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Reanimating feminist archives: ethics and praxis

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This study explores the complexities of developing feminist archives with a particular focus on the 'Feminist Approaches to Youth Sexuality (FAYS)' archive, created as part of the Reanimating Data project (RAD, 2018–21). Through this case study, we explore the ethical considerations and practices involved in reanimating a landmark feminist study, the Women, Risk, and AIDS Project (WRAP), and emphasize the ethical dimensions of reanimation processes, considering feminist ethics of care and risk. We also explore the concept of rematriation, which is rooted in indigenous feminist scholarship. This concept has become a guiding principle in our efforts to return WRAP to its geo-political context. As such, the article is structured into the following three sections: data in the attic, on recovery and rematriation; feminist ethics, on care and risk; and feminist archival praxis, on reanimating and language.

KEYWORDS

feminist archives, feminist archiving, rematriation, feminist ethics of care, feminist ethics of risk, feminist digital archives

1 Introduction

Drawing inspiration from both academic and community efforts in feminist (Eichhorn, 2013; Cifor and Wood, 2017) and queer archiving (Lee, 2021; Stone and Cantrell, 2010) this study discusses practices related to developing the Feminist Approaches to Youth Sexuality (FAYS) archive. The FAYS archive, collaboratively developed by the authors as part of the Reanimating Data project (RAD, 2018–21), represents a revisiting of a landmark feminist study of young women's sexual cultures and practices, conducted in Manchester and London in 1988–1990—the Women, Risk, & AIDS Project—the WRAP. The WRAP formed part of an ESRC program into the social aspects of HIV/AIDS, and the project can be understood as capturing an important moment in which heterosexuality was named, de-naturalized, and broken down into following components: practices, silences, asymmetries of desire, and anatomical aspects. The RAD project, funded by the ESRC, was tasked with the following: revisiting the WRAP interviews; reengaging with narratives within and across inter-generational lines; reanimating the sound, text, stories, and experiences through experimental sound and art installations; and (re)archiving the original interviews, the focus of this study. Activities related to (re)archiving included revisiting the collection with members of the original research team, which included Professor Rachel Thomson (PI, RAD). From this standpoint, the original study and its data were viewed as an event, as a set of encounters, methodologies, and objects that enable feminist time travels and foster conversations among researchers, both then and now, as well as conversation within oneself bridging past and present. This temporality and the unique continuity between research projects afforded a critical element of self-reflection in relation to the original dataset and lived experience of the

RAD project team and network. (Re)archiving the data and these temporal elements prompted us to think beyond traditional modes of access and to explore epistemological questions related to archiving, now historic, sociological data. Through various ‘reanimations’ (for example, sound installations and feminist chatbots), the project considered questions around resurrection and reanimation, about ghostly messages which linger or haunt, about the forgotten interests, impulses, longings, aspirations, and desires, which emerged in the text and their reanimated offspring. Within this context, a particular concern was the ethical considerations of reanimating the WRAP data set from both the perspective of the original contributors and the contemporary reader. Ethics, from a feminist ethics of care and a feminist ethics of risk, therefore, is the second particular focus of this study. As such, this article is structured as follows: data in the attic, on recovery and rematriation; feminist ethics, on care and risk; and feminist archival praxis, on reanimating and language.

1.1 Data in the attic, on recovery and rematriation

The Women’s Risk and AIDS Project (1989–90) was a

Social science research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of a programme of AIDS and HIV research, commissioned to investigate changing sexual behaviour, practices and values in the UK...[The] research project...sought to understand how young women were negotiating sex, relationships, risk and pleasure following the emergence of AIDS. The collection includes 148 in-depth biographical interviews with young women aged between 16 and 21 in Manchester and London in the UK, carried out in 1989–1990.¹

The above description is taken from the Omeka archive in which the anonymised transcripts, as well as other material related to RAD, are now housed. This living archive, as we remain committed to adding to it, represents the culmination of over 30 years of work. RAD has provided WRAP a resting place, an archival place to hold the voices, memories, experiences, and, indeed, trauma of those originally interviewed. The journey to this archival home started with a visit to an attic in a London home where the data had been stored by Janet Holland, one of the PIs of the original regional study. Among the artifacts representing a lifetime of research were old computers, old storage devices, old paperwork, and vivid memories. The objects recovered from this excavation formed the basis of our archival work. Our ambitions, however, were much more than not just rescuing data. We aimed to bring it back into conversation with its original geo-political context—an action we have termed rematriation, which is an act or processes of return to an original community or context (Moore et al., 2023). Our actions of recovery and rematriation offered an opportunity to bring the original data

back to Manchester, where half of the interviews for the original WRAP were conducted. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the dedicated, sustained commitment and care demonstrated by Janet to the interviews and the WRAP research project. This feminist act of radical care ensured that the work of recovery and rematriation could be carried out—an act not often afforded to historical, social science data sets. As Niamh Moore (2019) discusses in a project blog, UK social science has often been an extractive economy, with stories and lives renamed, data, recorded and removed from communities, repackaged in journal articles and books, and hidden in filing cabinets or behind the licensing arrangements of more formal archives so that communities and individuals do not have access to their own stories.

Indeed, exploring the concept of reanimating in a separate project blog, Thomson (2022) describes this practice as a ‘dead sociology’, encompassing ‘dead data’ in the context of zombie practices, which keep data neither dead nor alive, but in a liminal state of suspended animation.

The vision of enacting rematriation, and indeed reconnection, was a core motivation for RAD and informed various project activities. Rematriation, a concept and praxis rooted in indigenous feminist scholarship and activism (Muthien n.d.; Moro 2018; Tuck 2013), commits to a return, a re-sharing, as a political act that is influenced by an ethics of care for the individuals and communities represented in or within data/archives. It also cares and is cognizant of the intergenerational relationships between object and subject, between subject and object, and foregrounds archives of connection over archives out of context—hidden, lost, or indeed stolen.

While rematriation stems from indigenous feminist scholarship, we consider it to be part of a broader feminist ethics of care and praxis related to contemporary work in community archives. This work is fuelled by identity politics, the politics of representation and inclusion, as well as the fallout of digitally mediated accessibility and reproduction. The historical acts of care and contemporary efforts of recovery and rematriation signify an ethical commitment and responsibility to research ‘subjects’, which leads to a re-evaluation of agency and ownership (Jimerson, 2009). These processes can also be understood as a form of ‘queer rematriation’, that is ‘neither a search for origins, nor a reliance on a future tied to hetero-patriarchal reproductive logic’ (Moore et al., 2023). It is not a return to biological ‘family’ through normative genealogical heritage, but rather a return through inheritance shaped by and through queer temporalities (see Freeman, 2010; Halberstam, 2010) and queer praxis.

Once ‘recovered’ from the attic, and transformed into digital format, with detailed descriptions and proper archiving, the data served as the foundation for various activities. These activities included engagement with youth groups and feminist organizations in Manchester, as well as collective reading sessions within the RAD network. The RAD network comprised members from the original WRAP team, the RAD team, and a diverse range of individuals, spanning from PhD students and early career researchers to senior academics and experienced youth work professionals.

This reconnection, in terms of both time and location, bridged communities of identity from the past to the present. Collaborations with organizations like Feminist Webs—a loose collaborative collective, which is reinvigorating feminist youth work in Manchester and the Northwest of England—enabled us to facilitate intergenerational conversations between the young women who spoke

1 ‘The Women, Risk and AIDS Project (WRAP) Collection’ in *Feminist Approaches to Youth Sexuality* available at <https://archives.reanimatingdata.co.uk/s/fays/page/WRAP>.

in 1989 (mediated through the archival text) and those attending youth groups (2018–2020), as well as project-facilitated workshops.

1.2 Feminist ethics, on care and risk

The WRAP dataset stands as an exceptional collection of frank, and intimate interviews conducted with young women aged between 16 and 25 years. Topics include sexual practices, sexual health, sexual orientation, family dynamics, relationships, and experiences in school and work and are situated within the immediate aftermath of the emergence of AIDS. As such, the dataset is inherently ‘risky’, challenging, and often sensitive. It includes stories of women navigating risky situations and of taking risks (sexual or otherwise).

Revisiting these stories involves its own kind of risk, including the prospect that the content (which includes descriptions of sexual pressure and consensual sex) could be triggering, leading to (re)traumatisation. In this regard, working with the WRAP collection posed ethical and technical challenges. As documented in [Thomson et al. \(2024\)](#) *Revisiting young masculinities through a sound art Installation: what really counts?*, the original data were collected in 1990 on the understanding that participant contributions would be anonymous in any publication. In working with this material, we undertook for the new work to keep within the terms of these original consents. We did not attempt to contact original research participants to renegotiate consent, but did operate a takedown policy for the archival and reanimating work—undertaking to remove data on request.

The decision to keep within the terms of the original consent forms, and to not contact original research participants, was informed by a feminist ethics of care. We considered the benefits of speaking with original contributors versus the potential of causing harm. Our deliberations on this process included self-reflection within the context of our own lived experiences: If we had to confront our younger selves, their words, their trauma, their stories, would we relish the experience, or would it conjure memories that have long since stopped haunting? How would it feel to re-live difficult memories with researchers? Would it feel empowering, or would it feel like an extractive process?

The ultimate decision to not contact or seek out original contributors was risky—what if someone recognized their story in the accessible (but anonymised) archive? Of course, longitudinal studies exist but the original research project was not anticipated to be such. From this perspective, we employed a feminist *ethics of risk*; that is, as [Welch \(1990\)](#) articulates, we took ‘responsible action within the limits of bounded power’ and ‘when control is impossible’. Control in this context referring to the digital archive—once something is published online, we have limited control over its recirculation and duplication. We balanced this feminist ethics of risk, with a feminist ethics of care, of taking responsible action to create ‘the conditions of possibility for desired changes’, while taking precautions to mitigate harm to the young women interviewed over 30 years ago. The ‘desired changes’ were not mere publication of the dataset but instead rooted in archival activism and feminist action. Responsible action then included working in partnership with members of the original research team, further anonymising interview transcripts, and implementing a takedown policy. Ultimately, these decisions, informed and led by

responsible action, created the conditions for ‘desired changes’, particularly in relation to the historical canon and archival praxis.

1.3 Feminist archival praxis, on reanimating and language

We know that traditional archival practices are steeped in bias and privilege, resulting in the erasure or marginalization of certain voices (i.e., those that were not white, cis, men) ([Dever, 2019](#)). The experience of women and gender-diverse individuals, therefore, is often missing from the historical record ([Kumbier, 2014](#); [Bly and Wooten 2021](#)). Therefore, the WRAP is a unique dataset in that it challenges the social norms and conventions of what was traditionally deemed as archivable material—WRAP destabilizes traditional power structures and gives authority to voices traditionally undocumented or deemed unimportant—a 16-year old can authorize their lived experience of society, their history is valid, and they possess political agency. Additionally, we wanted to reanimate the original dataset—to free it from being a social science data set with observable patterns, to return agency and autonomy to the individual voices, and to remove the interpretations and assumptions made by researchers. Allowing the data, the stories and narrative, to exist outside of these confines provided new opportunities for active listening. This was especially evident through the University of Manchester’s Women’s Theater Society performances (Feb. 2020), which were a direct response to the WRAP data.

When working with the material, what the young women in the theatre society notice and are moved by are the interview encounters themselves: the communication that took place between a young women (much like them) and a researcher (not much older). The interview questions were bold, much bolder than would be possible or acceptable today. They found the questions problematic and part of the performance shows their irritation. The young women in the Women’s Theatre Society wanted to do justice to the realness of the young women’s accounts. In doing so they created their own monologues, effectively interviewing themselves but in the context of solidarity from others – both in the present and in the past ([Thomson and Scott, 2020](#)).

These reanimations, and reflections, created conversation and dialog across intergenerational lines, which exemplify the power of rematriation.

We understand rematriation as more than a simple act of return. The process—unearthing of physical material, recovery through digitisation and archiving, and reanimating through participatory engagement—requires considerable resources and an ongoing commitment to the material/data and the voices contained therein. Rematriation is a responsibility after the act of return. It is an engagement with feminist archival praxis to reclaim women’s histories—of access not gatekeeping, of maternalistic care not paternalistic protection, of co-creation and knowledge sharing, and of intergenerational dialog. It is ‘desired change’ and represents political power and semblance of control over narrative where previously none existed ([Webb, 2022](#)). This ‘desired change’ is also in terms of how content, data, and histories are archived (where, how, and by whom).

As such, a major undertaking of RAD was developing the catalog for WRAP interviews and writing the metadata (or data about data). The process reinforced the idea, as Sharon Webb (2023) writes, that Metadata descriptions are political. Writing metadata is not a neutral act—it reflects the writer, the politics of the day, and the perceived social and cultural norms of society. It is an interpretative act, which depends on the knowledge, experiences, and outlook of those writing it (Webb, 2022).

Within this context, the team allocated significant time to developing the subject headings for the archival material. We worked collectively to think through the possible nuances of terms and to generate a controlled vocabulary that was both informed by best practice and by a feminist ethics of care. Two particular subject headings (which become user search terms), ‘lesbian’ and ‘sex worker’, serve as case studies. As Webb (2023) documents in ‘Inclusive Data: Metadata and Descriptive Language’,

Up until 2021, the Humanities and Social Science Electronic Thesaurus (HASSET) controlled vocabulary...preferred term for Lesbian was (Female) Homosexual. This is/was problematic for a number of reasons. First, while some embrace the term homosexual, and even find the term affirming, for many homosexual can be offensive....Second, who among the LGBTQ+ community self identifies as a female homosexual? If terms are not used by the community they purport to represent then the power to describe, becomes the power to other, to categorise as less than.

Additionally, ‘female homosexual’ can also be viewed as trans-exclusive and biologically reductionist (Webb, 2022). In this regard, the power to name is also the power to disempower—to remove agency over identity and to render archival objects inaccessible and unfindable. While this term has since changed in HASSET, the project team took the decision (in 2019) not to use their recommended subject heading, and chose instead to use the subject term used by interviewees, as well as the project, and wider, LGBTQIA+ community.

Discussions over the latter term, ‘sex worker’, were prompted by close readings of the interview transcripts. Some interviewees equated the term ‘prostitute’ with simply enjoying sex. This conflation between moral judgment and sexual pleasure or desire, on the one hand, and an individual engaged in consensual and transactional sex posed challenges in terms of fitting within established controlled vocabularies. Of course, in the majority of cases, ‘prostitute’, which is HASSET’s preferred term whose related topics include ‘exploitation’, ‘sexual offences’, and ‘social problems’,² was used to mean ‘sex worker’. As a team, we reviewed this term in its contemporary and historical usage and decided not to use the term ‘prostitute’ since it replicates and perpetuates stigma. Instead, in the archive, we use ‘sex work’ to refer to consensual, transactional sex, and terms such as ‘first sex’,

‘sexual pleasure’, ‘pressure or coercion’ to differentiate between the two usages. These deliberations and decisions over search terms, logged as part of the project’s documentation, exemplify our obligations to archive in an ethically responsible manner. It also shows how the process of creating metadata can produce insight and engagement around the context through which language gains meaning and connects to broader regimes of authority. In future, our metadata reflections may become ‘part of the data’ in the same way that the original WRAP researchers’ questions became part of the data for the WRAP.

2 Conclusion

The process of archiving and reanimating the WRAP data set was not simply technical. The process itself generated knowledge about ethics, archives, and feminist praxis. The significant challenges we faced demanded that we work slowly, carefully, and in partnerships that enabled us to reconnect places, people, past, and present. Our practice can be located as a kind of slow archiving, as conceptualized by Christen and Anderson (2019), who asserts that a slowing down helps us to focus differently, to listen carefully, and act ethically. This slowing down, formulated through an ethics of care and an ethics of risk, produced archival material that speaks to both the past and the present. This process removes the specter of archival ghosts, voices left lingering, by reanimating within contemporary networks and contexts. By navigating the intersection of ethics, rematriation, and language, the RAD project has not only preserved historical records but also breathed new life into them, fostering a dynamic and ethical engagement with the past.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this study can be found in online repositories. The names of the repository/repositories and accession number(s) can be found at: https://sussex.figshare.com/Re-animating_Data.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Social Sciences & Arts C-REC, University of Sussex. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

SW: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. RT: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NM: Writing – original draft.

² <https://web.archive.org/web/20231128130811/ukdataservice.ac.uk/hasset/en/page/50e41d71-0af3-4aec-be61-3dfcb33c75dd>

<https://hasset>.

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