

Introduction

Disability is increasingly recognised as an analytical concept across the humanities, alongside familiar concepts of class, gender and race. The academic discipline of disability history, for instance, now encompasses both the analysis of the group ‘disabled persons’, and of broader phenomena; including histories of the welfare state, employment law, and the arts. This trend accompanies growing attention to disability in heritage institutions. Museums and archives have begun to identify disability within their holdings – with new curatorial and interpretive opportunities emerging for already familiar collections.

Such interest is welcome – although unevenly spread – but comes at significant cost. To borrow terms from democratic theory, these approaches prioritise our history’s inclusion over its contestation. Our social existence – how we lived, learned, loved, worked, and thought – is now more visible than hitherto in scholarship and heritage; but is organised and put to work within elite institutions from which disabled people are generally excluded. We are not permitted to curate our own history, set priorities for what is collected and kept, or, often, to view it as researchers due to institutions’ ‘access policies’ being inaccessible. In short, heritage practices and research are now much more about us, but largely without us.

Our presentation today looks at one, very new, response to this problem of alienation in heritage; the disabled activist led archive. These archives also collect material about the history of disability, but under the control of social movement groups with awkward things like memberships and political strategies to which the archive must be accountable. They share deep roots with the rich tradition of self-organised archives in other movements – most notably feminism, anti-racism, and anti-heterosexism. Like our sister archives from those movements, disabled activist-led archives make three key claims.

The first is proprietary: our history is *ours*: not something for others to interpret and explain to us, but a resource that we as oppressed people must control and deploy. The second is distributional: our history must be available in ways that we can access it. Where the user is impoverished, excluded from formal education, or unable to reach the physical collection; the collection’s structure must change to meet these realities. The third is, we think, fundamental to what history *is*. The activist archive, from whatever movement, contends that history is about the future, not the past or the present. It does not simply paint a picture of where we came from, but represents a practical toolkit of ways that oppressed people have analysed and responded to their social position – one which can be raided for strategies and tactics in contemporary struggles.

Activist-led archives contribute to an alternative model of heritagisation to that commonly found within the heritage sector: one which, to borrow an axiom from

disabled feminism, ‘resist[s] the notion that one needs to be legitimated by an institution, so that they can try and fix you according to their terms’ (Johanna Hevda). For women and black and LGBTQ+ communities, they can point to significant successes. Practices of social movement remembering – in their archives, libraries, educational projects, and commemorations – built different ways of organising race, gender, and sexuality as narratives of social history, and forced mainstream heritage institutions to adapt accordingly. State and private archives, galleries, etc, are increasingly compelled to describe marginalised people in the language chosen by those people themselves, to co-produce their education and outreach projects, and to respond to community demands for how collections should be accessed. For disability, a complex web of institutional and social barriers distinct from those affecting non-disabled women, people of colour, or minoritised genders and sexualities complicate the picture. Our analysis of these barriers – which we call the problem of disability heritagisation – is ongoing, but we identify some of its central challenges in our case studies and conclusion.

The two examples we present today – the Disabled People’s Archive in Britain, and the developing Kreukelcollectief Historical and Cultural Centre in the Netherlands – are both social movement archives of social movement practice. They collect, arrange, and promote the history of activist groups, social struggles, campaigns, protests, mutual-aid projects, etc undertaken by disabled people in our respective countries. Our sister archive in Marburg – Das Archiv Behindertenbewegung – does the same for the German movement. Before going further, we should acknowledge that this is not the only way that disabled activists engage in archival practice. Our friends at Disability Cornwall, for example, collect the testimonies of local disabled people to curate an alternative social history of the region. Colleagues at Displace in the Netherlands take a more experimental approach; using digital tools to rearrange material from medical and other collections and expose historical relations of domination and resistance. These projects are integral to democratic heritage, and we only focus on archives of disability politics because we are most familiar with those.

The DPA: Manchester

The Disabled People’s Archive began in 2006 as a collection of magazines, pamphlets, organisational papers, banners, and cultural artefacts from the disabled people’s movement. Initially collected and housed by the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP) – a grassroots Disabled People’s Organisation – our ethos is that those with a stake in preserving the movement’s history should make the decisions about its organisation, presentation, access, and promotion. A steering group of disabled activists,, movement historians, and depositors manages the project, and supervises its entirely disabled staff team. The archive is now, we believe, the largest collection relating to disability politics in Europe, and has been housed at Manchester

Central Library since 2019 as part of a partnership between GMCDP and Archives+ (the state funded regional archive).

GMCDP's constitution states that disabled people share a social situation, and therefore a stake in each other's struggles for equality and liberation. This includes a right to access the history of their shared movement. Each element of our work is designed to be accessible to people with as large a variety of impairment types as possible, and adaptable to address other access needs with (hopefully) minimal fuss. We hope, thereby, to facilitate a collective reflection on social and political history in Britain, which also contributes to understandings of other histories of oppression and inequality. This requires, first and foremost, a coherent and multi-dimensional access strategy.

The first, and most important, plank of this strategy is rigorous co-design and co-production. The archive's priorities are produced jointly by workers, the steering group, and GMCDP's elected officers. We also consult with disabled researchers and the wider GMCDP membership to identify barriers which prevent or discourage disabled people from using heritage resources. These barriers have, in many cases, little to do with impairment type; but with the advanced technical skills presumed by archive catalogues and finding aids, which are denied to those shut out of mainstream education.

The second element is collaborative work with Archives+ to improve accessibility in the archive viewing space. Viewing and search rooms are heavily regulated by national standards which presume able-bodied and neuro-typical visitors, and are designed around the needs of archived material, rather than its human users.. Despite this, we have succeeded in implementing Plain English Search Room Guides, appropriate seating for people with mobility impairments, and allowances for aids and equipment to be brought into the space. Adaptations relating to the structure of the building are slower, and we are only now beginning to make real progress on things like room layouts, noise control, and accessible doors and fittings.

The third strand is a multi-format digitisation process, designed to address multiple access needs by altering the forms and locations in which items are presented. A well-organised digital collection reduces costs associated with research, and allows people who would not usually visit archives to access materials. Standard forms of digitisation (photographs and scans hosted on a website), however, are often unusable for people with sight impairments or learning difficulties, and for those without regular internet access (amongst whom disabled people are overrepresented). Each item we digitise is made available in a variety of formats; including screen-reader accessible PDFs, plain text and large print Word documents, and translations into easier-to-read formats to support people with learning difficulties and neurodiversity to access the collection. Audio-visual items, such as recordings of protest songs, poetry, or speeches, are

digitised with captions, and transcriptions – as well as Sign Language translation where resources allow. Our toolkit for developing accessible digital items is shared with colleagues managing other collections. Our digitisation strategy is, to the best of our knowledge, the first of its kind in the heritage sector, and guarantees users reliable access to our collection regardless of their impairment type or location. We consider this an important step in making social history more democratic, as well as a contribution to making the heritage sector more accessible to disabled people.

Kreukelcollectief Historical and Cultural Centre (656 words)

The roots of the Dutch disability movement are long and sprawling. In fact, referring to a singular movement is an injustice to the enormous diversity of work done by collectives and individuals. The eight founding members of the Kreukelcollectief were aware of this fact when we first gathered online in the early days of the covid pandemic in 2020. All of us engaged with disability activism directly or indirectly through our (academic) work, art, and/or community organising. We curated disability history collections of our own: legacies of departed friends and comrades, oral history interviews, public history websites, personal writing and photography, and so much more. The Dutch word “kreukel” means “crinkle” or “crease”, linguistically and ideologically referencing the reclaimed slurs “cripple” (English) and “Krüppel” (German). The name Kreukelcollectief is a perfect common denominator for the somewhat haphazard, disjointed, but always intersecting ways of collecting we had been engaged in up until that first meeting. We didn’t know yet where our new collective would take us, but more and more opportunities to share and deepen our understanding of Dutch disability history started to come our way.

Then one of us died. Jan Troost (1958-2023) had been a disability activist for more than 50 years. His advocacy had taken him to local and national politics, theatre and action groups, and protests and occupations. The personal archive he left us, together with his foundation, reflected his multifaceted work and life. We were unable to find an archive willing to take in Jan’s archive in its full complexity. Refusing to break up the deeply intertwined strands of Jan’s work, our work, and the work of other Dutch disability organisers, we started dreaming of a place of our own. A place that could be a living archive, where we could not just *house* private and collective disability history collections, but where we could also *share* it with current and future disability organisers and allies. A place with a disabled activist led archive at its core, housing permanent and temporary exhibitions, welcoming disabled and nondisabled visitors to activities and gatherings showcasing the abundance of disabled lives and resistance. In short, we dreamt of a historical and cultural centre dedicated to the past, present, and future Dutch disability movements. Not by just remembering, but also by *doing*.

Making this dream a reality is no easy feat. Disability heritage is as complex, diverse, and fragmented as the disability movement itself. Many disability activism pioneers of

the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are passing away at an increasing rate, leaving their already precarious private archives even more vulnerable. If any archives are left at all; disabled individuals and organisations were not always able or willing to prioritise the past in their struggle for individual and collective survival. In addition to building our own collection, the Kreukelcollectief dreams of creating a central hub for Dutch disability history. This would allow us to offer all kinds of (public) history resources and digitised materials with a broad audience, while also pointing visitors towards disability heritage at other cultural and archival institutions. The Kreukelcollectief Historical and Cultural Centre has no ambition to be a *complete* disability archive; we also want to challenge heritage organisations to reflect on and engage with disability in their own collections.

Big dreams come with big responsibility, however. Our main inspirations in the Netherlands being The Black Archives, Atria (women's archive), and IHLIA (LGBTI archive), we reflect actively and frequently on our own positionalities, biases, and power dynamics as Kreukelcollectief members. *Dreaming* of a historical and cultural centre featuring disability and its intersectional dimensions is something different than actually *doing* it. As a currently seven-person collective we will never be fully representative of all those impacted by ableism; realising our own limitations is the first step towards extending resources, increasing agency, and fostering collaborations. Although we have yet to move beyond the dreaming stage, we remain hopeful that one day we will be able to welcome you to the Kreukelcollectief Historical and Cultural Centre.

Conclusion: Challenges and threats to disabled activist-archives

What's gone before, we hope, indicates at least part of the heritagisation problem we noted in the introduction. While we in no way want to diminish the widespread and pernicious barriers facing women, people of colour, and LGBTQ+ people in the heritage sector, archivists from these communities can (with a little luck and a lot of hard work) get off the ground quickly and go on the offensive against the distortion of their histories. For non-disabled members of other oppressed groups; decent premises, a few skilled workers, and a good digitisation program are often enough to start re-evaluating their history and demanding the rest of the world take notice. For disabled people, even getting off the matt is much more complicated. Accessible premises are rare, and adaptations costly and time consuming. Digitisation is more necessary for disabled users than anyone else; but the sheer extent of digital adaptation required turns a labour intensive process into an herculean task – often carried out by tiny staff teams, whose disabled members face the same hostile societies as their users. The funding environment for community archives is generally bleak, but arbitrary rules around what counts as medical or social heritage (or, what kind of groups can receive funding) places further arbitrary obstacles to curating our history.

These are not the only obstacles to our heritage taking its rightful place in the social history of Europe. There are, in society in general, plenty of bigots and people with vested interests who would prefer we be remembered as grateful beggars or tragic cases rather than living humans (let alone fighters for our own freedom); and these forces have only been empowered by decades of austerity, and political choices around who could live and die during the covid pandemic. Our friends in anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic archives are battling similar prejudices at the moment. We have compared our projects to theirs because we believe they are more experienced in the struggle over history than we are yet. We first need to get into the ring to get into the fight.

We will not survive or grow, however, unless we are taken just as seriously as any other archive dealing with disablement, or unless our ways of working take root across other archives. We urge you not only to use, and to tell your friends about, our collections; but to seriously question the archives and museums you currently work in. The next time you go to look at a disability collection, we urge you to ask which disabled people had a say in its accession, cataloguing, and presentation. If the answer is none, please ask 'why not?'. And more importantly: 'How can that be addressed?'