 to release it. Or if you didn’t have the money, it would be \$2,000 the next day. I decided to get a bicycle instead. Besser and I met later on in 2006 at a Red Cat intergenerational feminism panel. Less than a year after that, at some point, Besser said, “I’ve always wanted to do something like that.” And I was open to doing it a different way.

¹ The interview transcribed here took place over 150 minutes in Downtown Los Angeles on May 12, 2013. The conversation has been edited by the authors.

RODERIC CROOKS: What kinds of records did you keep in the early period?

IRINA CONTRERAS: At the time, I was really interested in things that could just disappear, things that were transitory in nature. I did very little recording or documentation. I was asked to do events, but I stayed away from doing big, official art events because they didn't speak to what I wanted to do. That has been consistent throughout the project. People ask us to do all kinds of events and things. Recently someone asked me if I wanted to do a big art exposition, but we don't really do that.

RODERIC CROOKS: Kelly, how did you get involved?

KELLY BESSER: In 2006, we got started with my Jeep. Irina was living in a queer, collective punk house in Highland Park called Black Diamond. We had a barbecue there and invited a bunch of folks and told them what we were planning, a community-based bookmobile. That's how we started our collection, from word of mouth, from donations, from having a barbecue. Later, we had another one at the Gay Gardens Cooperative in Echo Park. People just brought bags and bags of books, really great stuff. And we had a skeleton of a collections policy. That's when we moved away from *MacWorld* to a more specific body of materials to take out on the streets.



The Miracle appears for a Tranza party at The New Jalisco Bar, Downtown Los Angeles, 2011.

We said we wanted memoir, science fiction, autobiographies, unauthorized biographies, porn, anything queer. A lot of zines and stuff that people photocopied. Los Angeles politics, California history, social justice movements.

IRINA CONTRERAS: Art books, if we could get them. Anything in Spanish or Korean languages.

RODERIC CROOKS: How does the collection relate to other more established places that collect similar materials such as ONE Archives?

KELLY BESSER: The ONE Archives houses the largest collection of LGBT materials in the world. The work they do there inspires us. But the ONE has a collection that mirrors the people who have been able to have their stories preserved: it's mostly male, white, and gay. That's just a statistical reflection of an underlying problem that we are working to address in our own way, which is that all kinds of people deserve to have their community memories tended to and cultivated. We look at redistribution as an activity, as something you get up and do.

We have a very different kind of collection. We were mourning a loss of community space, of community space for queers and people of color. It does come from a place of loss, of memory and mourning. We wanted to create something that was a mobile archive but was also a library. Something that we would be excited to see on the streets. We were motivated by our own memories of bookmobiles and a desire to use this bookmobile to address these disappearing community spaces by making events where community can happen.

IRINA CONTRERAS: We were also motivated by this story of a librarian in rural western Maryland, Mary Titcomb. She started the first bookmobile that we could find. It was like a wagon. Her big push was, "Take the book to the man. Don't wait for the man to come to the book." She called it a book wagon and took it out to rural populations without access to public libraries.

RODERIC CROOKS: If this is a mourning for a community that has disappeared, what was the community?

KELLY BESSER: The whole point of public space is that it brings different kinds of people together. When the right to occupy space becomes the property of the wealthy only, it becomes impossible for the rest of us to simply exist. When our space is taken from us, we can no longer be the same kind of people. We are mourning the loss of communities, multiple, overlapping communities, of the

possibility of different kinds of people existing together in the city. Yes, we are queer, and Latina, and trans and feminist and working class and all these things, but we are addressing a fundamental problem that transcends a political statement of identity.

We originally brought a lot of feminist stuff. It has to do with our main drive, which is the mandate of redistribution. Redistribution of ideas, works, literature — queer, POC, hidden history. Herstory or hirstory, maybe. That exchange that we have with people on the street is really affirming. It's exciting to be able to create a community space, a reading space, a happening, materializing right there on the streets of Oakland and Los Angeles.

RODERIC CROOKS: Every time I've participated, it has been fun. I'm surprised to hear you talk about it as a memorial.

KELLY BESSER: It is always a celebratory experience. You don't have to be depressed at a memorial. You can celebrate the life that was lived, while embracing a hopefulness for the future and imagining what is still possible.

IRINA CONTRERAS: So many spaces, not just bookstores, have disappeared. Around 2006 there were major ICE raids that were affecting us here in Los Angeles in very different ways. Students sometimes just disappeared or friends and family. A memorial can be both mournful and celebratory. We wanted people to see what was gone and be a part of remembering. It was a way of saying that even if we can't pay rent, we can still make space. You go out, you claim some space, you fill it with books and people will respond.

RODERIC CROOKS: It's a very different kind of memory. You make an experience and that's all that's left behind. Can you talk through the event: how it works, how you do it. How do you even pick a place?

IRINA CONTRERAS: There have been several different iterations. The first period was just me, stopping alongside the road on my commute. When Besser and I started working together, there were a couple of different ways we thought about it. We definitely thought about locations in Los Angeles that are either without bookstores or places where there is a lot of traffic. Maybe they will stop or pick something up and engage. That would help us pick a location.

We also supported our friends' events. Because some people would have events and if you could say, "Oh a bookmobile came too and brought us zines and porn" that makes the event more exciting. We had this idea for a while of doing a front

lawn tour. That didn't go as well as planned. In my heart of hearts, I hope someday there will be a front lawn tour.

KELLY BESSER: My students were part of the front lawn tour planning. They were like, "Come to my neighborhood." That was a cool thing. Kids who had never experienced a bookmobile couldn't wait for it to appear in their neighborhoods, on their blocks, even on their front lawn or stoop.

RODERIC CROOKS: So you were a public school teacher and told your students about your queer bookmobile?

KELLY BESSER: Absolutely. They immediately embraced the project. Other times, we'd be invited to queer art shows at the Hollyhock House or galleries around town. We've gone out to ONE Archives. We did an Original Plumbing launch party as part of Platinum at Outfest. We decided against the Printed Matter Art Book Fair. Instead, we bookmobiled at the L.A. Zine Fest. I know there are tons of youth who come to that. That was amazing. The kids brought stickers and tagged up our signage. The happiest girl on earth that day was the owner of a new (well, used) Webster's Dictionary. An event like that is totally homegrown. Alice Bag was speaking on a panel with Allison Wolfe. Everyone was talking about making stuff: publications, queer zines, political literature.



Stickers and graffiti by fans to decorate The Miracle's appearance at L.A. Zine Fest 2013.

Another space that was important for us to collaborate with was the Southern California Library. SCL has such an important history of leftist movements. And we've witnessed the library transitioning to be more reflective and community-driven because the neighborhood is changing. A lot of their old lefty funders have left the area. The SCL is becoming more invested in the neighborhood and taking up its struggles. A friend of Irina's, Jang, invited us to bookmobile there at the Anarchist Café. I think we easily gave away 400 publications that day. Food Not Bombs was there. Speakers and workshops all day. It looked like Los Angeles. We've also done farmers markets, roadsides, parks, queer nightclubs, and BART stations.

We took a trip up to the Bay Area. That's where we got the name, when the Jeep broke down near Patterson. We were stranded on some dirt road, having a Mary Titcomb moment. It was called Firebaugh, the town. We thought any fool could come out from AAA. This man pulled up, a good ol' boy. And he got underneath the Jeep and handled it. We told him about the bookmobile and he was super excited about it and shared with us that his favorite writer was Orson Welles. We just happened to have a gorgeous hardcover art book: Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* with a CD recording inside. It was a moment of redistribution. And he didn't even put repairing the Jeep on the books or anything. That's when we started calling it The Miracle.

IRINA CONTRERAS: Before, we always called it the bookmobile. Now we just call it The Miracle.

KELLY BESSER: We tell this to folks, hoping that they will start their own Miracles or bookmobiles: it doesn't have to be in a car. You can just put some books in a suitcase or pack them up on a bike.

IRINA CONTRERAS: What I'm trying to reference is that there is a whole tradition from Mexico and throughout the Americas. Having a suitcase was good, whether it was a puppet show, or a performance, what we might call agitprop. It's an entertainment you offer to the public.

One thing was really solidified during that time period and we were both working here in Los Angeles taking books out to farmers markets. We were gathering a selection of books determined by the kind of event. Like for example, if we were going to an event at Southern California Library, we would bring lots of zines and local histories, documents about struggles for social justice in LA and elsewhere. It was only within the last few years, since 2009, that we kept any records. Besser

and a friend named Erica Cho worked on LibraryThing, just trying to keep track of what we had and where it went.

RODERIC CROOKS: This is really interesting to me. When I first heard of the project, I thought you should get The Miracle a Twitter account to announce where the bookmobile will be so that everyone would know. Then as I learned more, I realized that might not be the best idea. I thought, “Oh we’ll make all these records and we’ll do a blog and we’ll be active on social media.” It took me some time to realize that might not be what you want. It’s kind of a knee-jerk reaction: wherever I see that there is no blog, I want to go make one. Can you talk some about your recordkeeping?

KELLY BESSER: Cho helped us move into the cloud. We set up a Facebook page, a Twitter account and a Tumblr. Around the same time we set up a LibraryThing account to catalogue the materials and keep track of our collections. We would also document who donated what in a private field, and then the date it was donated and when it left. We had paper cards like an old-school card catalogue to keep track for ourselves. We just put a card with each book and bagged them individually so they could be ready to go out at any time. I have 2,000 items stored all over Echo Park. Irina has at least that many up in Oakland and LA.

IRINA CONTRERAS: Some of the donations are in Oakland, some in North Oakland. Friends have donated space and I keep some in a converted garage at my old house. Books take up lots of space. There are some in Fruitvale. We have two other collections at a place called The Cycles of Change Bikery and Liberating Ourselves Locally (LOL): that’s a specific lending library for people waiting in the queue to get their bikes fixed and a QPOC maker space.

KELLY BESSER: How do you think people understand the term lending library? Do you explain that to them?

IRINA CONTRERAS: There are two different spaces. At Cycles Bikery, there’s one shelf. It’s on the Facebook account. The biggest bookshelf with hard copies are books that are supposed to stay in the space, but if people take them, it’s not a big deal. We also keep a zine rack and those people can just take. We keep on copying the zines so people can keep on taking them. Kids hone in on things.

RODERIC CROOKS: The project seems to have a lot of resonance with youth. Is that how you planned it, as a queer-leaning, youth project?

IRINA CONTRERAS: No, it just happened that way. Other than that we are perpetual fourteen year-olds ourselves. I definitely was thinking of the public at large, meaning anyone from my community, or my mom, or my grandma. People in the U.S. don't think of literacy as a problem or a concern. We think public schools have solved this problem. It's taken for granted that literacy is universal, but my mom didn't start reading books until a few years ago. She took some bookmobile books. I was thinking about people who want to read, but for whatever reason find they can't or they don't.

KELLY BESSER: One thing we learned as LAUSD teachers is that everyone wants to read. We couldn't keep enough Spanish language books with us. We got a lot of donations from a public high school that was weeding books from a bilingual program that had been cut. It was important for us to circulate these materials.

IRINA CONTRERAS: I forgot about some of these things. That's why it is good for us to do interviews. Around that time, as those programs were being cut, a lot of our friends who were public school teachers called us to come get books that were being thrown in the garbage when these bilingual programs got cut. We don't have any of these books left: they were taken as soon as we put them out.

Once, when we had a bulk of bilingual children's books and young adult lit, we got in trouble with LAPD. We went downtown, to get some foot traffic from garment workers getting off work. We pulled up to a parking meter, after work, maybe at like 4 or 5. We had a zine called "Murder Can Be Fun." A lady cop rolled up and asked us if we had any kids taking that publication. She was not feeling us or that publication. She reprimanded us and told us it was illegal to be on the sidewalk and made us pack up and leave.

RODERIC CROOKS: Have you had a lot of problems in Oakland or Los Angeles with not being allowed to be somewhere?

IRINA CONTRERAS: That was the one that really sticks out, where the cops just seemed very opposed. If you look at LAist blog, you'll see a picture of Besser talking to the cops.

RODERIC CROOKS: Do you keep photographic documentation of events?

KELLY BESSER: We do, but it gets to be a bit much, posting photos on Twitter or Facebook, and too virtual. It's really not where our readership resides. We

think of the audience as being whoever happens upon it. Social media is just an afterthought to our life in the streets.

RODERIC CROOKS: Do you think it would be useful to collect materials about your project, photos and so on, in one place, so that people could access them?

IRINA CONTRERAS: We have a Tumblr that hasn't been updated. We would update it if we had the time and resources. We are not opposed, exactly.

RODERIC CROOKS: All these free tools end up being more labor. It's labor intensive to manage all these services.

IRINA CONTRERAS: There has always been a very purposeful refusal to keep records. We never wanted to frame our work like that. Lately, I feel comfortable bringing the project back in conversation with these ideas. People have the same reaction. People have this need to see all the hands the book has gone through, to witness its travels, maybe via the Internet.

KELLY BESSER: People in library science always want us to harvest data and make a visualization. That could be interesting, but it's something else, a different exercise. Maybe one day. I'm not opposed.

IRINA CONTRERAS: For me, it's not that I'm opposed. For me, the thing that happens is that I find those things interesting, but taking a step back, it brings me back to just wanting to deal specifically with the public, specifically with the materials without letting technology or intellectual work come between. Someone that's been a big donor has been Catherine Lord, the feminist scholar. People want to know which books she gave. That's not our interest.

Also, we both have been open to whoever wants to participate. They can do so however they want. If you see something and you want it to happen, then do it. The reason these two new lending libraries are happening is that the project partner, Elokin Orton-Cheung, wanted it to happen in Fruitvale where she lives and works and does everything she does.

These are different versions of the same project. I see them as connected to a continuum of bookmobiles, The Miracle, the lending library. It's a project within a larger project. It was something that was conceived as a reading room in Watts. But that's not how life works in Los Angeles. You don't spend that much time in one place, you're going from place to place. Cycles of Change and Liberating

Ourselves Locally are trying to resist that, to make a home space, to return to that idea of space as a possibility for letting different kinds of people live in the city.

KELLY BESSER: Here in Los Angeles, we started one in Silver Lake at a friend's house, and now that we gave out 1,000 publications over the last three months, we decided to redo the collections as a gifting library. Take what you want, there's no return policy or due date. Keep it as long as you want. The other one is going to start soon at Commonwealth and Council, which is Young Chung's queer, feminist gallery. It'll be a couple shelves in the gallery, like our special collections. It's the best of the best art books. They will both be gifting libraries. It's a very different investment of time and energy that we envision as running itself. We'll just keep it stocked.

IRINA CONTRERAS: When Kelly was working at Tom of Finland, we received some books that we didn't want to just be handed out because they were so rare, a collection of racist pulp novels that a teacher friend donated. We wanted more people to be able to experience them because they lend themselves to an experience that we could not accommodate in our events. These rare books we want to share in a lending library situation, so other people will have the opportunity to see them. A lot of my artistic projects around colonization and decolonization have utilized imagery from collections such as these.

RODERIC CROOKS: How does your collections policy relate to the political project of The Miracle?

KELLY BESSER: Our collections policy and our mode of distribution/redistribution is a part of our politics. The idea that a lot of people are amazed about when they experience The Miracle out on the streets or wherever is that this exists. It's crazy. People come out to us and talk about the loss of community spaces. Part of the exchange is about that also. And also just being out in every way possible. Literally out on the streets, distributing literature that reveals hidden histories that people haven't ever experienced before. And so getting that for free, just as an exchange and conversation, talking about coming out or any sort of political charge that emerges. Opening up a publication that brings that out of you and then sparks a conversation that you have with someone else. It's an important part of the project that resonates with the core of what we're trying to do and experience and share with other people.

IRINA CONTRERAS: I would definitely agree with all those things. Not to simplify.

RODERIC CROOKS: How about the status of the project. What are we working on now?

IRINA CONTRERAS: At some point, in an email I think, I realized we were both talking about the same things in both places. It's as obvious as it is serendipitous. I think life is just like that. We were talking about lending libraries and bikemobiles. The bikemobile is an interesting thing that's come up in several conversations. People are like, "You can't really get out a lot of books on a bike." Yeah, of course, that's obvious.

KELLY BESSER: What about the burromobile? That's not a large, collection-driven thing.

RODERIC CROOKS: The what-mobile?

IRINA CONTRERAS: So the burromobile - I think there's couple of them actually - one in Colombia and Zimbabwe. There's several of these projects that use some kind of bike or animals.

KELLY BESSER: That's very much in line with The Miracle: access to literacy, to literature, to ideas in areas where people are feeling isolated.

IRINA CONTRERAS: One of the things that we haven't necessarily talked about that is implicit and should be spoken is that in places like Los Angeles, life is very urbanized, but you still have these pockets that are still extremely isolated. For me, growing up, it was common that kids that live on this side stay on this side — that could be east of Western, or east of the Freeway. Maybe Pacoima, but even farther out. Whenever we went to the city when I was little, we just went straight to Boyle Heights. We stopped on Broadway if we needed to get blankets or something like that. But going to the beach? Going to the beach was like going to Mexico, basically.

ALL: Laugh.

IRINA CONTRERAS: It was only 20 minutes away, but you'd swear you were going to Disneyland. I thought it was ridiculous when I was growing up. And then later I would have students who would be like, "I've never been to the beach."

ALL: Yeah.

RODERIC CROOKS: Did we get the status of the project now? Is it still on? We're going to keep doing it? Any upcoming events that you want to talk about?

IRINA CONTRERAS: The event that will be the unveiling of the half-done lending library at Liberating Ourselves Locally, a POC-founded makerspace in Oakland – we have to do it for some grant spiel, which is why I hate doing grants and projects that are outside my own personhood. The bikemobile has no specific timeline. We know which bike we're going to use. I'd really like to get back to fixing cars. I keep having these ideas. There was a brief period of time when I was really into fixing cars several years ago. And so I've kind of gotten back to that. Maybe I really do just want to have another bookmobile, as in vroom, vroom car.

KELLY BESSER: We have done stuff with the Gay Gardens Cooperative, which operates a queer community space in Echo Park, where we had one of our initial donation barbecues. The GGC grows food and shares it. One of the gardeners, artist Lisa Sitko invited us to her Planter Show at For Your Art. We brought all of The Miracle collections that had to do with gardening, green stuff, hippie stuff, feminist, lesbian, back-to-the-land stuff. The best thing about that show was — we try to resist gallery spaces, but when it's for a friend we'll show up — we had to price our stuff out for the gallery list, so we priced everything “Free.” Ideas should be free. You should have access to ideas and books and stuff that inspires you to change your life and the world.

In terms of the lending libraries, we're calling them gifting libraries at Young Chung's space in Koreatown, the one I mentioned before (Commonwealth and Council) and the other spot in Silver Lake, where we're going to transform a garage into a reading space/gifting library. It is essentially like a lending library, but you don't have to bring stuff back. We are going to rethink the whole special collections thing. Maybe some stuff will just stay.

RODERIC CROOKS: The ruckus! Article ends with them giving their stuff to a larger institution, so they may benefit from the resources of the larger institution. One thing they say is that they are not archivists, but they are open to professional archivists helping them to preserve their materials. I wonder about the relationship between this activity and professional activity. Professional libraries, professional archivists, institutions. You have some relationship in that you're getting grants, but what exactly is the nature of the relationship?

IRINA CONTRERAS: Grants were something that at one point we had specifically talked about NOT doing, so that our independence could be preserved.

KELLY BESSER: I'm still buying Scratchers.

RODERIC CROOKS: That's your relationship to grant writing? Buying Scratchers?

ALL: Laugh.

IRINA CONTRERAS: I think part of it is about the relationship you have with specific spaces that you are supporting. This particular space, LOL, it's really one of those spaces. Right now is the time. Its future depends on how we are able to treat the space now. It just happened at the right time. It's not very much money. I wanted a space that realizes how this project is born out of mourning for other kinds of spaces that don't exist anymore. Whatever opportunities can bud out of this right now could determine what happens afterwards. It could be the birth of other spaces. On the other hand, I can't ever imagine how someone would handle what we've done. It just seems like such a mess, a good mess, but a hot mess.

RODERIC CROOKS: Well this is a good question for you, Kelly, because you are a professional archivist. You have this other background. How do you see them relating? Can there be a clear relationship between The Miracle or Gay Gardens Cooperative and what you are doing in professional practice as an archivist?

KELLY BESSER: It relates in terms of messes. Because people's personal papers are messy. And The Miracle collection was a mess. At the beginning, we weren't keeping track of anything. We just had bags and dumped the books in trash bags, in tubs outside. We didn't have any storage space. Then it would rain so we'd bring them inside. We lost a lot of stuff that way. So there was more mourning. It would pain me to throw away a moldy book. That cuts to the core of my professional work.

Also the arrangement of The Miracle speaks volumes to my archival work. I think that we're able to, like Irina said, pull specific collections together for different events. We're going to a queer or labor thing, so we'll bring this. Or we go to a thing where there's going to be tons of kids. It's similar to arrangement of archives or the curation of an exhibit. Also having a collections policy assists with collection control. At the beginning we took anything. We would take stuff and plan to just sort it out later.

IRINA CONTRERAS: There were some of those initial donations that were just so ridiculous. There were many items that were offensive for various reasons. The thing that was funny about one of these books was that it had a really pro-capitalist slant.

KELLY BESSER: It was like *How To Get Ahead in Corporate America* with a corny guy on the cover in a bad suit. Go figure.

IRINA CONTRERAS: The person who ended up taking that book is a person who is a part of this prolific queer Latina film cooperative. It was interesting. We're not the only ones who like to look at offensive literature.

RODERIC CROOKS: There are a lot of questions there. A reader can take a book ironically, or they can take it strategically, or they can take it angrily.

IRINA CONTRERAS: I think we would only take these things to certain places. So people could see that we could organize or curate a selection in ways where it would be obvious that we were criticizing the book. We had these books for a while that were about photographing black women. We didn't want to take it out with us, but then we were like, "If we don't take it, someone else will, then what will happen?" This work was donated by a good friend, a self-identified feminist black woman, who was clearly giving from a place of self-love, but also a place of love for literacy and consciousness-raising.

KELLY BESSER: We're also working on a Trans Living Archive. That's the working title. It's going to be here in Los Angeles and it's going to be a living archives. Probably a distributed network because we don't have money for space right now. We're looking at documenting social justice and trans movements in Los Angeles and beyond. We're looking at working with other community organizations, Qteam Los Angeles is one of them. We'd love to work with them. We want preserve their materials in cooperation with the Southern California Library and make them accessible to the public.

That's another connection I want to make between the work that I do and The Miracle: it's about accessing stuff and making stuff accessible, whether it's bringing it out to people on the street or putting it up on the Online Archive of California. Traditional archives seem like elitist spaces that all too often document straight white male history. The contrast with this project is that we didn't have to wait for anyone to give us the right to do it. We just did it. It was a D.I.Y., queer, punk, feminist project. Bring the books and then let's read. Here we are and if you want to do this too, it's so easy to get other people involved. In Los Angeles,

other people have talked to me about wanting to do a bikemobile or a lending library.

IRINA CONTRERAS: This project is born out of the bookmobile. I've been working on a Talking Shit Archive. I've been taking different ranting, specifically political rants, that have occurred online or in other spaces. There were a couple projects that took place, huge momentous projects that generated a lot of discourse. Discourse is a nice way to say it. There was a lot of...

RODERIC CROOKS: Acrimony? Are we talking about how the archive represents queer and community based activity?

CONTRERAS and BESSER: Yeah, I think so.

RODERIC CROOKS: I was kind of concerned doing this paper, because the big problem is that when you try to present something in academia, in a scholarly journal, in any of these kinds of discourses, the interest of the archivist or scholar is rarely explicit. The archivist or scholar is always assumed to be an honest broker, who is neutral and is going to let you say whatever you want to say and then dutifully care for it to preserve it for the future. I thought the form of the article X, Campbell, and Stevens wrote could give us a way to talk without having to present ourselves as the subject matter of someone else's research and translation.

KELLY BESSER: It's like you're hiding behind this veil of "neutrality." That's some drag that we've never done.

Conclusion

McKemmish et al. (2005) argue for an inclusive archival multiverse based on a pluralized view of records, institutions, laws, culture and social justice and a greater engagement with marginalized groups interested in participating in their own representation in records. A similar ethos runs through the work of The Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group's (2011) argument that archival education should engage with these issues. This same imperative to allow previously marginalized groups to interact with, append, change, redo or even create new records and new forms of evidence applies to many other groups as well. As Caswell (2013) has pointed out, our efforts to include various viewpoints in the interest of accommodating human rights and social justice in archival theory will always be incomplete, since these concepts themselves can never be fully resolved or generalized. We hope that providing this account of our activities and the reasons behind them will prove useful to ongoing scholarly, artistic, and politicized discussions of archives. This work is offered in a spirit of

collaboration and a belief that community archives of all kinds can cooperate meaningfully with archival theorists and practitioners in productive ways.

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