

# Dismantling Oppressive Power Structures in the Archive

Questioning the role of the record creator in official documentation of communities of color:

Practical approaches to creating a more just and accurate archive

The power inherent in the archive can be used to maintain or to dismantle oppressive power structures that impact the documentary heritage of communities of color. As archival institutions seek to avoid complicity, we look for new ways to use traditional archival concepts and non-traditional tools like web archiving and



promotion of self-documentation to create a more just and socially responsible archive for all.

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**Problem:** When examining the documentary heritage of communities of color & historically oppressed peoples, we often find the documentation that survives in the archive are the records created by the powerful, by government agencies & institutions that attempt to silence & control communities of color. The creators of these records are in positions of power, acting under the authority of an oppressive power structure. Today, there's still a "structural pull in all our record-making" towards the protection of these structures. Manipulated, inaccurate, falsified, coerced and incomplete government records that live on in the archive, damage the documentary heritage of communities of color by misrepresenting their past and threatening their future. For archivists working in government funded institutions, it can be challenging to find ways to put the call for a more just archive into practice. Here, I apply a series of questions to two case studies & present a few practical approaches to this challenge.

## The Dawes Rolls of the Muscogee (Creek) People

The Dawes Act of 1887 broke tribal land into individual allotments. US Government appointed the Dawes Commission to take roll of Creeks living on to-be allotted land. Un-allotted land was opened to white settlers. The Dawes Commission



rejected rolls created by Creeks. With federal authority they created their own standards, using "non-tribal ideas of belonging" to determine citizenship, one of them being a satisfactory level of competency. In addition, mixed ancestry and inter-tribal relations



existed generations prior to enrollment, making their authority to determine "Indian blood" problematic. Today, having a direct ancestor on the rolls is required for tribal membership.

Roll No.	NAME	SEX	AGE	ETHNICITY	STATUS	PROPERTY	REMARKS
4372	Baker, James	M	21	Indian	Head of Family	1/2 Acre	Wife, Mary, 18
4373	Harmon, Robert	M	21	Indian	Head of Family	1/2 Acre	Wife, Mary, 18
4374	Waller, George	M	21	Indian	Head of Family	1/2 Acre	Wife, Mary, 18
4375	Waller, George	M	21	Indian	Head of Family	1/2 Acre	Wife, Mary, 18
4376	Waller, George	M	21	Indian	Head of Family	1/2 Acre	Wife, Mary, 18

**Two Case Studies:** Below is comparison of two instances in which the record creator, operating under the authority of an oppressive power structure, impacted the documentary heritage of a community of color.

### Questioning the role of the record creator

- About whom was this record created?
- Who created it?
- For what purpose was this record created or what activity resulted in the record?
- Who benefits from its preservation?

Questioning the official record helps us identify gaps in the archive & identify post-custodial work that can create a more accurate & just archive

### Practical Approaches

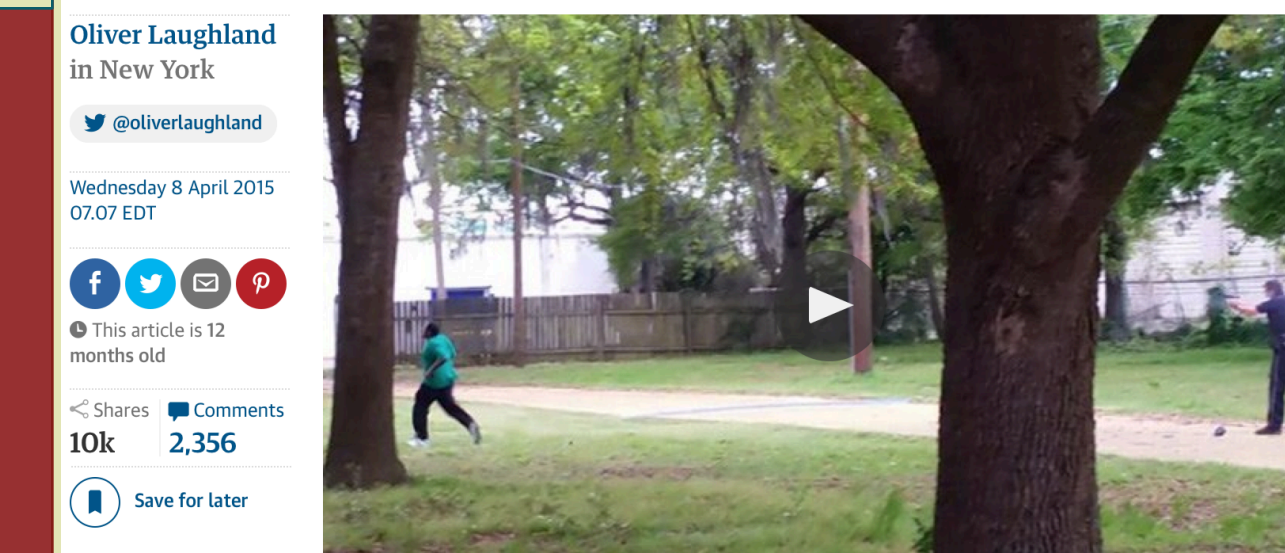
Citations & additional resources:



## Fatal Encounters with Police in the Black Community

South Carolina officer charged with murder after shooting man in the back

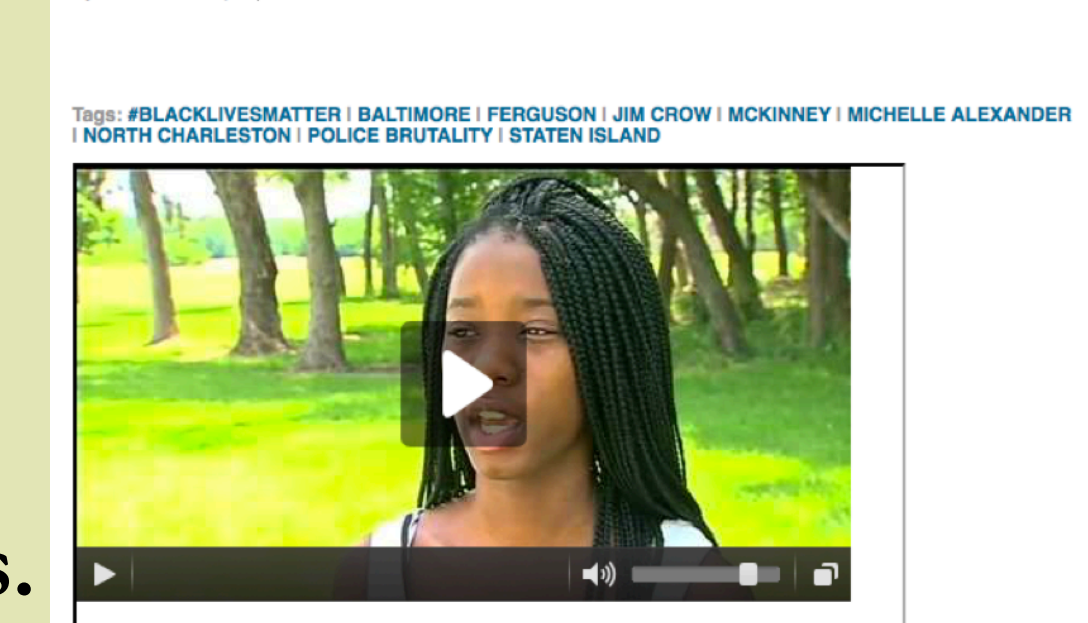
Video shows white police officer Michael Slager shooting 50-year-old black man Walter Scott in the back at least eight times as he ran away  
Warning: video contains graphic footage



Official police records documenting fatal force used against African Americans are created by the officer in a position of authority, about their use of force against a member of a community of color. The power structure under which these

records are created is problematic & present officers opportunities to abuse their role as record creator when documenting these encounters. The 2015 murder of Walter Scott by S.C. Officer Michael Slager exemplifies the importance of community created records. His police report claimed a struggle with his Taser & fear for his life. But, bystander footage shows Slager fired from nearly 20 ft. behind Scott. Slager was charged with murder and fired. Without video, it is likely the falsified

The number of times African-Americans were brutalized by police this year? Unknown.



official record would not have been questioned and Slager exonerated. The Counted project by the Guardian takes community created documentation & attempts to determine the number of citizens fatally

We exist in a tradition of erased histories. Twitter has helped us tell our own story. We are all standing in history & making it. Protest.

wounded by police in the US. Why is this project necessary? Because, accurately documenting these fatalities can help dismantle the oppressive power structure under which they are justified. Archival institutions can make a difference



in the fight for social justice.

There is no section of the finding aid for what was left out. Maybe there should be... #derail2016 @littlegoldenage

- **Add to finding aids:** Include answers from the questions posed above to the finding aid/metadata. Point out what may be missing & if community created documentation exists elsewhere...
- **Cross-reference:** informing patrons of what may be missing & non-traditional places they might find other relevant collections.
- **Promote self-documentation:** Might not have staff to train communities, but lists of resources like WITNESS.org can go a long way. WITNESS empowers communities by teaching safe, ethical filming & advocacy techniques.
- **Partnerships:** Archive-It can help institutions harvest, build and preserve collections of digital content created in their communities. Documenting the Now, a new project in the works, will facilitate the "collection, analysis and preservation of Twitter and the Web resources they reference" & create a dialogue about the ethical use of social media content in the archive.

# Citations and Additional Resources

## Images from poster and related readings

1. “Indian Land for Sale” from Indian Country Today Media Network: <http://tinyurl.com/zxyqe9p>
2. “Creek Tribal Rolls” from NARA/Oklahoma Historical Society: <http://tinyurl.com/hkvovld>
3. “Creek Men” from Smithsonian Institute: <http://tinyurl.com/zz6tffo>
4. Screen shot of article from The Guardian about murder of Walter Scott: <http://tinyurl.com/luc22nk>
5. Screen shot of article from Reuters about police brutality: <http://tinyurl.com/hl85lqr>
6. Tweets from activist DeRay McKesson: <http://tinyurl.com/j85rag8>
7. LIS Ed Forum @derailforum (Diversity, Equity, Race, Accessibility and Identity in LIS) 2016 Conference Tweets: <http://tinyurl.com/hzkqagz>

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