

# Disgust and Fascination

Feminist Ethics of Care and the Ted Bundy Investigative  
Files

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# Abstract

*Content warning: murder, sexual assault, corporal punishment*

The King County Archives is home to records created by the King County Office of Public Safety and its successor agency, the Sheriff's Office. Among the records held by the King County Archives are police investigative files created during the disappearance and murder investigations of a number of young women killed in the 1970s. These files would colloquially become known as the "Ted Bundy collection" to both staff and researchers. This article, written from the perspective of a processing archivist working on the "Ted Bundy collection," explores how emotionally challenging content may disturb typical archival operations like processing, describing, digitizing, and providing access to a collection. Utilizing a feminist ethics of care, this paper interrogates the act of balancing King County Archives' mandate for open government records while attempting to be sensitive toward the victims, victims' families, and other survivors of that period of public anxiety, researchers of myriad intentions, as well as the collection's stewards. This article examines ways that the Archives has failed some of these stakeholders in attempting to protect others, including staff, and asks how to remedy this failure with iterative processing, description, and other work with the collection.

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# Positionality and Intention Statement

This paper is intended as a self-reflective case study of archival work, decision-making, and ethics, which is rooted in my direct and lived experience working with a traumatic archival collection. For the purpose of contextualizing myself within this work, I am a white, western U.S.-born, able-bodied woman who is an early- to mid-career archivist, and worked at the archives described here from late 2017 to 2019. While this paper grapples with the figure of Bundy, the intent is not to give gravity to him but to explore the complex emotional aspects of this work and as such it is a deeply personal reflection. Decision-making around these types of collections is invariably difficult, nuanced, and still unfolding for this collection, but I am no longer present at the King County Archives to observe or participate in those choices.

# Introduction

One of the most popular and frequently accessed records at the King County Archives is the somewhat innocuously named “Closed investigative files,” a series within the King County Office of Public Safety record group. Most of the archives’ users and staff just call it the “Ted Bundy collection.” The records document the disappearance and murder investigations of a number of local young women killed in the 1970s. The King County investigation was conducted in collaboration with other regional, state, and federal agencies across the United States, which were investigating similar crimes in their own jurisdictions, ultimately leading to the arrest and eventual execution of Theodore Robert Bundy, the notorious serial killer best known as Ted Bundy. Bundy confessed to the murders of 30 women but is suspected of having murdered up to 100.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> He was executed in 1989.<sup>2</sup>

The records at the King County Archives are particularly unique because no other jurisdiction involved in parallel investigations retained these records permanently, and as far as archives staff have been able to determine, these are the only extant investigative files that still exist from the time about the Bundy investigation. While the majority of investigative records are scheduled for eventual destruction, the Washington state local government records retention schedule—upon which the King County schedule is based—includes an exception for “notorious/historically significant” cases.<sup>3</sup> Although the records generated by the County focus on the local investigations, they also include information shared by other jurisdictions as investigators collaborated across county and state lines. The collection has been used by researchers for a number of books and documentaries, including a recent four-part documentary on CNN’s “How It Really Happened with Hill Harper” and the Netflix produced documentary series, “Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes.”

The bulk of the records, which include textual, photographic, and audiovisual materials, was transferred to King County Archives by the Sheriff’s Office (previously the Office of Public Safety) in 1998, long after Bundy was convicted and executed. This initial accession consisted of numerous police investigation files as they relate to the dis-

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<sup>1</sup> Abby Bentham, “Fatal Attraction: The Serial Killer in American Popular Culture,” in *Violence in American Popular Culture: American History and Violent Popular Culture; Representations of Violence in Popular Cultural Genres*, Vol. 1., ed. David Schmid (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger/ABC-CLIO, 2016), 208.

<sup>3</sup> Washington State, Office of the Secretary of State, Washington State Archives. “Law Enforcement Records Retention Schedule,” version 7.2 (January 2017), [https://www.sos.wa.gov/\\_assets/archives/recordsmanagement/law-enforcement-records-retention-schedule-v.7.2-\(january-2017\).pdf](https://www.sos.wa.gov/_assets/archives/recordsmanagement/law-enforcement-records-retention-schedule-v.7.2-(january-2017).pdf).

appearances and murder of women living in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. These disappearances and murders were eventually attributed to Bundy. Archival processing included intensive review and redaction work conducted by archivists in consultation with the Sheriff's Office and the County's Prosecuting Attorney's Office. The textual records were boxed as paired sets of redacted photocopies and unredacted original records. A comprehensive spreadsheet was created, which intellectually maintained the original order of separated materials. The redacted set was intended at the time of processing to be fully open to the public for unrestricted research use; however, new Washington state case law has made further review necessary.<sup>4</sup>

Three subsequent accessions, much smaller in scope, were transferred to the archives from the Sheriff's Office over the next twenty years. Some of these materials date from Bundy's incarceration after his conviction for assault and murder in Florida. During this time period, police requested Bundy's consultation on the "Green River Killer" Gary Ridgway murder investigations. The records in these accessions were minimally processed and not incorporated into the descriptive inventory of the initial accession. A staff review is required for public access to these new materials since they have not been subjected to the systematic review and redaction work that was completed on the original accession.

The investigative records include voluminous, seemingly mundane materials such as DMV lists of Volkswagen owners or tip sheets documenting reported sightings of men who looked like the circulated suspect sketches, but they also include graphic crime scene photos and police reports describing violent assaults and murders. While they fall under the heading of county government records based on the fact that they were generated by a county agency, they fall far outside of the typical scope of the records with which the Archives routinely interact.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Lee v. City of Seattle, Seattle Police Department, Courtney Love Cobain, and Frances Bean Cobain. No. 75815-2-1, (Wa. Ct. App. May 14, 2018), <https://www.courts.wa.gov/opinions/pdf/758152.pdf>.

# Applying a Feminist Ethics of Care Approach in the Context of the Ted Bundy Collection

Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor describe four “affective responsibilities” in a feminist ethics of care: that of the archivist and the record creator, the archivist and the subject of the records, the archivist and the user, and the archivist and the larger community.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I am most interested in the latter three responsibilities. While it would be inaccurate, potentially even harmful to say that government archives do not perform their own collecting and appraisal, the dynamic is less curatorial than one would see in other types of archival repositories. Bound by its narrower scope as a government archives, the King County Archives is not able to collect supporting materials from private individuals, for example, in efforts to expand the range and perspectives of the Bundy collection.

In this article, I offer a case study of how emotionally challenging content disturbs the typical operations like processing, describing, digitizing, and providing access to an archival collection. While there is a fair amount of archival literature regarding traumatic collections, much of it centers around the documentation of genocide and human rights violations on a massive, systemic scale.<sup>2</sup> It is more difficult to find literature that addresses the trauma perpetuated by individual perpetrators like serial murderers. In 2010, Nora Devlin discussed the ethics of preserving the “Unabomber” Ted Kaczynski’s papers at the University of Michigan, but this analysis focuses primarily on the ethical obligation to document even controversial subjects,<sup>3</sup> and relies heavily on University

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 27.

<sup>2</sup> See Michelle Caswell, “Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach to Records Documenting Human Rights Abuse: Lessons from Community Archives,” *Archival Science* 14 (2014): 307-322; Michelle Caswell and Anne Gilliland, “False Promise and New Hope: Dead Perpetrators, Imagined Documents and Emergent Archival Evidence,” *International Journal of Human Rights* 19, no. 5 (2015): 615-627; Verne Harris, “Antonyms of Our Remembering,” *Archival Science* 14 (2014): 215-229; Lisa P. Nathan, Elizabeth Shaffer, and Maggie Castor, “Stewarding Collections of Trauma: Plurality, Responsibility, and Questions of Action,” *Archivaria* 80 (2015): 89-118.

<sup>3</sup> Nora Devlin, “The Ethics of Archiving ‘Murderabilia’: The Papers of Ted Kaczynski,” *Journal of Information Ethics* 19, no. 1 (2010): 126-140.

policy and the Society of American Archivists' Code of Ethics,<sup>4</sup> or what Caswell and Cifor describe as the "legalistic, rights-based framework" of records "as tools of *legal* accountability."<sup>5</sup>

Devlin's argument, and by extension that of then-curator Julie Herrada, places strong emphasis on the concept of archival neutrality. In responding to criticism of the Kaczynski accession, she writes that it was important to clarify that "documenting such histories is not to legitimate or condone them, but to record them with the same equality as any other historical event in the United States."<sup>6</sup> She goes on to quote Karen Lamoree's emphasis on "professional responsibility to fairness, objectivity, and intellectual freedom"<sup>7</sup> and states that "neutrality should be emphasized."<sup>8</sup> It is precisely this "veneer of detached professionalism"<sup>9</sup> that becomes embrittled when deployed even in some of the examples Lamoree provides. For instance, the choice not to name racism but instead describe collections as "documenting race relations"<sup>10</sup> is an effort in objectivity that instead turns "a blind eye to power differentials."<sup>11</sup> By insisting on neutrality, archivists are likely only to re-inscribe the dominant values of the "hegemonic default,"<sup>12</sup> which ignores those individuals and communities that fall outside its strict parameters.<sup>13</sup> In the context of the King County investigative files, a neutral approach to description and access could in fact be harmful to the victims' families as well as other survivors in its lack of care toward their lived experiences.

As a government repository, the King County Archives has a legal and ethical obligation to the public to provide open access to the records in its keeping, regardless of the content. The state of Washington's public records laws dictate this access as an essential function of assuring transparency from our elected officials and government agencies.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately it is these laws and policies that govern how access is provided

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<sup>4</sup> Society of American Archivists. "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," Society of American Archivists, May 2011, updated August 6, 2020, <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

<sup>5</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 27.

<sup>6</sup> Devlin, "The Ethics of Archiving 'Murderabilia,'" 129.

<sup>7</sup> Karen M. Lamoree, "Documenting the Difficult or Collecting the Controversial." *Archival Issues* 20 no. 2 (1995): 150.

<sup>8</sup> Devlin, "The Ethics of Archiving 'Murderabilia,'" 131.

<sup>9</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 25.

<sup>10</sup> Lamoree, "Documenting the Difficult or Collecting the Controversial," 151.

<sup>11</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 32.

<sup>12</sup> Sam Winn, "The Hubris of Neutrality in Archives," *On Archivy*, Medium, April 24, 2017, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/the-hubris-of-neutrality-in-archives-8df6b523fe9f>.

<sup>13</sup> See Bergis Jules, "Confronting Our Failure of Care Around the Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives," *On Archivy*, Medium, November 11, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-of-marginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>; Winn, "The Hubris of Neutrality in Archives"; Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *The Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 14-26.

<sup>14</sup> See: Washington State, Office of the Attorney General, "Open Government," Washington State, <https://www.atg.wa.gov/opengovernment.aspx>, accessed September 10, 2021.



to these investigative files and other records in the archives, but there is an argument to be made that the Bundy collection warrants a more nuanced approach within those parameters.

In the process of writing this paper, I brought up questions to administration staff about access restrictions to the original photographs in the collection. While consulting with the Prosecuting Attorney's Office on the Archives' legal ability to restrict access to materials, the office discovered a new state case law which addressed some of the concerns laid out here. The 2018 case considered whether or not the City of Seattle and its police department were obligated to provide access to post-mortem photographs of musician Kurt Cobain as part of public records requests for the files on the investigation of his death.<sup>15</sup> The opinion put forth in the case allows local government agencies to refrain from disclosing photographs of deceased people in order to prevent emotional harm to those peoples' families. While this decision provides a legal basis for the King County Archives to restrict access to some of the more sensitive photographs in this collection, it also forces staff to make a judgment of how to interpret the decision in the context of risk around public disclosure versus potential harm to surviving family members.

By analyzing multiple affective responsibilities within the framework of radical empathy as described by Caswell and Cifor,<sup>16</sup> I interrogate the act of balancing King County Archives' mandate for open government records with sensitivity toward the Archives' stakeholders: concerns for the victims and their families, other survivors of that period of public anxiety, researchers of myriad intentions, and the collection's stewards. This discussion also examines the ways in which the Archives has failed some of these stakeholders in attempting to protect others—including archives staff—and asks how to remedy this failure with iterative processing, description, and other work with the collection.

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Lee v. City of Seattle, et al.

<sup>16</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 33.

# The Archivist and the User

I worked as one of two assistant archivists at the King County Archives from 2017 to 2019, and it was not long after I started that we received a request for access to the Bundy materials by local news media. Their piece on the subject, in addition to 2019 being the thirtieth anniversary of Bundy's execution, created renewed interest in the collection and over the months that followed, a number of requests from production companies and private individuals came in reactive waves. In responding to these requests, archival staff came to realize a number of issues regarding access: conflicting documentation on what was and was not open for public access, detailed inventories that were only available to staff, and a complete lack of descriptive information about the collection or even acknowledgment of its existence in any of our public-facing web content or literature. As archives staff worked to dismantle the resulting barriers to use, we wrestled with the realization that some barriers appeared to be intentional in order to discourage use of the collection.

Providing any access to the collection, even just a confirmation of its existence, required numerous interventions by archives staff that, in turn, resulted in staff being exposed to the gruesome nature of the records. Nowhere on our website or in our public catalog was the name "Bundy," the primary keyword users would search in our catalog (which we knew from monthly search reports provided by IT) or use when requesting via reference transactions. Instead, users had to discover the existence of these records through other sources like book citations and news reports. In fact, the series-level descriptions entered into our internal collection database were not available on our online catalog. In spite of the extensive processing that had been completed years before, the detailed collection inventory—with folder-level description of the textual materials and item-level description for photographs, maps, and audiovisual materials—remained available only as a spreadsheet saved to our internal server. Furthermore, despite the collection's consistent draw and the relative ease to batch import data from spreadsheets into the database, the spreadsheet was never migrated into the collection database. Because of this absence of public-facing information, any review of the collection's description and contents required a direct request to staff just for this preliminary step, which has likely eliminated any number of potential users over the years.

Caswell and Cifor argue that "empathy is radical if we allow it to define archival interactions even when our own visceral affective responses are steeped in fear, disgust,

or anger.”<sup>1</sup> One possible reason why archival staff have previously obfuscated access to these files is for personal or collective affective aversion to the Bundy collection. Users will likely always be drawn to this collection and its subject; to obscure the collection or protect users or ourselves from its unpleasantness is counterproductive to the reality of its continued popularity. It is not staff’s prerogative to judge or shame our researchers for their interests, or to prioritize or rank the worthiness of researchers’ goals in accessing collections. It is very possible in some cases that potential users interested in the collection may already be conflicted themselves about their interest in the collection; by forcing them to request information via a gatekeeper we further exclude these users, whose human curiosity or research interest may have been simply satisfied by reviewing an inventory privately.

In this sense, one might argue that a measure of neutrality is what the Archives’ past approach to this collection was lacking. Staff had previously allowed their own distaste for the content of the collection to affect their efforts to “promote” it by publicly sharing descriptive information. By treating it as any other set of records, especially ones frequently used, we might have prioritized this inventory being one of the first added to the catalog when initially implemented approximately five years ago. And indeed, neutrality was what my colleague and I set out to approach these records with when we began receiving a string of consecutive requests to use the records. However, the more time I worked to make this collection accessible, the more it complicated the notion of neutrality.

Discussing the work of Carol Gilligan, Caswell and Cifor describe the “dominant rhetorics of autonomy, individual freedoms and rights, choice, and neutrality” as “meaningless to many women,”<sup>2</sup> and yet these are words that could easily describe the norms particularly inscribed in government archives with strong legal mandates for public access to records. In a neutral view, a murder investigation file is ultimately the same as a development site plan, and yet to even write such a thing *feels* flippant and wrong. The myth of neutrality is underlined in the way collection materials are referred to obliquely in the collection database as the “closed investigative files,” as though they are no different than any other government paperwork on more banal topics held by the archives, and yet no one, not even staff, calls the records anything other than the “Bundy collection.” It is present in the judgment, voiced by one former staff member, that everything that could be written on this topic has been written and there is nothing new to discover in the collection, as though the primary reason users access the collection is for solely scholarly purposes.

The reality is that use of these records is inherently emotional, for both researchers and staff providing reference and access, and reactions to these materials might include excitement, anger, fear, sadness, curiosity, disgust, shame. I would argue that it is radical to turn toward the affective qualities of the collection and apply a feminist ethic of

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<sup>1</sup> Caswell and Cifor, 25.

<sup>2</sup> Caswell and Cifor, 28.

care to our reference interactions. That is, rather than holding our noses and attempting to take refuge from our discomfort by refusing to engage with the collection or by obscuring access, we should acknowledge the emotional qualities that draw people to the collection and seek to orient our service around the affective. In practice that could mean allowing users to privately access descriptive materials (finding aids, detailed catalog records, scope notes on the archives' website, etc.) by making them clearly and publicly available, and by using the language researchers use when searching for the records, rather than requiring staff intervention to provide copies of finding aids and inventories. It could mean more transparency regarding past processing and redaction actions to contextualize the lack of originals in the public set of records. Perhaps most importantly, it could mean adding content warnings to collection descriptions to allow users to make informed decisions about which materials they were comfortable or prepared to view.

# The Archivist and the Subject of the Records

Although both users and archives staff regularly refer to these records as “the Bundy collection,” when we think of the impetus for the creation of these records, a different perspective emerges. The investigations were carried out initially because women were missing, and while their absences are the instigators of investigation and documentation, their presence is more keenly felt in the records. Photos of Lynda Healy, Donna Manson, Susan Rancourt, Roberta Parks, Brenda Ball, Georgann Hawkins, Janice Ott, and Denise Naslund are ever-present throughout the collection, often the same one or two images used on missing posters in duplicated forms. Other photographs, however, depict far more intimate scenes and features: their bedrooms, their clothing, their blood, their bones.

Caswell and Cifor argue that “in a relationship of caring, we must balance our desire to capture histories that would otherwise be silenced in the archival record with the privacy, desires, and needs of the subjects of our records.”<sup>1</sup> We cannot ask these women if they would prefer their bodies kept private, or if they want their violations shouted across all forms of media. Should archivists describe certain photos obliquely, and only provide access to them when explicitly requested? Is it overstepping our roles as “neutral” government employees to provide access with a preamble on sensitive usage? At the same time, these images have already been published in various media over the past nearly twenty years since the collection’s processing; what damage might be done has already been done, many times over. While the 2018 case law<sup>2</sup> sets the legal precedent for the Archives to restrict access to post-mortem images, due to the nature of public government records, institutional action will be confined to the “legalistic, rights-based framework”;<sup>3</sup> the risk of restrictions based on affect, not law, is—from the public disclosure and legal perspective—too great. In this situation, at least, the law has sided with the affective impact on surviving families, in the sense that the emotional impact of disclosure must be considered for an (albeit small) portion of these records, but we must try to find ways to support and contextualize the challenging material that remains accessible.

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<sup>1</sup> Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 37.

<sup>2</sup> *Richard Lee v. City of Seattle, et al.*

<sup>3</sup> Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 27.

It would be dishonest to insist that Bundy is not also a subject of the collection, though the depiction of him in the collection is scattered and incomplete. There are more copies of suspect drawings than photographs of him; there are more records about public tipline sightings and similar crimes shared by other agencies than descriptions of confirmed encounters. Even in the later accessions which include Detective Bob Keppel's interviews with Bundy in prison and correspondence he received while incarcerated, Bundy is more a shadow over the records than a voice in them.

Writing about the Kaczynski papers' inclusion in the University of Michigan's Labadie Collection, Nora Devlin suggests that failing to collect materials from controversial figures risks that they "may suffer the same fate that minorities and other victims of 'hidden histories' have suffered in the past."<sup>4</sup> The conflation of the other communities represented in the Labadie Collection—such as transgender, anarchist, and antiwar activists—with a white man who committed serial murders is at best a clear representation of the shortcomings of archival neutrality and at worst a disingenuous argument. It is a false equivalence that the aversion to elevating controversial figures like Kaczynski or Bundy is the same as the systemic inequities that leave certain communities out of the historic record. There is also little risk of serial murderers being neglected by history; it can be easily demonstrated that much work has already been done to historicize Bundy: a quick search of several local libraries brings up approximately 30-40 results relating directly to him. His name is how archives staff describe the collection in shorthand, how users request the records, and how the media refer to the murders of numerous women across the country.

While I agree that collecting controversial materials is important to the historical record, I reject the idea that to do so is so that controversial figures are not forgotten like "minorities and other victims of 'hidden histories.'"<sup>5</sup> Perhaps in a neutral view, the "visceral affective responses" Bundy elicits suggests we might treat him as "the other" to be invited into our treatment of the collection.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to envision extending empathy to someone who embodied misogyny in its most horrific forms. I would argue that there is an unavoidable conflict in the affective responsibility to the subject when one considers Bundy as subject versus Healy, Manson, Rancourt, Parks, Ball, Hawkins, Ott, and Naslund as subjects.

However, it is easy to allow that visceral response to obscure the truth. The collection is titled the bureaucratic, neutral "Closed investigative files" and evades naming Bundy explicitly, even though it is his violent actions that are central to those investigations. What does turning away from explicitly naming him in the collection title do, perhaps not so much in the archivist's responsibility to him, but in the archivist's ability, or duty, to hold him responsible?

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<sup>4</sup> Devlin, "The Ethics of Archiving 'Murderabilia,'" 31.

<sup>5</sup> Devlin, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 25.

In many ways, it seems to me an ethical imperative to attempt to address a collection that documents violence against women within a feminist framework, refocusing on the women themselves. Instead of allowing both perpetrator and victims equal weight, I am more interested in what happens when we turn away from the pull of the killer to the silences around his victims. This is not to say that we continue to obscure the presence of Bundy in the collection, as past archival intervention and practice (intended or not) has done. But what happens when we center the women he brutalized in our treatment of the collection? Marika Cifor writes:

I argue that witnessing is a relation that comes with certain responsibilities. The pain of others that can be found in archives does not simply belong to others; rather, as inevitable witnesses to such pain, archivists are deeply implicated in webs of affective relations.<sup>7</sup>

How can we present the records in a way that makes users remember their names and not just his? Do we include biographies of the women in the collection's descriptive matter to draw greater attention to them, knowing their histories will be brief and full of unfulfilled potential? How do we refocus on the search for resolution and justice for these women?

We can ask, as I did above, what the women described by these records would want, but these are unanswerable questions. However, in the context of these investigations and the women's absences, it could also be argued that there is a third set of subjects: the families and loved ones of the women, who provided the school portraits and family photos to investigators, who described their loved ones' personalities and habits and preferences to investigators, who were at one time intimately involved in the processes documented in these records. From what information I could locate on the early stewardship of the collection, the Sheriff's Office allowed the women's families some review of the records prior to them becoming inactive, but the families do not appear to have been consulted during the preliminary processing and redaction work or any time after.

What would involving victims' families look like now—decades after the investigations, thirty years after Bundy's execution, twenty after the initial transfer of the records from the Sheriff to the Archives? What insight could the families give on the investigation processes described? What depth could they provide to write biographical notes on the women subjects? Is there any way the Archives could invite these families into the process of reviewing the records without reopening old wounds? And even if given the opportunity to opt out, what harm is done just by the asking? What purpose would this serve? How would a government archives balance public records laws, "legalistic, rights-based framework"<sup>8</sup> approaches to records stewardship, and a family member asking for removal or redaction not covered by state or case law? When is it

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<sup>7</sup> Marika Cifor, "Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse," *Archival Science* 16 (2016): 9.

<sup>8</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 27.

too late? Is it an opportunity for healing or likely to only retraumatize? Is there an argument to be made that care might also mean *not* reopening contact? How can you know?



# The Archivist and the Larger Community

One of the first times I provided a user access to the collection, I used the neutral, openaccess argument of archives to justify sharing the full selection of currently digitized photographs from the collection. The photos, having previously been digitized by another archivist for a researcher's book, had already been released to the public. The end result of the request I fulfilled was a web article that featured a gallery of photographs of bloody bedsheets with no content warning and large thumbnails of these images above the fold of the web page. My colleagues and I were disturbed by the usage, but it was—in the “legalistic, rights-based framework”<sup>1</sup> of archives—within the news organization's right to publish.

At the same time, that news organization was fulfilling the media adage of “if it bleeds it leads,” and in the last few years interest in true crime media shows no sign of slowing with the proliferation of podcasts and TV serials. The human and particularly American interest in serial murders is directly fed by media usage of collections like this one, which in turn provides significantly expanded access to a wide community of potential users. Bentham describes interest in serial murder narratives as “concerned with boundary-breaking and taboo,” allowing “vicarious contravention of societal norms, yet in exposing the threats to society such narratives ultimately serve to reinforce the very boundaries that are being transgressed.”<sup>2</sup> While it describes horrific crimes, the Bundy collection is literally a closed investigative file: the perpetrator was found and legal justice was served and satisfied. To mark the anniversary of that capital punishment seems distinctly emblematic of society reinscribing norms—revisiting Bundy's crimes while simultaneously commemorating his execution.

Then again, this is not an old crime, and the trauma of these events is still present in the lives of many people. The women Bundy killed would be the same age as my mother. Victims' family members are likely still alive. One colleague lived down the street from one of those women, and was a young woman herself living in Seattle while the investigations were being conducted and bodies were being found not far outside the city. I have been contacted by women interested in the collection who tell me they think they escaped Bundy in other cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 27.

<sup>2</sup> Bentham, “Fatal Attraction,” 205.

Most of the time as an archivist I am perpetually striving for ways to facilitate access, and yet the myriad ways this collection wields potential to harm gives me pause. While there certainly is a societal fascination with the serial murderer, most of the people I talk to about working with this collection express revulsion at the topic. For every researcher who is fascinated by the collection and wants copies of everything from it, there are many other users who would prefer to hear nothing about it. We have discussed fully digitizing the collection in order to provide equitable access, but what does this actually look like from an ethical stance? The Archives has the capability to embed digitized content in our public-facing catalog, which would allow free, unmediated access to users and would reduce staff involvement with the materials. However, this may lead to unintentional or undesired exposure to the materials, with the added danger of being removed from their context when discovered at the item level. A researcher searching for King County Parks photographs of Taylor Mountain, could for example, return digitized records that describe the instance of bodily remains found there. Would our entire catalog require a content warning just to make these materials easier to obtain without making a reference request?

The content of this collection complicates and disturbs the archival profession's general ethos toward facilitating greater access, particularly government archives that are meant and mandated to be open. Caswell and Cifor write, "An archival approach marked by radical empathy would require archives to make survivors and implicated communities not just a target group of users, but central focal points in all aspects of the archival endeavor, from appraisal to description to provision of access."<sup>3</sup> How do you define an implicated community when a collection's subject is one of the most infamous serial murderers in modern memory? How do you balance the polar responses of fascination and aversion in providing access? Is it our duty to protect those who would prefer never to hear of this case, and is that even possible once surrogates of the collection leave our hands?

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<sup>3</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 24.

# The Archivist Herself

Caswell and Cifor's affective responsibilities<sup>1</sup> address the stakeholders archivists work with and for on a daily basis, and each responsibility is in many ways framed with the archivist at the center of a "web of affective relations."<sup>2</sup> I'd like to delve into that center, however, and suggest that archivists have an additional affective responsibility *to each other and ourselves*, especially when working with traumatic collections.

When the King County Archives first wrote its processing plan for the collection, the County Archivist at the time consulted with a neuropsychologist specializing in Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) in order to develop strategies for preventing trauma to staff working directly with the collection. The archivists performed the extensive redaction work in the collection, which meant they read every document in order to find not only mundane but protected instances of personally identifying information but also, for example, protected instances of juvenile victims of sexual assault. In spite of the popularity of the collection with researchers and the detailed level of processing and description, the extensive data was never imported into the catalog, nor was the series described at the collection level on our website in order to facilitate discovery.

This article has already described how the lack of follow-through on making this information publicly available has resulted in requiring greater staff interventions in request fulfillment, and how that has affected our users. Yet these interventions have also had a profound, although unintentional, effect on the staff that performs them: by allowing their discomfort with the collection to affect description and access information, previous archivists made it so that future archivists would in turn have to spend more time interacting with the collection in order to provide access.

This creates a unique tension around the motivations to make the collection more accessible. Yes, we are driven by the imperative of making our collections easy to learn about, request, and interact with—but there is also an undercurrent of that visceral response, a desperate, affective reaction to remove ourselves from the collection as much as possible. As such, we are not so different from the archivists before us. The more time I spent working with the collection I was simultaneously frustrated by the amount of effort archives staff had already expended on arranging and describing the collection while it remained still so hidden to users, and repeatedly came to empathize

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<sup>1</sup> Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics."

<sup>2</sup> Cifor, "Affecting Relations," 9.

with the exhausting, heartbreaking, and enraging labor it required to process these records.

It is an easy, and perhaps unavoidable aspect of archival work that we often curse the decisions of our predecessors whether because of inadequate documentation of previous work, arrangement choices we disagree with, quirks of legacy systems out of which data has since been migrated, or little details that were prioritized that now seem a waste of time. I began my work with this collection of files angrily fixing something I believed should never have been broken: allowing researchers descriptive access that was there but inaccessible for so many years. Yet looking back now I see how much my approach was still colored by a neutral, universal, rights-based framework.<sup>3</sup> The moment one engages with these materials, it becomes almost ridiculous to insist that they should be managed the same way the archives might manage County ordinances or septic permits. Collections like this one inform archivists that neutrality is an impossibility, and to strive for it “asks us as scholars and archivists to ignore how our work and relationships are mediated by affects.”<sup>4</sup>

When I first started writing this article, I went to great lengths to rewrite sentences that centered myself, rephrasing “I” to “the author,” changing syntax to emphasize processes over people in order to remove pronouns. And yet the further I got in describing the deeply affective aspects of this collection, the more difficult writing about this experience became. First, it does the profession a great disservice to remove ourselves from our work; in describing only processes, we remove the archivists from the archives and erase our labor.<sup>5</sup> But there is also an incredible expenditure of emotional labor when working with traumatic records. Working with this collection and writing about it has changed me. On days I was embedded in the hundreds of photographs I thought of the women’s faces when I went to sleep. I became afraid of walking alone. When I look at the photograph of Brenda Ball that appears again and again throughout the collection, her long, dark, straight hair reminds me of my mother’s passport photo from the 1970s. When women reached out to the archives because they thought they had escaped Bundy in other cities and wanted to know if they were in the records, the conversation was rarely about the collection and much more about needing to share their own story of fearing for their lives. I began to feel myself deeply responsible to the women in the collection and to the women who lived through the trauma of Bundy’s crimes.

It is also difficult to remove my own identity from my interactions with and reactions to this collection, and to its users and potential users. As a woman witnessing the records of horrific assaults and murders of other women, neutrality is an impossibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 27.

<sup>4</sup> Cifor, “Affecting Relations,” 12.

<sup>5</sup> There are numerous discussions on this topic, but my formative introduction was via Eira Tansey, “Archives without Archivists,” *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016), DOI: 10.7945/C2GW2F.

If “empathy at its most simplistic” is “to imagine our body in the place of another,”<sup>6</sup> it is frighteningly, extraordinarily easy as a young, white, middle class, University of Washington graduate in Seattle to imagine myself in the place of these women, preyed upon on their college campuses and at the beautiful natural sites that drew me to the Pacific Northwest. These records breathe danger and fear into places that have brought me happiness living here. A care-based approach appears to be an essential counter to this violence, in which “deeply relational, context dependent, and emotionally resonant” treatment of the collection, its subjects, and its users is valued and implemented.

At the same time, my own socialized inclination toward care<sup>7</sup> led me frequently to take on each reference request for this collection as a sort of protective measure for my colleagues, who were predominantly women. It has been pointed out to me that this was likely the same mindset of my predecessor, who became the ad-hoc “expert” on the collection in spite of her strong dislike of the subject. My own attachment to it also became entwined with my sense of responsibility to the women in the collection. With each new request I thought to myself, *I know it best at this point, I can provide faster access rather than forcing another staff member to expose themselves to the collection.* There’s an aversive, get-in/get-out affective response to using the collection that is difficult to avoid, but also contributed to the thinking that I was the best person for the job, every time. Yet in writing about collections on human rights abuses, Caswell argues for a community-based approach to traumatic materials: “archivists need to be reflexive about how their practice impacts their own physical and mental well-being, and seek out networks of support in the face of damaging materials.”<sup>8</sup> In protecting each other, we are potentially harming ourselves more than necessary. To steward a collection of trauma effectively, we must share the load in order to minimize burnout and secondary trauma. It is worth noting at this point, then, the fact that the burden of working with this collection has repeatedly, and to an extent, consciously fallen to temporary, projectbased labor. The first archivists processing the collection were, as far as I can determine from the documentation of their work, hired specifically to process and redact the collection. That means that the entirety of their work was focused on reading violent and disturbing content in these records. As a full-time, permanent assistant archivist, my work did not solely consist of working with this collection, which enabled me to step away from the collection and work on other tasks when it became overwhelming. However, when I shared my concerns about how the media had used the collection photographs, and my growing belief that providing online access to digitized records was perhaps not the appropriate solution to the frequent requests for the collection, I was removed from working on the project. My removal from the project was framed as rescuing me from the distress of working with the collection, in spite of my repeated insistence that I felt deeply responsible for seeing through the

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<sup>6</sup> Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics,” 30.

<sup>7</sup> Caswell and Cifor, 28.

<sup>8</sup> Caswell, “Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach,” 318.

work I had started. Ultimately, decisions were made that led once again to the hiring of a temporary staff member to work solely on these records.

In 2016, Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Jennifer Douglas conducted a survey on secondary archival trauma, and the results reflect the tension I describe experiencing above.<sup>9</sup> In their analysis, they note that “respondents felt their workplace required a ‘stiff upper lip’ approach to archival work”;<sup>10</sup> a later quote from one respondent affirms this mentality: “‘If someone finds the records they are dealing with upsetting, they should [...] find something a little lighter. In my opinion, archivist, as professionals [sic], should be able to maintain a level of detachment that would prevent any secondary trauma.’”<sup>11</sup> This idea that secondary trauma is a personal failing of the archivist rather than an inevitability when people are exposed to traumatic records (if proper support and resources aren’t made available and utilized) is a dangerous side effect of the perpetuation of the myth of neutrality.

Other respondents, particularly those in temporary and contingent positions, noted that even if resources were available, they felt a stigma against using them, that “concern about the professional reputation” was “a deterrent to accessing support,”<sup>12</sup> and that asking for extra resources “‘may lead them to lose a contract renewal.’”<sup>13</sup> The stability and security that archives workers continue to advocate for is, as Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas’s research illustrates, an aggravating factor in the secondary trauma working with records like the investigative files can cause. The “networks of support”<sup>14</sup> Caswell urges us to seek out can only aid archivists if we can build a culture of care within the profession that not only acknowledges the affective qualities of traumatic collections but also allows us to be affected and to ask for help without judgment.

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<sup>9</sup> Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Jennifer Douglas. “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle’: Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 6 (2019), Article 20.

<sup>10</sup> Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 10.

<sup>11</sup> Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, 16.

<sup>12</sup> Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 18.

<sup>13</sup> Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, 19.

<sup>14</sup> Caswell, “Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach,” 314.

# Conclusion

The uniquely challenging content of the Bundy collection presents a tension between access and responsible stewardship because of its traumatic, emotional, and affective qualities. The inclination that I have observed in myself and archives staff to protect others and ourselves from these qualities can lead to harmful actions, from withholding information from users, to staff siloing and oversaturating themselves as “experts” in the collection in order to protect their fellow colleagues from overexposure to the collection. However, this protective urge in many ways comes from an affective inclination toward care and may also be examined as an invitation to use the framework of radical empathy to explore, present, and interpret the collection. Michelle Caswell writes that continuous, critical self-reflection is particularly important in working with traumatic collections, allowing us

to see and react to the multiple, sometimes contradictory, ways that the archive is constructed and viewed, the competing priorities that are embodied in collection policies, and the shifting nature of the categories used to describe records. In such reflection, problems are identified, solutions proposed, and successes are celebrated.<sup>1</sup>

By facing our aversive responses to the difficult subject matter in this collection and treating those responses in each other with care, we can more effectively address the needs of our stakeholders while respecting our own emotional limits.

Since writing this article, I have moved on from the King County Archives, where new review and redaction is ongoing in order to respond to the 2018 case law. It feels strange to be finishing this piece now, but I have to remind myself that one of the lessons here has been that this labor must be shared, and that it will continue iteratively as law, societal circumstances, and staffing change. I, like my predecessors, am not solely responsible nor necessary for this work to continue. However, it is with concern that I note that this work transferred from one silo—myself, by choice, in a misguided attempt to protect other staff—to another, by the terms and conditions of their temporary employment. I hope that the individual who was given the monumental task of reviewing the records over again has been given resources to manage the pain of embedding oneself full-time in the collection, and that they are not expected to always keep a “stiff upper lip.”<sup>2</sup>

Based on the review process and the work previously put into the collection by myself and the archivists before me, my hope is that in the near future this collection

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<sup>1</sup> Caswell, 314.

<sup>2</sup> Sloan, Vanderfluit, and Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle,’” 10.

will have a robust, browsable finding aid available online, with clear and detailed information on restrictions and redactions, available digital surrogates by request, and the context of the records' creation and purpose. Descriptive material should frame the collection as investigative records centering around the recovery of and justice for missing, assaulted, and murdered women. Description should not evade naming Ted Bundy, the perpetrator of the violence against them, because that is the name that brings so many users to the collection, but the King County Archives must strive to provide visibility of the names of the women whose lives were taken away: Lynda Healy, Donna Manson, Susan Rancourt, Roberta Parks, Brenda Ball, Georgann Hawkins, Janice Ott, and Denise Naslund. In continuing to aim for equitable ease of access, I hope that the Archives will strive for balance in serving those interested in the records and those who do not want to encounter its contents, as well as respecting those who cannot tell us what they prefer themselves. And for those of us stewarding traumatic collections, I hope we will treat ourselves and others with kindness, whether in moments of fascination or moments of disgust.



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The Ted K Archive

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