Ep 18 - Public History with Krista McCracken - Transcript

AJ: Allison Jones

KN: Karen Ng

KM: Krista McCracken

KN: Welcome to the Organizing Ideas Podcast. I'm Karen.

AJ: And I'm Allison and we are two new librarians/archivists and your hosts for this podcast.

KN: Together, we're taking a closer look at the relationships between organizing information and community organizing, how libraries and archives are never neutral, and what we mean when we say that knowledge is power. We are recording today on the unceded and ancestral territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.

AJ: Today, we're talking to Krista McCracken, who is the Archives Supervisor at Algoma University's Arthur A. Wishart Library and Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre, in Baawating (Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario) on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe and Métis people.

We were first introduced to Krista's work way back in our archival core courses, when we read their piece "Community Archival Practice: Indigenous Grassroots Collaboration at the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre."

Krista's training is in public history, and they are an editor for Activehistory.ca, the host of the podcast Historical Reminiscents, a board member for the National Council on Public History, and a member of the Steering Committee on Canada's Archives – Response to the Report on the Truth and Reconciliation Task Force.

We're so grateful that Krista made the time to talk to us today about their work!

[Intro jingle]

AJ: Let's get started. Welcome, Krista, to Organizing Ideas! There are so many things we want to talk to you about, but before dive into all the different kinds of projects and work that you do, can you tell us a bit about how you ended up working in archives and what drew you to this work, or what draws you to this kind of work?

KM: Yeah! I kind of like to say that I ended up as an archivist accidentally. I went into public history and really thought I was going to end up in a museum. And I've been working in the same archival space for about ten years now, so firmly identify as both a archivist and a public historian. But really what draws me to this work is a desire to help community, to really focus on access to historical information, and really what motivates me day-to-day is seeing

the connections that people interacting with the past, and documentary heritage can really bring and just how powerful that can be.

KN: What is public history?

KM: Yeah! That is a good question and every public historian you ask will probably have a different answer. And I'd say it is a term that actually has much more popularity in the United States than in Canada, but it essentially is history that is outside of the classroom. It's history that is responsive. It's accessible to the public. It's often reflecting on current events. It's community-oriented in many ways. In my mind, kind of the main tenet of my practice is it's history that's accessible to the general public and to the community. That being said, a lot of public historians work in a whole range of places, including archives, and some work in museums, some work for the government, some work in heritage sites, so you can find a public historian in anywhere there's history. I'd also say that, you know, public historian training often includes parts of archival studies training and parts of museum studies training. It's a little bit of both.

AJ: Do you notice frictions between the way that you were trained and the way that archivists you work with who did a more "Archival Studies" kind of degree or program think about things? Or approach work?

KM: Ummm. There might be different approaches. I think part of it is learning to make sure that you're speaking the same language. Often you both want the same thing but you might be using a different word to describe it. I think there's more tension in the archival field, in my approach to how I handle archives, in a community-oriented way that might be from my public history training. But that also might be because I work in a community archives. So it's hard to say if that tension is actually from public history or if it's from the community focus.

AJ: Yeah. A thing that's come up a few times on the podcast from our own experiences and people that we've talked to is that, at least at UBC where we both studied, the archival studies program doesn't focus very much on community archives and so the training doesn't feel like it prepares people particularly well for working in that context, but it sounds like a public history degree is maybe more focused on that as one among many settings.

KM: Yeah, I think there's definitely skills in a public history degree that lend themselves very well to community archives because the focus is often on working with community stakeholders, and that's something that's directly transferable to a community archives setting. Which you sometimes don't get in an archival studies program. You might get the theory behind it, but actually being amongst and working with community is different from what you might read in a book.

KN: So then maybe in relation to archives, how is that, what are maybe some of the major differences between public history, archives, how do we define archives then?

KM: Yeah, that's a big question.

KN: I'm also curious, maybe what did you think archives are, what are they supposed to do?

KM: Yeah, and I think that was one of the things when I went into public history that maybe that's why I thought that I'd end up in a museum, because archives seemed like this very nebulous thing. I'd been to an archive once in undergrad, and it was okay. But it wasn't something that got me super excited. Whereas I volunteered at a museum and, you know, getting to work with the collection, and working with another group of volunteers was really enjoyable. And I guess I didn't expect that to be replicated in an archive. But I think there are certain parts of both of those experiences that are very similar. This idea of making the past accessible to the public is often a tenant of both public history and archives. Likewise, preserving the past is part of that. I think there's often just different approaches to how that is done. And so a lot of my work as someone who sits kind of at the intersection of archival studies and public history is kind of thinking of ways that I can bring things from the archives out of the archives, be that through exhibitions, through digitization, or a lot of, people dropping in and how can I make the archive accessible to them in a different way.

AJ: Yeah, you also do a lot of really public-facing work in terms of making, it seems to me, accessible your process. How you actually do your work, not just the records or materials that live in the archives where you work. You've got your blog, your podcast, and all this kind of different public-facing stuff, social media. What inspired you to share the work that you do, that kind of behind-the-scenes look?

KM: So, initially the blog was actually a class project and I never let it die. So that's, it's been in existence since about 2009. Which is kind of scary that it's been going that long. I think a lot of the motivation is, though, that because archival work often happens behind the scenes it tends to get minimized. And people don't value labour they can't see quite often. So I think there is a lot to be said for saying, "This is what I'm doing. It is valuable because of this." Also, I think, for me, sharing process, either writing it down or speaking about it, it actually helps me get through some problems I might be trying to sort out, or if I'm working on an idea I might write a blog post that might later end up as a more formally written thing. But the blog helps me sort those ideas out in their early stages.

AJ: I found that with the podcast too, people will come and talk to me about a thing and I'm like, oh yeah, it's so weird someone listened to this but we have a really nice conversation about some topic that otherwise, how would they have ever known that's what we were thinking about or,

KN: Yeah. What kind of responses do you usually get to your blog and podcast?

KM: The podcast tends to be people who I would never expect listen to it listen to it, which is kind of fun. Likewise, the blog some people it's occasionally like, "Oh, I read your blog." I'd say my work with ActiveHistory.ca that tends to be the one that I get more responses from. It has a higher readership. Also, that blog really reaches more academic historians, which aren't folks that I would necessarily interact with on a daily basis, so when I'm, you know, out at a conference or at a larger industry event, making those connections the blog has really facilitated that in ways that I had never foreseen.

KN: Cool. I find, even reading academic articles when they talk about the process of, like, I went to the library or the archives to look for this thing and then it turned out it didn't go the

way they planned and then there's the rest of the research article, that's really interesting for me to read, you know, as a reader, but also as a student learning how to do research, it's also very helpful to know that you don't just go to the library and then everything works out. It's great to know and to have in such a public, official way how things get done.

KM: I would totally agree. There's something to be said for sharing failure because we learn from failure. But also, everybody experiences failure and we don't talk about it a lot. I think sharing that on social media or a blog can be a way to build community that's hopefully supportive of each other.

AJ: Do you have advice for us, as new podcasters?

[laughter]

KM: I'd say my biggest thing is to have fun. My podcast is very much, it's a work of joy. I do it as a hobby, and, uh, so I found the first year I heavily scheduled and had a new episode almost every week. And then I was like, I am getting exhausted, I need to scale this back. And so now, it's not as rigid and that works for me. But I think it's finding the groove that works for you, and enjoy it.

AJ: Fair enough. We were just talking about, are we going to burn ourselves out doing an episode every week. But, we'll find out.

KN: We'll see.

KM: There's two of you, so you know you can split the work.

AJ: And that's part of why we decided to do this together, a fun chance to hang out, talk about stuff

KN: We've done a lot of group projects together, so I think we know how each other work and

[laughter]

KM: That's awesome.

[11:50]

[musical interlude]

AJ: So do you want to tell us a bit about your day job? What do you do at Algoma University in the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre?

KM: Yeah, so I am the Archivist as well as the Researcher and Curator for the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre. So Algoma University is one of the only universities located in a former residential school building. And the centre that I work in was really founded by the residential school survivor community as a way to make sure that their experiences were being told and preserved. The Shingwauk Residential School operated on the site in Sault Ste. Marie until 1970, and Algoma moved in in 1971. So less than six months after the residential school had closed, there was then a university in that space. But really if you had

talked with people in the mid-70s and said, "Oh, this is a really old building, what was it before it was a university?" No one would have said it was a residential school. There was a lot of intentional forgetting going on, institutional forgetting, and just not talking about that past. So it really was when the survivors came together in 1981 that they were the ones advocating for this history to be preserved and told, and to make sure that the university honoured this history and thought about its responsibility to it. And so the work that I do is to care for the the archival collection in the centre, but also to facilitate that public outreach. So we do a lot of educational work, and exhibit development as well.

AJ: And do you teach also?

KM: Sometimes [laughs]. So I'm not teaching right now, but I have taught as part-time faculty in the history department.

AJ: Okay.

KM: So I've taught a public history course, as well as two archival studies courses, and served as a thesis supervisor as well. Your face Karen.

KN: Just, how you manage that time! [laughs] We've talked a lot about community-led work and Jorge, who was the first one on our podcast to talk about it really emphasized how it's different for everyone. Could you talk about the kinds of communities that you work with, you know, that you prioritize? And what does that mean in practice for you?

KM: Yeah, so because the centre was founded by residential school survivors, our mandate is to serve them first and foremost. And that means not only people who attended the residential school but also their families. But we also work a lot with non-Indigenous folks to teach them about residential schools. Community-led work, though, in terms of my context in the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre. I think this was one of the biggest learning curves when I first started at the SRSC. So, you know, you come out of grad school, or whatever program you're in, and going, "I know a bunch of things. I have read a bunch of things. And I know how it kind-of works." And then going into a community archives space and learning that maybe those things that I learned weren't applicable in any way, shape, or form. So part of that is the archival theory that I learned didn't necessarily apply to a community-driven archive that needs to shift colonial narratives. But also realizing that what I learned about residential schools didn't compare in any way, shape, or form, to working with residential school survivors on a daily basis. So definitely a learning curve, and I think a lot of that is listening and knowing you're going to screw up inevitably, but learning from those mistakes to do better.

KN: I feel like I'm hearing and also noticing a lot about how the stuff we learn in school just doesn't seem to either prepare or isn't quite adequate for how archives and how communities are operating outside of school, like in the "real world". Why? And how can we make this better?

[laughter]

KM: Yeah, um, everybody's school experience is going to be different. I'd just say in my context I didn't learn anything about Indigenous governed centres, Indigenous governed

archives, or really, yeah, I learned that RAD and how archives are organized is colonial, but I didn't really understand the implications of that. And so when thinking through how an archive can best serve a community and the survivors that I work with had really expressed an interest in what they were calling professionalizing the archive. And that meant, you know, trying to organize it in a way that was more accessible, meeting industry standards for care. But wanting to make sure that that survivor voice was still at the forefront. And, to be honest, the structure of respect des fonds, as well as the concept of provenance and how things should be organized in an archive really didn't work for the residential school survivor community. It meant that if we were following western archival standards, things would be organized by who created them. Which was often the staff of the residential school or the church groups. Which, organizing things in that way could be profoundly traumatic in some cases, and it really wouldn't facilitate access. And so, I think there's a couple reasons why these conversations really aren't happening at education or at the school level. Part of it is the archival community as a whole is still really struggling with how this is impacting them, particularly in respect to Indigenous records. There has been movement in Canada but there's still a lot of work to do. Say, likewise community archives are often run by the community themselves, and they're not the folks teaching in classes. So not getting their experiences in the classroom I think is another piece.

AJ: Are there techniques you use or ways you teach either staff that you're training or when you do teach classes to try and, I don't know, like shift that for your students?

KM: Yeah. So when training new staff, definitely we have our own handbook and orientation process, and it's really focused on learning about the history of the residential school and about internal archival practices. I mean, they still have to read about RAD and a bunch of other archival things, but it's really the weight is placed on survivor narratives and sitting down with a survivor, intergenerational survivor before they dig into the records to provide that context about how the archive was started by someone who was involved in it. Really trying to make sure that if I'm teaching an introduction to archival studies course, which is one that I have taught, is making sure that I'm balancing what information I'm sharing in the classroom. And I did have at least a couple weeks dedicated to community archives, so, part of that balance piece is just when I was looking for, like, readings for the class, not everything was archival theory. Some of it was written by people like Zoe Todd, who have reflected on their experiences in archives.

AJ: So another thing we wanted to ask you about, which I think this kind of bleeds into a bit, is the Steering Committee on Canada's Archives with the Response to the Report on the Truth and Reconciliation Task Force, which is such

KM: The longest name ever!

AJ: Where do I put the emphasis in this name, I don't know!

KM: So, as a committee, we tend to refer to it as the TRC Task Force, just as a short-hand because it is so long

[laughter]

AJ: Thank you. So do you want to tell us a bit about this committee? What's its purpose? And when was it created? And What do you do as part of it?

KM: Yeah, so this committee kind of came out of the TRC's Calls to Action. As you might be aware, probably are aware, there was a number of calls to action that were explicitly targeting archives in Canada. So both Library and Archives Canada as well as the archival professional community. And really specific calls to make sure that archives are working with Indigenous communities and that records connected to residential schools are being shared with community appropriately. And so this task force was kind of set out in response to that. The main goal of the committee is to create a set of recommendations that could be implemented across Canada for guidelines for working with Indigenous communities. So if you think about the United States and the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, creating kind of a comparable Canadian-focused set of protocols or recommendations. The committee is comprised of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous archivists and knowledge-holders, really with the idea that the non-Indigenous folks would do some of the grunt work to make some of the heavy lifting a bit easier.

AJ: So, have you worked on a particular part of it?

KM: Yeah, so the committee's work has kind of been divided in a couple phases. The initial phase consisted of a survey that went out to Canadian archivists and Canadian archival institutions, and actually the results of that are available on the Steering Committee's website. The next phase involved doing informal interviews with Indigenous archivists and record-keepers. And so I worked with a couple of my colleagues from the Northern Ontario region to reach out and talk to folks who are in positions in either the First Nation community or a cultural centre to get their thoughts on relationships with the archival community as a whole in Canada and how they see this relationship either maybe improving or ways that it could be changed or facilitating better access to Indigenous archival material that's maybe held in mainstream repositories. And the last piece that we're working on right now is those recommendations, and we have a draft and are slowly trying to work that into a shape that can be shared with everybody.

AJ: That's a pretty monumental task.

KM: Yeah, and I think it's a little daunting, and I'm trying to think how long this has been going on, but it's been multiple years at this point. We were lucky to receive a SSHRC Insight Grant to help fund some of this work, particularly to bring people together to talk about the work. And then hopefully to facilitate some workshops once the recommendations are completed that can be used to help with implementation across the country. Because I think that's, for me personally anyway, that's my greatest fear around this process, is that, say we create this thing and then nothing happens with it. So, for example in the United States with the Protocols there, they were out for almost a decade before the Society of American Archivists endorsed them, and they still haven't been endorsed by ALA. And so, it's like, hopefully when they're released in Canada there will be uptake of them, but, you know, I kind of have that fear. You see things like the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples from over a decade or multiple decades ago now that there were calls for change to archives then, and nothing was done. So hopefully we're at a better moment.

KN: Why, do you think it's so, why is change so slow to happen in archives?

[laughter]

KN: We've talked about this in classes, change is slow, but why is that? And as a student it's hard to understand, one, what is archives, what is archival theory, what am I supposed to do as an archivist? And then, to kind of see the work is being done, the work is there, why is it so hard to implement?

KM: I think that's a really good question. Part of it is looking at, say, provincial archival organizations that had their funding drastically slashed and many of them lost staff as part of that process, so to facilitate things at the regional level is really difficult. Likewise you have such a range of archives across this country, you have Library and Archives Canada, which is this massive institution, everything down to the archive that is staffed by a volunteer one day a month. And, so facilitating change across all those different organizations that have very different needs and very different communities is tricky. But I also think that certain changes have been slow because there's a lot of resistance to changing power structures and particularly when you're talking about changing how Indigenous records are accessed, described, and cared for, that's a conversation about power and colonialism and that's an uncomfortable conversation for many people, but it's a really important conversation, but I think there's been some resistance to having that change happen.

AJ: Since your committee has started your work have you seen changes? Are people going ahead with initiatives before the recommendations come out that you think are helpful or worth learning from for other folks?

KM: Yeah, so actually I wrote an article for the Canadian Historical Review that was kind of looking at some of the changes that have happened in archives since the TRC report, and I found actually most of the change was happening at those institutional levels. There are some institutions that are doing really fantastic work, that are doing, say, redescription projects that are engaging community either to identify people in photos but also to use Indigenous languages, to remove or annotate really racist comments that were on the original photos, things like that. Or implementing different forms of arrangement and description for Indigenous records, but for the most part, those are happening almost in silos across the country. They're really amazing innovations, I would just love to see it happening across more institutions or maybe more guidelines for the country as a whole. That being said, I do recognize that every Indigenous community is unique and has its own circumstances around it, likewise every archive is a little bit different. So one set of recommendations isn't going to be a one-size-fits-all solution, but it would be nice to see some of those bigger players coming on board, endorsing a change of practice.

AJ: Can you give us a preview of any things you think might be in the recommendations? Are you allowed to talk about them before they come out?

KM: [laughs] So I think some of it is, we did do a pretty large lit review of existing community protocols and existing recommendations from other colonial countries, so looking very much at the protocols from the United States but as well New Zealand, and I think you could see

some similar things to those protocols in ours. Definitely I think as a guiding principle, like, thinking about OCAP, Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession in relation to Indigenous archives or records that speak about Indigenous peoples is something that I know for me and a few other folks that was kind of a guiding principle as we were writing certain sections, so you might see bits of that.

AJ: We'll have to look forward to seeing them when they come out.

KM: Yeah.

[29:41]

[musical interlude]

KM: Do you have any other questions?

AJ: Well something we were bouncing back and forth this afternoon was asking you about really specific things that you've written or worked on, which we decided to steer away from, cause we were like, "Ah, maybe some broader, overarching question". But, um, since we have a bit of time there is one that I would like to ask you about if you're game to talk about it. Which is that I read your article recently about embroidery and needlepoint.

KM: Oh, yeah!

AJ: And I found it really interesting. And I wonder if you wanted to give a really short summary about it for people who might also find that interesting, and maybe haven't read it yet.

KM: Yeah, I'd be happy to. So that one I actually really loved the venue that it was published in as well. It's in Contingent Magazine, which really supports non-tenure-track historians, or folks who identify as historians.

AJ: Huh, neat.

KM: Who work outside of a tenured position, and everybody gets paid for their work, as well as the editors get paid, which is awesome and unusual in the history field, so, yeah, they're just a great magazine. But the piece that I wrote is really looking at the history of embroidery as a form of protest and feminist resistance. I learned how to embroider two years ago now, and I love embroidering things with swear words on them, and that are gender-affirming, body-affirming and positive but also a little edgy, and then surrounding them with nice pretty flowers that contrast. Butas someone who loves history and archives I also got the urge to look up, where has embroidery been found in the past. And I think it's a really neat example of it being kind of a record of the past, of people you often don't see in archives. So some of the examples in the piece show samplers that were stitched by women who there are no archival records of, but there's this one piece of embroidery that maybe tells a little bit of their life, and I think that's so beautiful and so empowering in certain ways. So yeah, it's kind of an intersection of my public history interest and my hobby of embroidery. I also embroider things with archival slogans on them, um, I've done a few "Archives are not Neutral" embroidery pieces as well as "No Metadata No Future". And I don't know if you've ever seen

the archivist's serenity prayer? But it's a meme that an archivist from the US created but I have stitched that as well. It's kind of like "Give me the funding to process the backlog"-type thing. It's adorable.

[laughter]

AJ: We'll find a picture of it to put up with the episode. That's awesome. Thanks for sharing about that.

KM: Happy to.

AJ: The article, I felt like, a lot of your writing does this, but I felt like that article really conveyed your joy from that hobby but also the importance of understanding the context of things we do or interact with, and I think that's a really powerful thing about public history work or archives.

KM: Yeah, I totally agree. They all tell stories and it's all tied to somebody's life in some way or shape or form, and it's that tie or kinship tie that's so important.

[33:36]

[musical interlude]

AJ: Well thank you so much for joining us. If folks want to reach you online or find your podcast or your blog, where should they go?

KM: My website is KristaMcCracken.ca and it has the blog on it as well as links to the podcast. And on Twitter I'm @KristaMcCracken.

KN: Thank you.

AJ: Yeah, thanks Krista.

[Outro jingle]

AJ: We can be found on Twitter at OrganizingPod. Our email is organizingideaspod@gmail.com and our website is organizingideaspod.wordpress.com. Bye!

Transcribed by Allison Jones