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Fugitive Archives

Black Women, Domestic Repositories, and Hoarding as Informal Archival Practice

K.T. EWING

Sometimes a break is a beginning. A burst pipe in my aunt's home, a wondrous menagerie of vintage and antique furniture, set me on a journey toward rediscovering my paternal grandmother's lost yet lovingly protected collections. Alongside the literal flood came waves of memorabilia. The broken pipe nudged my aunt to uncover possessions she'd long hidden from the light and to discover treasures buried deeper than her knowledge of the house's secrets. What we discovered in the process of restoring my aunt's boxed belongings was an informal archive curated by her mother, a woman who is no longer alive to help us properly categorize it in its newly reshuffled state. The journey from cleaning up my aunt's home to preserving my grandmother's collections is one that highlights the importance of treating the domestic repositories in our communities with curiosity and care.

Since the widespread popularity of Niecy Nash's television show *Clean House* in 2003, cable networks have capitalized on the country's fascination with judging people's interior lives by gawking at their domestic spaces. For example, shows like TLC's *Hoarders* give viewers a glimpse into the clutter and chaos of seemingly ordinary homes. Though these programs give a scant nod to the trauma that often precedes and causes an emergence of hoarding, what is most often lost is a sense of how some hoarders have created informal archives within their homes. The insistence that they divest themselves of old belongings tends to obscure the rich histories hidden within layers of clutter.

A&E's *Storage Wars* is another show that satisfies audiences' voyeuristic desire to witness what happens when people accumulate too many things and lack sufficient spaces to contain them. The idea that one person's trash is another's treasure is a fraught truism for people whose treasured collections are considered trash by others. Likewise, the fascination with sparking joy through minimalism, aside from the unacceptably racist responses to Mari Kondo, revealed another level of the country's obsession with the fruits of America's relationship with capitalism and excessive accumulation. However, if we reconfigure the idea of hoarding in American society through a racial lens, then we must account for the many Black people who have relatively less space, including the size of their homes, number of properties, museum collections, and formal archives. Do the same rules of excess apply to communities that have historically been compelled to make do with less?[1]

When viewed from the inside, rather than through a pseudo-psychological reality television gaze, what we consider hoarding tendencies can reveal something more complex about how life is documented and remembered, especially for Black people. As a child, I was amazed by the staggering number of things cluttering the tables and lining the walls of my aunt's home. I unknowingly grew up in the shadows of collections

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ranging from pristine *Ebony* magazines to priceless family heirlooms. Unburdened by the weight of that knowledge, I darted through mountains of t-shirts and jumped from one precarious paper pile to the next without pausing to consider the weight beneath my nimble feet. What I thought was a funhouse was actually a series of collections with roots as deep as the Jazz Age.

Esther Jackson Ewing, the woman I was told my brother and cousins called Oma, was born in Alabama and relocated to Nashville, Tennessee after graduating from Sheffield Colored High School in 1927. She continued her education at Tennessee A&I State College (now Tennessee State University) where she earned her Bachelor's and Master's degrees. She taught Arts and Crafts, Home Economics, and Special Education at the Tennessee School for the Blind where her youngest daughter, Zelma, would follow in her footsteps to teach Math, Physical Education, and Special Education. Zelma, or Aunt Duchess, as we call her, inherited her mother's penchant for collecting items along with their shared love of teaching. Among the prized items I found during the cleanup is an old photo album and a windbreaker Aunt Duchess acquired when taking a team of swimmers to the Special Olympics in the 1980s. She never told me until that summer. I would have never known this part of her history if the pipe had not broken and opened doors to new conversations.

What follows is a qualitative exploration of home archives in Black communities through an intimate case study of an atypical collection, one that might otherwise be mislabeled a double hoard, across two generations. Framing Black women's collections—organized and disorganized—as hoards suffers from an inability to render them legible beyond a gaze that sees them as inherently problematic. Though often perceived as hoarding, these may sometimes be cases of fugitive archival practice. Black women born during the Silent Generation and the Baby Boom are disproportionately prone to hoarding because of their experiences with racism, erasure from public records, and difficulties with home ownership. An analysis of these Black women's collections spanning from the 1920s to the mid 1990s uses the idea of fugitive archiving as a literal and figurative attempt to document the present and prevent an erasure of the past. It considers the challenges and possibilities of navigating a home archive by approaching Black women's substantial domestic collections as treasures instead of problems.

My understanding of the significance of these collections is shaped by the research and public-facing work of archival studies scholars. However, I am guilty of embracing the linguistic turn toward using the term "archive" for collections that trained archivists might not consider deserving of the title.[2] My usage primarily serves to highlight a historical significance and emotional preciousness that may help preserve important familial items that are often discarded or destroyed. In personal conversations, I refer to domestic collections as archives so that the people I love might begin to see their relatives' items anew. In conversations with other scholars, particularly trained archivists, I am more likely to call them collections or informal archives. In this essay I blend the two in ways that mirror the blurred lines of this personal and professional endeavor.

I offer this shifting terminology, not to diminish the serious work and rigorous methodology of professional archivists, but to urge us all to regard our familial collections with a similar regard that we do publicly recognized archives. In response to N.D.B. Connolly's reflection on what is considered an archive, I have taken liberties.[3] But valuing Black life at times demands that we take liberties or accept many figurative deaths. Likewise, the fraught intersection of racial and gender politics determines how we locate the past. My training as a historian equipped me with the tools to begin a preliminary processing of Oma's treasures, but I immediately turned to Ashley Bouknight-Claybrooks, my friend and professionally trained archivist, for assistance with what I knew was a significant undertaking. After expressing her absolute horror at how I had stored fragile items in repurposed cardboard delivery boxes, she immediately showed me how to properly sort and preserve the magazines, letters, and other personal objects dating as far back as the New Negro Movement. Bouknight-Claybrooks taught me a great deal about formal archives and gently revealed the limits of my own training as a historian. The conversations we shared while hunched over my grandmother's belongings were a lesson in archival methodology and a reminder of the obstacles we have faced as Black women scholars seeking to expand representations of ourselves and our foremothers.

Writing about my family at times feels like a personal rather than professional endeavor. I have worked to dislodge this false dichotomy from my understanding of my place in academia. With all due respect to the discipline, as a Black historian, I do not often feel inclined to observe rules that were meant to exclude us. Working within the robust interdisciplinary tradition of Black Studies allows me to grow as a scholar and disregard the illusion of separating professional research from its personal origins. My responsibility as a Black scholar is to respectfully merge scholarly rigor with community wisdom when my research comes back home to intimate spaces serving as grounds for exploring who we were, who we are, and who we can be.

We owe a major debt to Black women archivists and archival scholars, those who work in predominantly white spaces like plantations and those who work in Africana-centered spaces like the National Museum for African American Music. We owe those who curate new digital archives made possible by expansions in our online worlds and bring us closer to a future that is rich with spaces focused on Black lives. Archivists, scholars, and ancestral memory keepers like Camille Bethune-Brown, Aleia Brown, Renata Cherlise, Zakiya Collier, Marisa Fuentes, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Jessica Marie Johnson, Krü Maekdo, Sangodare (Julia Roxanne Wallace), and Tonia Sutherland have ushered in new worlds of possibility for Black memories and futures. These women bring specific skills to the proverbial kitchen table and remind us of the richness before us, when we have the wisdom to look with different lenses. From these women, I have learned to be a kitchen table archivist, at best.

Finding

My favorite scene in any episode of *Clean House* is always the slowly opening front

door of the hoarder's home. The dramatic music wraps perfectly around the unfolding scene as viewers are invited into the clutter and chaos of a person's hoard. It feels like the excitement that ran through my body as a child when the wooden interior door opened and we saw Aunt Duchess smiling at us on the other side of the iron security door. The sturdy black linoleum in the foyer looked like poured lava to my young eyes and still seems exotic to me now, an invitation to adventure. I could see a glimpse of the fun behind and on both sides of her petite, athletic body. Her youthful grin matched my childish joy marveling at all of her things as we entered and caught a familiar whiff of her home. It always smelled the same, like aged wood, citrus oil polished floors, and re-upholstered furniture.

After exchanging hugs and being appropriately fawned over, my brother and I were free to run and explore the house that Oma designed. The only rule was that we go slowly and hold the rail when we descended the steep, narrow staircase into the basement and garage. It smelled of wood, damp earth, insulation, and old paper. With house cats swirling around our ankles, we looked up at the looming piles of boxes, bags, suitcases, furniture, softballs, metallic bats, lawn mowers, vehicles in some sort of disrepair or another, and mountains of papers. Game on. There was nothing like playing hide-and-seek in that basement, oblivious to the treasures in our midst.

A long corridor runs the length of this ranch-style house. At night, the hallway is a frightening thing, a thick gauntlet of memory. I used to imagine it populated with ancestral ghosts, and sometimes I still do. But a haunting does not have to be frightening. As I have grown older, I see it as an invitation to confront my fear of the unknown. There is a closet at the end of that hallway. For the first time in my life, I entered this no man's land that I only discovered was a pass-through after the flood. In that moment, I understood how my brother evaded me during our games of hide-and-seek. Aunt Duchess laughed as I literally stooped to crawl through a space that connected the public and private areas of her home. More than anything, that crossing was a literal passage from my childhood fear of the unknown to an inheritance of my grandmother's interior life.

My father's family is very invested in its paternal side. Consequently, as a child, I had not thought deeply about Oma's family. Moving to Nashville and spending time with my aunt provided an opening for discovery nudged wider by the burst pipe. This minor flood ushered me into newly packed boxes of unexplored items and pushed me deeper into crevices of the home I had never closely considered before then. I spent the next few months immersed in her homemade dresses, store-bought hats, and colorful yet sensible shoes. I marveled at how carefully she stored her unused fabrics, sewing patterns, and collections of yarn for the oversized loom that remained in the guest room my entire childhood. Most of all, I was in awe of her hats. She had a collection to rival my mother's, and I will always love the way Black women turn hats into crowns. In these moments, Oma was regal to me. She was as striking as the cobalt blue Evening in Paris bottles she kept in their original box and as delicate as her white silk gloves.

As an adult, I see the home and these collections differently. I began my journey through Oma's possessions on a white cloth covered coffee table in a small, South Nashville apartment. I have continued that process on Oma's clawfoot table inside of a home I bought within walking distance of her house. Working at her table in my kitchen grounds me in the reality of the professional and personal nature of my work as a Black historian. It is where I sift through the paradox of arriving to the city during a period of rampant gentrification in order to come home to a neighborhood where I never lived but is nonetheless a kind of birthright. My neighbors' acceptance of my presence rested in part on my physical appearance but also on the fact that I had come to be with my father as he transitions into his senior years in his hometown. His blood became my tie. I had come to maintain a legacy, not disrupt an intimate community where people still hold conversations while leaning across shared fences and invite each other to hot chicken summer block parties. Nevertheless, things are changing.

In the early 1970s, in the wake of Interstate 40 crashing through North Nashville's historic Black community, Esther J. Ewing moved into a new home minutes away from her former residence in what is now a commercial and medical district.[4] Though her house was not directly impacted by the new thoroughfare, she was unable to save her home from the wave of urban renewal that was slicing across the city and the nation. The home she unwillingly abandoned was eventually torn down and replaced by a medical office parking lot. Her choice to relocate to Bordeaux makes sense within the context of what she witnessed happening to North Nashville, which would have otherwise been a slightly closer option to the neighborhood she had to leave. The once thriving district running along Jefferson Street's Black neighborhoods began a slow hemorrhaging that continues to this day. The North Nashville Heritage Project, a digital archive curated by TSU historian Learotha Williams Jr., chronicles the neighborhood's past in an attempt to protect its future, because the Nashville I moved to is still reeling from gentrification's opening shots.[5] Its most vulnerable neighborhoods still have not fully absorbed or recovered from the initial shocks of this continual exploitation. It has yet to fully contend with the violent displacement of people who once blossomed there and have been viciously uprooted. It has no apology for residents whose parents called North Nashville and its surrounding neighborhoods home and now find themselves in Smyrna and Clarksville, while transplants from other cities inhabit tall-and-skinnies next door to crumbling homes along 28th Avenue.[6]

Oma made a wise decision when she put down new roots. It would be the first home she purchased in the wake of her husband's untimely passing. Given her advanced age at the time, she also understood it to be her final residence. She was choosing a place that would serve as her home and a new site to house her precious collections. Her decision fifty years ago would eventually position Aunt Duchess as both an incidental and intentional archivist of her belongings. It is now a family home, heir property in the wake of her passing, but my aunt has been its primary resident and remained solely

responsible for its care and upkeep. My aunt's process of protecting her mother's collections while accumulating her own possessions is at the heart of how I understand fugitive archival practices.

I imagine the journey through my aunt's home as a rediscovery, because my entry points were familiar objects from my childhood. For example, I have always thought of popsicle sticks as the beginning of something new as opposed to the end of a sweet journey. Aunt Duchess' home has a few hexagonal baskets made entirely from popsicle sticks and glue. They fascinated me. I turned the wooden containers over in my small fingers and marveled at the crisscross of the light wood. In childish awe, I wondered how many popsicles Oma had to eat before she had enough sticks to make the baskets. It had not dawned on me that each stick was as clean as the day she unboxed them and imagined their new configurations.

With the expansive creativity of a child, I conjured new ways of playing games with Oma's baskets. This contrasted with the long summers I spent in Mississippi under the care of my maternal grandmother. We used to play Mother May I, a low stakes game for our aging matriarch and one of our favorite ways of passing the time together. Oma's passing when I was only six weeks old precluded any possibility of similarly bonding with her. Instead, her belongings became proxy for the paternal grandmother I never knew. I pretended permission and used her baskets to collect other odds and ends around the house, delivering them to fictitious locations and imagining that she enjoyed our game. Where I could not touch her, I held the remnants of her creativity and bridged the temporal gaps between us. My family believed I was only playing in my aunt's hoard. But I was conjuring memories I had been denied an opportunity to authentically create.

Filing

Most writers have a thing for desks, and I was thrilled to learn that Oma had a dark, hardwood desk that now serves as my aunt's folding table. I had never known it was there as a child, because it hid behind a wall of clothing in another large closet. Inside this desk, I found the keys to unlocking Oma's archival process. I also found a gift that I can only view as affirmation of my decision to move "back" home. Her 1931 edition of *Ayeni*, TSU's yearbook, sat in the bottom of those drawers, waiting to invite me home, not only to my grandmother's interior life, but also to the institution that has educated both sides of my family. Coming to TSU as an educator has helped me begin a long overdue relationship with the maternal side of my paternal line, one that may not have happened without the broken pipe and my aunt's generous flood of memories.

Though Oma had a filing system, I did not initially understand it. I am still slowly making sense of what has always made sense to her. What I discovered tucked into her desk drawers seemed haphazard until I began to recognize patterns. I found the unexpected while what I desired continued to elude me in an endless game of hide-and-seek with my ancestral grandmother. After a while, I learned to silence my formal training and let my inner child lead. With this one decision, Oma's world opened to me like all the

birthday presents she never had a chance to give. As I appreciated one gift, I was rewarded with another. And another. This is how her collections unfolded before me, and, as a historian, I am grateful for the tools to contextualize, analyze, and preserve these gifts.

Exploring Oma's desk, untouched since her passing, taught me that she had been intentional in how she stored her collections. This process transformed her archive from fugitivity to recovery. My favorite example is a blue, green, and red box of Johnston Candies and Chocolate nestled toward the back of a bottom drawer. Though I childishly hoped to find stale sweets inside, I was still delighted to instead see the sharp swirl of her sister Hazel's cursive writing on letters addressed to my great-grandmother Zora. These letters are a migration story helping me trace their lineage from Alabama to Tennessee and on to the Midwest.

Kim F. Hall likens reading archival letters to eavesdropping on conversations.[7] For me, reading the letters between Great-grandma Zora and her daughters Hazel and Esther feels like I am being invited into a conversation that is my birthright, like I am finally being allowed to listen in on grown folks' business right there at the kitchen table that was the heart of so many Black women's interior lives. In a way, I am their business, and what is happening to Black Nashville today is also their concern. Gentrification is an erasure of their built environments, and collections like Oma's are integral to our ability to preserve the remnants.

Oma's precious items were buried in a tomb of her daughter's grief and the perpetual mandate that Black women push through their emotions to face another day in a world that never stops for them. My aunt, a woman who had dedicated years of her life to caring for her mother, was not allowed sufficient time to care for herself or do the healing work of reminiscing. After Oma came Aunt Hazel, who carried with her the same temperament she used to survive a shootout with a robber at her Chicago shoe store. Aunt Hazel's time residing in her deceased sister's home was short-lived, but I remember her visits. I clearly recall Aunt Hazel's face and the way she curiously regarded her sister's youngest grandchild, but I was too young to remember any conversations we had. I was also too young to know that she, like Oma, had a tendency to hoard.

I do not know how Oma felt about her sister's gunfight, only that she regarded it as important enough to preserve. Aunt Duchess remembered being told the story, but she did not know the clipping was part of her mother's archive. She filled in the gaps left by the newspaper and brought Aunt Hazel, her shop, and her close relationship to Oma to life in a way I would have never experienced if Oma had not saved that piece of history. A living repository of memories long scattered across familial gravesites, Aunt Duchess is a vibrant, irreplaceable link to the maternal side of my paternal bloodline. She is our memory keeper, an ancestral emerald mine.

In addition to protecting Oma's collections, Aunt Duchess is also a fastidious record keeper. She insists on having two physical copies of every document, including ones she produces herself: two receipts, two invoices, two church programs, even two t-shirts from community events. By keeping two of everything, Aunt Duchess attempts to

prevent loss and erasure of important records alongside inconsequential store receipts. In doing so, she has cultivated a lifelong practice of ensuring that more consequential artifacts remained preserved. In fairness to my frustrated family, the house can feel overwhelming at times. However, she is the only one with the right to determine when, where, and how we enter a space that she has lovingly preserved. Heir property is not inherently home unless someone makes it so. That someone is her, and she elevated that property to an informal archive by sorting, filing, and sometimes hiding important items to ensure their protection. In these collections, we lovingly uncovered memories, forgotten treasures here and there, so common as to have become invisible. This nontraditional, fugitive archive is her home, and we should treat it with the care that it deserves as a private residence and a monument to our maternal ancestor.

What if we honored the memory keepers labeled as hoarders? When I pay attention, when I pause to regard the home through my aunt's playful and loving eyes, I see that her filing system is more sophisticated than it appears on the surface. Her paper piles are not haphazard. Her records are intentionally, if not carefully stored. They are sorted according to a categorization that makes perfect sense in her mind, and her mind is the one that matters. As we sift through her collections together, I appreciate what she reveals and respect what she chooses to withhold.

Over the years, Aunt Duchess has asserted her autonomy through a refusal to let go of her possessions and insisting that certain records and objects are important, not a hoard, and may be needed in the future. As imperious as her name and as generous as the faith she lives by, Aunt Duchess guides me through her collections with joy and patience. I sense the well-deserved pride she feels in finally being appreciated for what she has accomplished through sheer determination and a refusal to be shamed by how others have viewed her home. Whenever I ask, "Aunt Duchess, can you tell me …" she lights up, as if she has been waiting for someone to ask the question, any question, to open the doors to her memory. That summer my questions flowed like water. She closed her eyes as if floating, and I could see her time traveling. Zora, Charlie, Hazel, Esther … She conjured our ancestors one-by-one, and they came alive in the house where Oma collected and protected what she could of their ephemera.

Fugitivity

By all accounts, Oma had a beautiful voice. That summer Aunt Duchess gifted me two vinyl records: *First Baptist Sings* and *First Baptist Sings Again*. Oma's name is on the back of each, listed in the soprano section. When I place the needle in the grooves, I hear her and I don't hear her. I know I do, but I don't know when I'm hearing her. This search for evidence within evidence guides my exploration of her collections. I hug the albums to my chest, but she is not in there. She is not in the Victrola airwaves, no matter how hard I strain to hear her. She is everywhere and nowhere, and this is why imagination is necessary to fill the gaps. What if we were permitted to dream beyond the boundaries of disciplines and even

interdisciplinary methodologies? What if we could just dream before disciplining those yearnings back into something that can be distilled as formal knowledge production? I know I cannot hear her. But I do hear her in that place where possibility intersects reality. This is the legacy of a fugitive archive curated by an intensely private woman and her equally protective daughter.

As of now, the neighborhood Oma chose is still resisting encroachment from developers, but long-time residents can see change gnawing at the edges of their tightly knit community and threatening to undo what their parents and grandparents built. Gentrification is coming, and this has consistently meant displacement of people without the structural and financial power to win the end game. This means that, ultimately, Black Nashville loses parts of itself that it cannot recover. This means that, as always, Black communities are racing against the clock to find, collect, archive, and preserve what they can of their personal effects and built environments. As Syreeta Gates, archivist and founder of The Gates Preserve, reminds us, "archiving is a statement of value" and a means of protecting our narratives.[8] One way this is happening is via digital albums in online spaces from personal Instagram accounts to professionally curated websites like the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's Web Archive Collections. Although individuals have less control over whether or not their personal Instagram pages last than trained archivists and generously funded institutions have over their digital presence, both of these types of sites are important grounds for resisting the erasure of Black community histories.

When we treat our families' personal collections with the same historical reverence that we regard formal archives, we can better see the connections between our collective memories, how they are officially recognized and protected, and the many ways that they are not. Every time I touch my grandmother's collections, I am reminded of how much and how little Black women have to inherit and pass down in this country. In those moments, I fear losing what I never knew I had. So I balance the poverty of her absence with the abundance of my creativity. This is a conjuring. There is magic in reclamation and possibility inherent in the power of preserving our archives, including the fugitive ones dismissed as hoards.

I have become a maternal memory keeper on my paternal side. Aunt Duchess' willingness to let me remove Oma's items from her house is rooted in a faith that I will not destroy, disrespect, or discard anything. In this way, she moves her mother's legacy from one kind of protection to another. This responsibility invites me to contend with categories in my personal life in ways I had not considered. It merges my roles as granddaughter, daughter, niece, and trained historian. It pushes me to think about lineage. What does it mean for a daughter who has no daughters to pass down a maternal collection to her brother's daughter who has no daughters? I don't have an answer. At present, I only have questions, tools, and dreams.

There are two versions of Oma in my mind: who she was and who she might have been. Fortunately, her preserved collections are an invitation to witness my past and see traces of futures she imagined. As her youngest

grandchild, I am more fanciful in my conjuring than I may have been without this familial tie. Sometimes, when I brush my teeth before bed, I search my face for hers. Sometimes she smiles back.

Notes

1. It is important to differentiate between individuals who meet the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* diagnostic criteria for hoarding disorder and those who exhibit some signs but do not meet the diagnostic threshold. Doing otherwise can unintentionally lend itself toward ableism, stereotyping, and other forms of marginalization. Please consult with a mental health care professional if you or someone you love is concerned about hoarding disorder. For diagnostic criteria, see American Psychiatric Association, "Hoarding Disorder," in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 247–51.

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