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## Covid-19 Collecting

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### Is Ethics at the Table?

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#### Introduction

No matter where in the world the readership of this article sits, few of us can say that we have not been impacted by Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The acute respiratory disease, first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 was swiftly declared a public emergency of international concern by the World Health Organization in January 2020, and as of March 24, 2021, more than 124 million cases have been reported worldwide across 188 countries and territories, with emergency measures including lockdown being put in place by leaders in many areas across the globe.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary collecting of lived experience and personal stories raises particular ethical and legal considerations including working through data protection issues and navigating the balance of rights and responsibilities running through the project. These considerations affect not only collecting aims and ethos, but also the presentation, preservation, and use of generated materials through time. In the case of COVID-19, there has been a desire in heritage spaces across the world to react quickly while events are still unfolding to capture a rich picture of the impacts of COVID-19. It is in this real-time dynamic that paying attention to due diligence in working through ethical and legal considerations can be particularly challenging.

COVID-19 has had a deep and traumatic impact on individuals and communities globally. By posing a direct threat to human health and wellbeing, the pandemic has created a variety of stories and materials for potential collection including patient narratives of survivors; grief narratives of those who have lost loved ones to the disease; and narratives of isolation, fear, and mental ill-health from those affected by lockdown efforts. Intersecting with the discussion of impacts on health and wellbeing are narratives of job and business losses, prolonged anxieties over job security, severe financial hardship, and associated social problems. There are also stories of those on the frontline of fighting the disease and from essential workers of all kinds who are often at greater risk of contracting the virus and who face unique pressures in their work to sustain a functioning society for the benefit of others. And in the UK context, there are stories of communities coming together,

<sup>1</sup> "Covid-19 Pandemic," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/COVID-19_pandemic), accessed March 24, 2021.

learning to rely more on each other for support, and reaching out and establishing new bonds with each other, as well as accounts of people who may have been time-poor previously finding that they are unexpectedly time-rich and able to invest in themselves, their homes, and their loved ones in different ways. Despite these positive aspects, the potential for collecting around COVID-19 to touch on traumatic events and memories for participants/donators, curators, and audiences means that an ethical approach must begin with careful consideration of the potential impacts of the *collecting work* on all of those who are directly involved or who become involved as an audience of the generated materials.

In the section on Trauma and Distress within *Contemporary Collecting: An Ethical Toolkit for Museum Practitioners*, a guide published by the London Transport Museum, the affective nature of traumatic content is considered, including the potential for triggering secondary trauma. For individuals giving their story, re-traumatizing can occur as they re-live events by giving their narrative. Curators who gather and process materials may have had similar experiences during the pandemic, or feel empathetically connected to the story and therefore relate to the trauma that has been represented in a personal way. These empathetic and personal connections may also occur for audiences accessing the materials. Curators or other staff members acting as a liaison point between audience and material need to feel equipped to respond to the emotional dynamics around traumatic materials. The toolkit helpfully includes suggestions on ways to both consider and navigate through these complexities, all of which may come into play around contemporary collecting of COVID-19 stories. Despite these complexities, the sheer volume of projects that have sprung up on a local, regional, national, continental, and international levels speaks to an unprecedented impulse toward mass documentation of the crisis and its impacts.<sup>2</sup>

This essay aims to look at contemporary collecting around COVID-19 focusing on projects hosted from within the UK, with some reference outwards to US-based, European, and internationally focused projects. Rather than aiming to provide a comprehensive overview of existing projects, or detailed analysis of individual projects, it aims to move towards a typology of collecting responses defined according to collecting area and ethical approach in the period up until and including July 2020. UK archivists have established a Slack website as a democratic and non-hierarchical tool for sharing information, ideas, challenges, and resources relating to collecting efforts, and this has been a major source of information for this article. Initial discussions with Elena Carter, Archivist at the Wellcome Library in London, have also been instrumental, particularly as Elena is the founder of the Slack website and has therefore built up a detailed knowledge of the UK response.

<sup>2</sup> Ellie Miles, Susanna Corder, and Jen Kavanagh, *Contemporary Collecting: An Ethical Toolkit for Museum Practitioner*, March 2020, [https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/assets/downloads/Contemporary\\_collecting\\_toolkit.pdf](https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/assets/downloads/Contemporary_collecting_toolkit.pdf).

## Collecting Areas, Approaches, and Projects

### *Medical and social care experience*

There are many existing institutions that have a collecting remit orientated around medical experience, including professional and fellow-based associations in the medical sphere; archives connected to hospitals and medical research centers; and specialist repositories such as the Wellcome Library and Science Museum that have medical history embedded within their collecting mission.

The Wellcome Library in London, for example, describes itself as one of the “world’s major resources for the study of medical history” offering “material relating to contemporary medicine and biomedical science in society.”<sup>3</sup> It is potentially well placed to collect broadly on the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the Wellcome Library decided *not* to instigate any public contemporary collecting projects at the time of writing this essay. Its response instead has, first and foremost, focused on establishing networks across the sector to enable the generous sharing of knowledge. They have also focused on providing guidance, help, and signposting for other institutions considering or undertaking collecting. Wellcome’s internal discussions around their own collecting focus have identified the following areas to be part of a long term documentation strategy:

- Capturing lived experience of minority groups—particularly people of color, disabled people, and neurodiverse individuals.
- Collecting artistic responses to COVID-19, in particular as additions to the library’s existing Print and Published collections including the acquisition of QuaranZines, children’s books and pdfs, and graphic medicine, recognizing that any artistic commissions need to be fairly paid in an equitable partnership.
- Working initially with existing depositing/donating organizations whose work has been diverted by COVID-19 to capture relevant records, thinking carefully about when to get in touch so as not to distract from the work they do, but with intervention timed to enable capture of records that might otherwise be lost.
- Identifying new depositing/donating organizations.<sup>4</sup>

As a leading medical charity funding cutting edge scientific research, The Wellcome Trust itself (which the Wellcome Library sits under) has its own corporate archive which documents the Trust’s actions, and this archive is being actively developed in response to COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> This is particularly pertinent as the Wellcome Director,

<sup>3</sup> For further information on the Wellcome Library visit their website at: <https://wellcomelibrary.org/>.

<sup>4</sup> In a UK context, a depositing organization deposits its archive with the collecting institution whilst retaining legal title to the deposited material.

<sup>5</sup> For further information on the Wellcome Trust visit their website: <https://wellcome.ac.uk/>.

Jeremy Farrar, serves on the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). Wellcome's internal communications to staff including bi-weekly updates, staff comments on the intranet, and a weekly radio show all are being actively captured for the archive. As part of Wellcome's institutional collecting there has also been a call-out to staff to send in COVID-19 diary submissions to document their lives through the pandemic. The request raises ethical complexities around the blurred distinction between professional and personal life and the diaries will inevitably include crossover as staff describe the challenges of balancing work with caring responsibilities and their more general feelings as the pandemic unfolds.

Of note here is the fact that the Wellcome Trust building in Central London has been opened as a respite center for National Health Service (NHS) staff working at a nearby hospital, providing meals and hot drinks, table tennis, other recreational activities, and a quiet space. Photographs were taken during the installation of the center and will be taken again on deinstallation, and signs and feedback cards will be collected for the corporate archive but no professional photographs of NHS staff using the space will be taken. There was collective discussion around installing a sound booth to capture oral histories but the collections team raised questions around the morality of expecting NHS staff to speak of their experience in this way, concerns about potential pressure to take part, and worries of opening up trauma in staff without effective safeguards. The Wellcome's developing response to the crisis was described within the Slack website as:

- Do nothing that exacerbates the crisis, detracts from the emergency response, or distracts those who are involved in it.
- Respect the impact of the crisis; be sensitive to the fact that lives are at risk and may be lost, and that requiring staff and collaborators to work on a matter that may also affect them directly can cause harm.
- Ensure that organizations work within their collections development policies.
- Maintain standards of assessment, documentation, and planning, but recognizing the additional need to record appropriate consents for future use and, potentially, next of kin information.
- Ensure that producers and artists are paid a fair price for their work, and that wherever possible collecting institutions provide active support back to those they seek to collect from.<sup>6</sup>

From a curatorial perspective, Imogen Clarke, assistant curator of medicine at the Science Museum in London, in a recent blog post writes of the emotional impact of living through the pandemic while also working in an environment with an immediate and obvious vested interest in documenting what she describes as “the most

<sup>6</sup> Knowledge of the Wellcome's collecting response came from discussion via Zoom call with Elena Carter on June 4, 2020.

globally shared medical experience of our lifetime.” She writes of being confronted by an “immense and overwhelming stream of collecting opportunities and also a simultaneous source of anxiety, grief, and confusion.” For Clarke, these mixed emotions have also been coupled with an initial sense of urgency—“if we don’t collect ephemera such as public health messaging at airports, will it be lost?”<sup>7</sup> Yet she emphasizes that the affective impact of being bombarded on both a professional and personal level with concerns around the pandemic cannot be underestimated. With these considerations in mind, the Science Museum, which exists to document scientific achievement through iconic objects and stories, has issued a public call as part of their COVID-19 collecting policy.<sup>8</sup> It outlines the national and international scope of the collecting intention around materials that reflect medical, public health, industrial, and scientific responses to the pandemic as well as materials that reveal the impact of COVID-19 on personal and social interactions and on society and culture more broadly for future research and public display. More specifically, this includes the following categories of materials, donatable via the museum’s generic object donation mechanisms.<sup>9</sup> The specific outcomes related to collecting materials related to the pandemic are outlined on the museum’s website:

- Tangible and digital forms of public advice and guidance produced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, from official sources at national and local levels.
- Material associated with assessing, monitoring and testing those suspected of having severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) or those who may already have had it.
- Material relating to medical treatment for SARS-CoV-2, in a pre-vaccine environment as well as the provision made for the expansion of care facilities.
- Items associated with the scientific response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Material related to the impact of COVID-19 on our culture, economy and society. These items may reflect significant changes to whole industries, such as our rail or air transport networks. Other items collected might be highly trivial, moving or outlandish, and may at first seem removed from scientific or medical aspects of the pandemic.<sup>10</sup>

7 Imogen Clarke, “Collecting in the Time of Coronavirus,” *Museums Journal*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/opinion/2020/05/27052020-collecting-in-the-time-of-coronavirus/#>.

8 For further information on the Science Museum’s ethical approach and public call out see “Collecting Covid-19,” Science Museum Group, <https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/project/collecting-covid-19/> and “Ethical Guidelines—Collecting Covid-19,” <https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SMG-Ethical-guidelines-Covid-19.pdf>.

9 The Science Museum’s object donation webpages can be found at: <https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/object-donations>.

10 “Collecting Covid-19,” Science Museum Group, <https://www.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/project/collecting-covid-19/>.

Public call-outs initiated within the medical sphere have mainly been focused on capturing stories from key workers connected to NHS or other care contexts. For example, the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh has issued a public call-out asking for volunteers from all areas of healthcare including doctors, nurses, laboratory workers, and psychiatrists to record experiences of the impact of COVID-19 on their work, focusing on the context of treating patients, but also including any indirect impacts they may have experienced.<sup>11</sup>

The NHS at 70: The Story of Our Lives project<sup>12</sup> is a time-limited project led by the University of Manchester and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It has been recording oral histories from workers, patients, volunteers, and campaigners connected to the NHS since 2017 to mark its seventy-year anniversary. As the NHS enters an unprecedented era in its history as it responds to the pandemic, the NHS at 70 has continued to collect oral histories by telephone with a public call-out specifically requesting COVID-19 related stories.<sup>13</sup> COVID-19 related NHS stories can also be shared via the project website in written form, alongside photographs of memorabilia.

Some archives linked with the NHS or other medical and social care contexts have decided to seek interviews or other materials relating to experiences of working through COVID-19 from staff, but others are taking a more cautious approach. They are considering the possibility that one-off COVID-19 related interviews with hospital staff or the public more broadly without adequate support mechanisms in place may trigger post-traumatic stress syndrome in participants. The Royal College of Nursing, for example, has had a regular oral history program with nurses running since the 1980s but will not be refocusing around COVID-19 to collect stories as the pandemic unfolds due to ethical concerns.<sup>14</sup>

### *Everyday Experience*

It is, of course, not just institutions focused on documenting medical and social care experiences that have an existing point of connection with collecting around COVID-19. Archives and museums that document everyday experience are also well placed to consider adding a focus on collecting around COVID-19.

The Mass-Observation Project, connected to the Mass-Observation Archive, has been running since 1981 as a national life writing project to record everyday life in Britain.<sup>15</sup> Mass-observation, pioneered in the 1930s, sought to use participant-

<sup>11</sup> "RCPE Recording COVID-19/Coronavirus," Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, <https://www.rcpe.ac.uk/heritage/rcpe-recording-covid-19-coronavirus>.

<sup>12</sup> *NHS 70: The Story of Our Lives Project*, The University of Manchester, <https://www.nhs70.org.uk/>.

<sup>13</sup> For further information on the "NHS 70: The Story of Our Lives" project's specific Covid-19 call out see: <https://www.nhs70.org.uk/covid>.

<sup>14</sup> The author's awareness of the Royal College of Nursing position developed from following discussions on its Slack website.

<sup>15</sup> For general information on the Mass-Observation Writing project see <http://www.massobs.org.uk/about/mass-observation-project>, with guidance notes for participants here: [http://www.massobs.org.uk/images/Covid19\\_guidance\\_updated\\_200505.pdf](http://www.massobs.org.uk/images/Covid19_guidance_updated_200505.pdf).

observation to create an “anthropology of ourselves.” Today’s mass-observers are given themes to write about on a regular basis as a means of capturing the experiences, thoughts, and opinions of twenty-first-century people. Once processed, donated writings are made publicly accessible in an anonymized (and occasionally redacted to protect third parties) form at the Keep Archive. The Mass-Observation’s response to COVID-19 has been threefold:

- Members of the public can become Mass-Observers and join the existing life writing project. The existing writing panel have been asked to write about their experiences of COVID-19 and are keeping diaries through the pandemic.
- The archive is also accepting discrete journals of the pandemic.
- Every year on May 12, the project runs a diary day, and has therefore captured COVID-19 related stories through this longitudinally focused call out.

The Museum of Ordinary People is an award-winning pop-up museum which seeks to document the magic and mundanity of everyday life through stories and objects.<sup>16</sup> It has been collecting examples of the rainbows people have placed in windows (which became a symbol of hope and thanks to the NHS during lockdown), as well as things such as school and work timetables, receipts, lockdown recipes, photographs, and other ephemera. The museum also started a “These Times” project early in March asking people to write journals of their everyday life as a rapid response to the pandemic. They originally delivered fifty journals for participants in Brighton but in response to interest in the project launched the #thesetimes diary campaign via social media and have had approximately 150 participants across the UK. The founders of the Museum of Ordinary People, Jolie Booth and Lucy Malone, have received positive feedback from participants and sense that participants appreciate having a creative space to process their experiences.<sup>17</sup>

Many local and regional archives, libraries, and museums across the UK have issued public call-outs within their local area for the collection of lockdown diaries. Commonly, the approach is to issue a call-out for diaries to be kept for assessment on a case-by-case basis. Examples include Suffolk Record Office, which is encouraging participants across Suffolk to document their experiences as part of an online survey or to keep a diary or scrap book for future donation; there is also opportunity to join their project identifying fake news to document disinformation relating to COVID-19.<sup>18</sup> In the US, similar localized efforts to collect can be seen, for example, from the Museum of the City of New York which has run an image-based collecting effort via #CovidStoriesNYC where members of the public upload photographs

<sup>16</sup> For general information on the Museum of Ordinary People and the #TheseTimes public call out see <https://www.museumofordinarypeople.com/>.

<sup>17</sup> Knowledge of positive feedback gained from comments made by founders on Slack website.

<sup>18</sup> Suffolk Record Office’s public call out for collecting around Covid-19 can be found at: <https://www.suffolkarchives.co.uk/life-in-lockdown/recording/>.

which can then be reviewed on a rolling basis by the museum and potentially further distributed via the museum's social media feed and other channels.<sup>19</sup>

International efforts to document the everyday have also rapidly begun to spring up. Examples include a project run from Arizona State University entitled "A Journal of the Plague year" which accepts text and digital objects including images, video, tweets, Facebook posts, Instagram and Snapchat memes, pdfs, screenshots of the news, and emails.<sup>20</sup> The project frames its interest around "anything that describes the pandemic and speaks to the present moment."<sup>21</sup> A geo-location map on the website illustrates that the majority of the stories submitted come from the United States, with the highest number from the New York City area, but there are also contributions from Australia, Europe, Africa, and Asia. Submissions must include a name and e-mail address, and names are provided with contributions unless the contributor opts out. The Term of Service for contributing make it clear that information is given under Creative Commons Licensing and that although best efforts are made to adhere to known intellectual property and privacy rights, due to the nature of community-built archive collections it is not always possible to identify these rights. However, the project welcomes hearing from rights owners who can request that material be taken down. At the time of writing, 7,568 stories have been published on the site, demonstrating that there is a strong desire to share and document experience. Browsing the stories reveals a full range of responses from commentary pieces on news articles to in-depth oral history interviews.<sup>22</sup> Some include object-based responses, such as a photograph from a wedding where hand sanitizers and masks have been placed on each chair with the words "spread love not germs."<sup>23</sup>

"History in the Making: Documenting Covid" represents a continental collection effort also focused on documenting everyday experiences under the key themes of solidarity, hope, and community building.<sup>24</sup> The project is run by the House of European History, which is based in Brussels, Belgium, and aims to be the leading museum about transnational phenomena. The collecting effort, relying on public call-outs, began in early 2020 and by June 2020 had already been curated into a temporary exhibition open to the public and running until December 2020.

19 The Museum of the City of New York's #CovidStoriesNYC public call out can be found at: <https://www.mcny.org/covidstoriesnyc>.

20 Mark Tebeau (Public History), Catherine O'Donnell (History), Richard Amesbury (Religious Studies), *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Arizona State University, <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive/page/team>.

21 Further insights about the project can be found in a series of essays on the National Council of Public History's *History@Work* site which can be found at: <https://ncph.org/history-at-work/tag/jotpy-series/>.

22 For an example oral history interview from the site see Lawson Miller, *Kyle Ballard Oral History Interview 2020.08.16*. Submitted via "Share Your Story" on the Site "A Journal of the Plague Year." <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive>. Accessed August 19, 2020.

23 Keirsten Camby, *Spread Love Not Germs*, August 16, 2020. Submitted via "Share Your Story" on the Site "A Journal of the Plague Year." <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive>. Accessed August 19, 2020.

24 *History in the Making: Documenting Covid* (Digital Exhibition), House of European History, Belgium, Brussels. Created June 2020, <https://historia-europa.ep.eu/en/history-making-documenting-covid>. Accessed August 12, 2020.



Using arresting images of the rainbow banners found across Europe and submitted to the project, the temporary exhibition (mirrored on the website) describes how these rainbows have become a symbol of positive thinking. In Italy, for example, the rainbows are accompanied by the message *Andrà tutto bene* (Everything will be alright). This positivity is balanced by a focus on pandemic borders; to contain the virus, forgotten borders have been reinstated and Europeans have found themselves separated from their families. People have responded with creativity, artworks, and silent protests. The exhibition also looks at how human rights have been limited in lockdown, the various ways in which people have sought to make their voice heard, and how medics have been afforded hero status and have found a new sense of solidarity in their practice. Having a physical and virtual curated exhibition of an ongoing and unfolding pandemic enables continuous reflection on its impact, but also raises many ethical questions relating to how trauma affects audiences enmeshed in the here and now of dealing with Covid-19.

#### *Artistic Responses*

Projects are surfacing that are more specifically tied to documenting a particular type of artistic expression. In relation to musical and sound-based responses to the pandemic, for example, “Cities and Memories,” based at the University of Oxford, is a long-standing collaborative sound project which combines field recording, sound mapping, and remixing to document cities around the world.<sup>25</sup> In response to COVID-19, the project has specifically launched #StayHomeSounds which is framed around the world’s entry into lockdown and invites anyone in the world to send in a sound recording with some information about where the participant lives.<sup>26</sup> Using a geo-location map, listeners can access the sounds via the website or a curated playlist and podcast. The intersection between COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter is particularly evident in the playlist with sounds of “De-Decolonise! De-De-Decolonise!,” recorded from the Rhodes Must Fall, Black Lives Matter Protest in Oxford, alongside the recordings of birdsongs from gardens.

#### *Identity-Focused Experiences*

As the pandemic has unfolded, the UK government’s initial message that the pandemic would be a great leveler between people has given way to more critical unpacking of the inequalities and divides that the pandemic both reveals and reinforces. These inequalities are far-reaching and include the disproportionate infection rates in Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, as well as class divides between those in jobs that enable work from home, and therefore social distancing, and lower paid positions that require remaining on the front line.

<sup>25</sup> *Cities and Memories*, Oxford, UK, <https://citiesandmemory.com/what-is-cities-and-memory-about/>.

<sup>26</sup> For information on the Cities and Memories #StayHomeSounds call out see: <https://citiesandmemory.com/covid19-sounds/>.

The connection between class and access to private gardens and the relationship between available space in the home and well-being have also all come under a new scrutiny as the pandemic has unfolded in the UK.<sup>27</sup> The popularity at a local and regional level of documenting the everyday through the lens of lockdown experience can be seen as problematic, as it is likely to capture materials from those who are most time-rich and able to reflect and document at this moment, and these are inevitably people outside of frontline roles. This raises ethical questions around whose version of dealing with the impacts of the pandemic are being highlighted and brought to the fore through current documentation efforts relying on journaling experience or donation of materials, and whose are already being side-lined by such history-in-the-making efforts.

To counteract the emerging white and middle class bias in mainstream collecting efforts, the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah RACE Centre, whose mission is to make BAME history, heritage, and culture more visible, has launched a #AllStoriesAreImportant campaign to collect the experiences of BAME communities during the Covid-19 pandemic, in recognition that historical accounts from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic communities using their own words are not equally represented in the public record, and are at risk of loss.<sup>28</sup> The project aims to collect via e-mail attachments material such as records, stories, and articles from Greater Manchester demonstrating how racism—structural, institutional, and interpersonal—still exists today, but is being erased by a national story of the pandemic largely told by the privileged few.

Other projects that seek to surface experiences that may become lost in other collecting efforts include those focused in on young people. For example, Company Three is a theater company for eleven- to nineteen-year-olds which seeks to be a leading force for change in the lives of teenagers across North London and the world. It co-ordinated with youth theatres and school groups across the UK to run an eighteen-week project entitled “The Coronavirus Time Capsule,”<sup>29</sup> for which groups edited together weekly videos of life in lockdown. In total 215 companies took part, creating 1735 videos.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the long-term and cautious approach to documenting being taken by some institutions, particularly in the medical sphere of collecting, the sheer volume and

<sup>27</sup> Robert Reich, “Covid 19 Pandemic Shines a Light on a New Kind of Class Divide and its Inequalities,” *Guardian*, April 26, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/25/covid-19-pandemic-shines-a-light-on-a-new-kind-of-class-divide-and-its-inequalities>. Accessed July 31, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> For information on the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Centre’s public call out see: <http://www.racearchive.org.uk/covid-19/>. Accessed August 21, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> For further information on Company Three’s *The Coronavirus Time Capsule* project see <https://www.companythree.co.uk/#coronavirus-time-capsule>.

<sup>30</sup> *The Coronavirus Time Capsule*, London, UK, Project Creator: Company Three. <https://www.coronavirustimecapsule.com/home>.

variety of projects that have sprung up to document the pandemic (which far outweighs the small selection discussed here for illustrative purposes) does raise ethical complexities.<sup>31</sup> In a recent blog post Eira Tansey, Digital Archivist/Records Manager at the University of Cincinnati, suggests that this collecting impulse may be connected to a desire to demonstrate relevance at a time of crisis and to hold on to a semblance of normality through the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> Since the 1970s, archivists have been urged by writers such as Gerald Ham in professional and academic journals to approach the “archival edge” and become active documenters of the here and now in order to build a more representative record of human experience, and it seems that the pandemic has pushed many over that edge creating an unprecedented scale of documentation projects.<sup>33</sup> Tansey asks us to consider whether this rush to document may be the latest example of the commodification of experience through collecting in which adequate ethical safeguards are given second place to the creation of immediate and visceral records of the moment. Tansey also reminds us that we must resist the cultural expectation that we are somehow entitled to collect other people’s experiences in the construction of a representative historical record, particularly when few archivists have had any form of adequate training in what form trauma-informed collecting and processing should take. These points return us to the ethical considerations laid out in the introduction to this piece: how can we minimize the potential to re-traumatize participants, workers, and audiences around the stories we are collecting, processing, and making available? What sort of support mechanisms do we need? And importantly, if we are entering a time when archivists and curators become rapid response documenters to trauma-laden moments and events, how do we need to shift the balances within the ways in which archivists and curators are trained or prepared to enable the taking on of this morally and ethically complex and demanding work?

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31 To understand the range of projects that exist, a crowdsourced list of collecting projects can be found here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1v5ts08spFq6SpW53h2OJULcdRoPEbyI6xpah3rkW-Ho/edit>.

32 Eira Tansey, “No One Owes Their Trauma to Archivists, or the Commodification of Contemporaneous Collecting,” June 5, 2020, [http://eiratansey.com/2020/06/05/no-one-owes-their-trauma-to-archivists-or-the-commodification-of-contemporaneous-collecting/?fbclid=IwAR3vEQOqANWV-syWrW-Bix0EvE6UjKCAnj9\\_HO-k6uomh6ynpU5FSDTDlSc](http://eiratansey.com/2020/06/05/no-one-owes-their-trauma-to-archivists-or-the-commodification-of-contemporaneous-collecting/?fbclid=IwAR3vEQOqANWV-syWrW-Bix0EvE6UjKCAnj9_HO-k6uomh6ynpU5FSDTDlSc).

33 Gerald Ham, The Archival Edge, *The American Archivist* (January 1975), 5–13.

## Sharing Suffrage Scholarship

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Digital Projects Commemorating the Centennial of the  
Nineteenth Amendment

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*Anya Jabour*

- Women's Suffrage Memorabilia*. Google Arts and Culture. Kenneth Florey. <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/wRm3wFhH>. Accessed September 30, 2020.
- Truth Be Told*. Evoke.org and Pivotal Ventures. Allison K. Lange. <https://www.evoke.org/truthbetold/story>. Created 2020; Accessed September 30, 2020.
- Rightfully Hers: American Women and the Vote*. National Archives Museum. Corinne Porter. <https://museum.archives.gov/rightfully-hers>. Created 2019; Accessed September 30, 2020.
- Votes for Women: A Portrait of Persistence*. Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery/ Google Arts and Culture. Kate Clarke Lemay. <https://npg.si.edu/exhibition/votes-for-women> and <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/2AKyZX3r7pZojA>. Created 2019; Accessed September 30, 2020.
- Because of Her Story*. Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative. <https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/2AKyZX3r7pZojA>. Created 2019; Accessed September 30, 2020.
- Crusade for the Vote*. National Women's History Museum. <http://www.crusadeforthevote.org/>.
- History of the Suffrage Movement*. National Women's History Museum. Allison K. Lange. <http://www.crusadeforthevote.org/history>. Created 2015; Accessed September 30, 2020.
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- 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment*. National Park Service. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/womenshistory/19th-amendment.htm>. Accessed September 30, 2020.
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This year marks the centennial of the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, which banned discrimination against would-be voters on the basis of sex and thereby granted many—although not all—American women the right to vote. In preparation for the centennial, suffrage scholars, women's historians, archivists, librarians, and park rangers have produced an impressive set of digital projects—digital exhibits, online archives, teaching resources, and more—dedicated to the suffrage struggle. Both the enthusiasm generated by the centennial and the productivity of scholars of citizenship have resulted in the creation of far more digital projects than can be reviewed here. On balance, however, the resulting digital projects—intended to reach the general public, K-12 educators, and professional historians—represent a critical reassessment of the suffrage movement rather than a simple celebration of it.

Of the projects reviewed here, all cover both opposition to the suffrage movement and divisions within it (such as the split between the National American Woman Suffrage Association and the National Woman's Party). The more recent projects also devote significant attention to both racism in the suffrage movement and the ways that women of color advanced voting rights. Some also extend the chronology of the suffrage movement, moving away from the traditional Seneca Falls to suffrage (1848–1920) timeline to emphasize ongoing efforts to expand voting rights from the nation's founding to the present. These innovations reflect current scholarship on the women's suffrage movement and voting rights in the United States.

The differences between two digital exhibits, *Women's Suffrage Memorabilia*, based on Kenneth Florey's 2013 book by that title, and *Truth Be Told*, curated in 2020 by Allison Lange, highlight these shifts in suffrage scholarship. Whereas the first exhibit covers only the years 1889–1917 and offers limited treatment of either racism or diversity in the suffrage movement, the latter provides a timeline from

the 1790s to the present and showcases African American women's role in the ongoing struggle for full voting rights.

Other recent digital exhibits likewise expand the scope of the suffrage movement to address the diversity of the suffrage movement and the legacy of the suffrage amendment. The National Archives' exhibit, *Rightfully Hers*, curated by Corinne Porter, emphasizes the limitations of the Nineteenth Amendment, restrictions on African American voting, and continued activism to expand voting rights. Likewise, the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery's exhibit, *Votes for Women*, curated by Kate Lemay, although focused on the 1830s through the 1920s, uses portraits of women representing different "races, ages, and fields of endeavor" to tell "a more complete story of the movement."

Each of these projects features a single exhibit—although the Smithsonian also hosts *Because of Her Story*, a set of videos, artifacts, and "conversation kits" on a variety of themes in US women's history. Other projects, sponsored by major organizations and initiatives, provide a wealth of resources intended to share the suffrage story—and, more broadly speaking, an inclusive history of voting rights in the US—with a wide audience.

The National Women's History Museum's (NWHM) suffrage portal is typical in offering a wide range of resources, although its coverage is less inclusive than some others. The *History of the Suffrage Movement* on this site offers a series of short articles, authored by Allison Lange in 2015, on various phases and aspects of the suffrage movement from the early national period through 1920, each accompanied by digitized documents, objects, and images and framed by "essential questions" for the viewer's consideration. The digitized items also are organized under a separate Primary Sources tab into primary source sets; in addition, the site provides Educator Resources: helpful lesson plans and a series of brief videos for middle- and high-school classroom instruction. Digital exhibits include *Creating a Female Political Culture*, curated by Edith P. Mayo in 2017, focusing on white women's activism in the Progressive Era, and *Standing Up for Change*, curated in 2016, dedicated to African American women and the Civil Rights Movement. Unfortunately, there is little connection between or integration of these two virtual exhibits. The NWHM's historical overview of the suffrage movement includes a segment on the National Association of Colored Women, but one must look elsewhere for a more thorough examination of racial dynamics in the suffrage struggle. Pointing in this direction, the NWHM portal also features a hard-to-find, but useful, curated list of recent news articles, Centennial in the News, which includes several articles highlighting the role of Black, Indigenous, Latina, and queer women in the suffrage movement.

The National Park Service's 19th Amendment project, although not as visually appealing or user-friendly as some other sites, offers one of the most comprehensive treatments of the suffrage movement, reflecting the lengthy chronology and diverse constituencies emphasized by current suffrage scholarship. The NPS portal provides access to several series of essays, including *Women's Access to the Vote*

*Across America*, a collection of fourteen essays edited by Tamara Gaskell on a range of topics, including regional approaches, anti-suffrage activists, and African American suffragists. Another collection of essays, *Suffrage in America: The 15th and 19th Amendments*, calls attention to the connection—and the conflicts—between movements for African American and women’s voting rights and inspires visitors to ask themselves, “Whose Voice is Heard” and “What’s Next?” Emphasizing diversity within the suffrage movement, *20 Suffragists to Know for 2020* profiles both well-known and lesser-known activists for voting rights, including women of color, such as Mabel Lee and Adelina Otero-Warren. By including individuals such as civil rights activist Septima Clark and labor organizer Dolores Huerta, this set of biographical sketches also extends the timeline of the suffrage struggle. The NPS project also features *Suffrage in Sixty Seconds*, a set of one-minute videos featuring rangers speaking about a wide range of topics and individuals, including offbeat topics such as how suffragists chose the suffrage colors. This portal also offers resources for teachers at all levels: elementary school, middle school, and high school. Finally, the NPS and the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission co-sponsored two suffrage history podcasts: *And Nothing Less*, directed towards adults, and *The Magic Sash*, intended for young learners, with accompanying lesson plans.

The Women’s Vote Centennial Initiative and the Women’s Vote Centennial—which, despite their similar names, are separate projects—build upon these and other projects. The Women’s Vote Centennial Initiative (WVCI), designed to serve as a clearinghouse for programs, projects, and activities related to the centennial, offers a wide array of resources, including suffrage-themed quizzes, games, and activities, K-12 teaching resources, and a centennial calendar with links to events across the country. The WVCI also provides links to exhibits (both physical and digital) in the national capitol and in each region, as well as to local and state suffrage projects. Finally, this portal offers links to preexisting biographical sketches of suffrage activists, including many Black suffragists.

The Women’s Vote Centennial, the portal created by the Women’s Suffrage Centennial Commission (WSCC), provides links to exhibits at the National Archives and the National Portrait Gallery, as well as to the podcast *And Nothing Less* (which the WSCC co-sponsored) and several webinars, including Curator’s Cut: An Inside Look at DC’s Suffrage Exhibit. This portal also offers links to state-by-state resources, initiatives, and events. This project’s most exciting segment, however, is its blog, *Suff Buffs*, a series of original short pieces by suffrage scholars about often-overlooked suffrage activists (especially women of color) and lesser-known aspects of the suffrage movement (such as how it fared in the South). Especially notable in this collection (also available for download as an eBook) are several pieces by Cathleen D. Cahill about the diversity of suffrage activists, drawn from her book, *Recasting the Vote: How Women of Color Transformed the Suffrage Movement*. Other especially important contributions highlight the contributions of “suffragents” (male supporters) and queer activists, further

expanding our understanding of the diversity of the suffrage movement. The WSCC site ceased to be maintained in 2021, but resources remain available at the archived website. The *Suff Buffs* posts have a new home at the NPS 19th Amendment site as part of *On Their Shoulders: The Radical Stories of Women's Fight for the Vote*.

These public-facing projects seek to share recent suffrage scholarship with a wide audience. The Long 19th Amendment Project, a collaboration between the Schlesinger Library and Harvard University's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, while sharing this goal, also seeks to advance suffrage research. This project's Suffrage School and Suffrage Syllabus, both intended for high school and college instructors, showcase the expertise of prominent scholars of race, gender, and citizenship as well as encouraging analysis of items in the Schlesinger Library's collections. In addition, the project provides an open-access digital portal to allow easier access to digitized material on women's suffrage and voting rights from other repositories, both in the US and abroad. Also reflecting the emphasis on collaboration, the digital exhibit *Seeing Citizens*, curated by Allison Lange, provides digital access not only to items held by the Schlesinger Library, but also from other repositories. This online archive of materials about gender and citizenship in America will further ongoing research on the history of voting rights.

Collectively, these digital projects—and others not included here—not only share the best of current suffrage scholarship with students, educators, and historians, but also encourage the production of new knowledge about the history of voting rights in the United States.

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