



Archives and Records

The Journal of the Archives and Records Association

ISSN: 2325-7962 (Print) 2325-7989 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjsa21>

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To cite this article: Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci & Marika Cifor (2016): 'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise': community archives and the importance of representation, Archives and Records, DOI: [10.1080/23257962.2016.1260445](https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2016.1260445)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2016.1260445>



Published online: 01 Dec 2016.



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'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise': community archives and the importance of representation

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ABSTRACT

Through data gleaned from semi-structured interviews with 17 community archives founders, volunteers and staff at 12 sites in Southern California, this paper develops a new tripartite framework for understanding the ontological, epistemological and social impact of community archives. Throughout, it reflects the ways in which communities marginalized by race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender and political position experience both the profoundly negative affective consequences of absence and misrepresentation in mainstream media and archives (which it calls 'symbolic annihilation') and the positive effect of complex and autonomous forms of representation in community-driven archives (which it terms 'representational belonging').

KEYWORDS

Community archives;
symbolic annihilation;
representation; impact;
affect

Introduction

I was trying to connect myself at a time when I didn't feel connected to a history of other trans women of color. And it was really hard ... I felt like really disconnected from any kind of past ... that made me feel really isolated, and increased the levels of isolation I was having to deal with everyday. There was a kind of historical isolation. And I think through doing this archival work ... it made me think that that historical erasure is a form of violence and then it really made me feel that doing that work is even more important, right? Trans communities, our legacies and our work is so often erased.¹

Transgender activist Reina Gossett points to the transformative affective potential of community archives as spaces for members of marginalized communities to represent themselves and learn about their histories. As Gossett indicates, connection to the past can be a survival strategy that enables people to counter feelings of erasure and isolation. These words give us insight into the development of independent community archives and hint at their impact.

Our research takes Gossett's words as a starting point to ask the following research question: How do these community archives founders, volunteers and staff perceive of the impact of their work on their own lives and the lives of members of the communities they document and serve? Through data gleaned from semi-structured interviews with 17 community archives founders, volunteers and staff at 12 sites in Southern California, this paper answers

these questions, contributing to a small but growing body of empirical research that situates the development of community archives in opposition to the silences, misrepresentations and marginalizations of mainstream repositories. In so doing, it develops a framework for understanding the impact of community archives work based on a tripartite structure: ontological, epistemological and social. Throughout, it reflects the ways in which communities marginalized by race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender and political position experience both the profoundly negative affective consequences of absence and misrepresentation in mainstream media and archives and the positive effect of complex and autonomous forms of representation in community-driven archives.

In a recent article in *The American Archivist*, Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor and Mario H. Ramirez interviewed South Asian American academics who both use the South Asian American Digital Archive (<http://www.saada.org>) for teaching and research, and volunteer for the organization in an advisory role.² This research uncovered that the concept of 'symbolic annihilation,' or the ways in which members of marginalized communities are absent, underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream media and archives, deeply resonated with the experiences of members of one ethnic minority in the US as they attempted to seek people who looked like themselves on television and film and in history books and in archives.³ That research proposed an initial framework for discussing the impact of community archives: ontological (in which members of marginalized communities get confirmation 'I am here'); epistemological (in which members of marginalized communities get confirmation 'we were here'); and social (in which members of marginalized communities get confirmation 'we belong here').

This article confirms, refines and visually represents this framework using a more expansive data-set gathered not just from one community, but from a range of community archives sites across Southern California. Our aim is to use empirical data to develop a theoretical framework that can be used to conceptualize the importance of such organizations to the communities they serve. We also hope that this theoretical framework can be mobilized in order to articulate the value of such organizations to potential volunteers, current and potential funders and to professional archivists who have devalued or overlooked the contributions of independent, community-based work. The ultimate goal to which we hope this research contributes in some small part is to 'imagine otherwise,' that is to conceive of and build a world in which communities that have historically been and are currently being marginalized due to white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, gender binaries, colonialism and ableism are fully empowered to represent their past, construct their present and envision their futures as forms of liberation.⁴

Literature review

This research is positioned in conversation with several key themes in the archival studies literature: community archives, symbolic annihilation and representation and assessments of archival impact.

Community archives

Recent research in archival studies reflects both a growth in – and a growth in academic interest in – independently operated, community-based archival organizations.⁵ Much of

the scholarship in this realm has emerged from the UK, but there is a growing body of literature by US scholars addressing organizations, contexts and concerns specific to the US, where a dearth of government funding has fostered highly independent politically charged community archives. Archival communities and community archives have formed around ethnic, racial or religious identity,⁶ gender and sexual identity,⁷ economic class⁸ and geographic location.⁹

Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd narrate grass-roots archival efforts as emerging in response to the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁰ Flinn and Stevens position community archives as part of larger movements in which groups whose histories and lives have been misrepresented, marginalized or elided entirely by mainstream institutions initiate their own archival projects as means of self-representation, identity construction and empowerment.¹¹ These organizations and projects are framed as ways for communities to make shared, autonomous decisions about what holds enduring value, shape collective memory of their own pasts and control the means through which stories about their past are constructed.

Professional archivists and archival studies scholars are only beginning to reckon seriously with the emergence of community-based archives. This engagement has required a reframing of the practices of appraisal, description and access to align with community-specific priorities, reflect cultural values and facilitate community participation in archival decision-making.¹² Serious engagement also calls for conceptual shifts, including Chris Hurley's notion of 'parallel provenance' (designed to incorporate Indigenous Australian perspectives on record creation), Joel Wurl's notion of ethnicity as a form of provenance and Jeannette Bastian's call for the expansion of provenance to include descendants of the subjects of records.¹³ Terry Cook named the growing emphasis on community as a paradigm shift in the field, succeeding previous conceptual turns towards evidence and memory.¹⁴

Anne Gilliland's Voice, Identity, Activism framework seeks to synthesize themes and lessons across community archival endeavours to establish a macro-level framework for understanding these organizations and projects in the context of archival theory and practice. Gilliland defines the core principles of a community-centric framework as such: community interests, needs and well-being are central; community records and materials are understood and valued in their originating context and not viewed by mainstream institutions as collectibles, 'salvage' projects or vehicles for diversifying existing collections; and community complexity and flux, including changes in 'interests, epistemologies, demographics and emotions,' are recognized, honoured and brought to bear on archival practice.¹⁵

The body of work in archival studies that frames, defines and reckons with community archives conceptually is complemented by research in history, geography, ethnic and LGBT studies on specific community-based archives.¹⁶ There is little other empirical work that examines multiple organizations simultaneously or takes a mid-scale perspective.¹⁷ Additionally, while addressed in some of these works, particularly by Sheffield, there is a greater need for research on emerging models of community–institutional partnerships and other strategies that seek to sustain these archival projects beyond the capacities and lifespans of original founders. While there has been significant scholarship regarding the conceptual impact of community archives for archival theory and practice and framing these organizations within a political and professional context, as well as literature on the histories and models of particular community archives, often in isolation, there is very little that directly addresses the impact of community archives' work on the communities in which they are based.

Representation and symbolic annihilation in archives

As Elisabeth Kaplan argued in 2002, archival studies as a field had been remarkably unaware of issues of identity and representation that had become central concerns to other fields in the humanities and social sciences since the 1970s.¹⁸ Kaplan re-centres representation as a fundamental archival concern, arguing that archivists wield power in representing historical actors, whether they embrace this power or not. Although a discussion of the importance of self-representation often serves as a backdrop to the community archives literature cited above, the importance of self-representation – and the devastating consequences of its lack – is more thoroughly developed in other fields.

In media studies, for example, feminist scholars developed the concept of ‘symbolic annihilation’ in the 1970s to describe the absence, under-representation, maligning and trivialization of women by mainstream media.¹⁹ This absence and misrepresentation have profound and wide-ranging implications for how children perceive gender roles, how girls imagine what is possible in their futures and how women are treated at home and at work.²⁰

The concept of symbolic annihilation has since been used by scholars in a range of fields to address a range of contexts, from mass media to museums to tours of historic sites.²¹ In public history, Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small use ‘symbolic annihilation’ as a frame to analyse plantation museums for the representational and discursive strategies they employ to address – or elide – narratives about the lives of enslaved people.²² Such sites symbolically annihilate African-Americans, Eichstedt and Small argue, when slavery and enslaved people ‘are either completely absent or where mention of them is negligible, formalistic, fleeting, or perfunctory.’²³

In archival studies, Caswell first borrowed ‘symbolic annihilation’ from media studies to denote how members of marginalized communities feel regarding the absence or misrepresentation of their communities in archival collection policies, in descriptive tools and/or in collections themselves.²⁴ More recently, Caswell, Marika Cifor and Mario H. Ramirez found that the concept of symbolic annihilation deeply resonated with members of one ethnic community.²⁵ Based on the authors’ own personal and professional experiences being part of and/or working with marginalized communities, we took symbolic annihilation as a conceptual starting point for this research.

Assessments of archival impact

Several frameworks have been proposed to assess the social, economic and pedagogical impact of museums, libraries and archives. Peter Brophy, in his assessment of the impact of information services, defines impact as ‘... any *effect* of a service, product or other “event” on an individual or group ...’ that can have positive or negative, short term or long term results.²⁶ Brophy’s model of evaluation not only gauges the user’s affective relationship to information and library services, but provides a means for information professionals to assess the import of the services they provide. It is this definition of impact that was employed by the research team.

In archival studies, the Archival Metrics project has provided detailed toolkits to help archivists and special collections librarians measure the economic impact of archives, as well as to assess the effectiveness of online finding aids and teaching tools.²⁷ Several studies in the UK have attempted to measure the social impact of libraries, archives and museums.

Among these studies, social impact is seen as ‘...encompassing inclusion or overcoming exclusion of individuals or groups in terms of poverty, education, race, or disability and may also include issues of health, community safety, employment and education ...’²⁸ Accordingly, the Burns Owens Partnership maintains that social impact can be located in three areas of focus, including building stronger communities, supporting health and empowering communities.²⁹

Indicators of archival impact as outlined by Diana Marsh, Ricardo Punzalan, Robert Leopold, Brian Butler and Massimo Petrozzi can also be divided under the categories of ‘knowledge,’ ‘discourse,’ ‘attitudes,’ ‘capacity’ and ‘policy.’³⁰ Examples of these areas of impact include the use of objects by community members, multiple returns of communities to the institutions, resource growth within the archive, the expansion and use of digital resources and collections and increased funding for collections and their acquisitions.³¹ In cases of ‘cultural revitalization,’ Kristen Thorpe and Monica Galassi illustrate the ways in which archival materials may impact Indigenous communities who have not had previous access to their cultural heritage.³² Many communities face challenges of access to these records, including the wide dispersal of cultural heritage collections, which are located internationally and excessively distant from the originating community, and are held in museums, libraries and archives which do not permit access, digital or otherwise, to these records.³³ The social impact of archives in particular manifests itself in issues surrounding the development of personal and community identity, the preservation of culture, broadening understandings of history and the positive representation of communities.³⁴ As Wendy Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Suurtamm and David Wallace point out, the impact of archives is distinct from museums and libraries insofar as archives contain records which in addition to having informational value, also demonstrate evidence of actions taken.³⁵

Social justice efforts within institutions by individual professionals may lead to widespread impact beyond the initial act of record preservation or acquisition. In their survey of 195 historians, educators and archivists, Sonia Yaco and Beatriz Betancourt Hardy analyse the impact of activism by cultural heritage and social history professionals on their institutions and communities.³⁶ The UK-based Community Archives and Heritage Group also found that community archives have wide-ranging impact at the personal and group levels, such as the development of skills in volunteers, the preservation of narratives not found in mainstream institutions and promotion of community pride, citizenship, empowerment and social inclusion.³⁷ Yet, the community archives landscape in the US is quite different, due in part to lack of government funding for such projects, and may produce different kinds of impact as a result.³⁸

There has been some recent criticism of impact models as neoliberalist means to quantify and financialize values that cannot be measured as such.³⁹ Several librarians have noted the increasing pressure with which libraries have been forced to demonstrate measurable impact on users, placing such impact metrics within a larger neoliberalist framework that emphasizes the free market values and monetizes library services.⁴⁰ Cathy Eisenhower and Dolce Smith, for example, write that academic libraries have become ‘obsess[ed] with quantitative assessment, student satisfaction, outcomes, and consumerist attitudes towards learning.’⁴¹ Information literacy in academic libraries has become a key site for such obsession. Maura Seale has critiqued such measurements of information literacy (particularly the Association of College and Research Libraries standards), arguing that ‘dominant notions of information literacy reinforce and reproduce neoliberal ideology, which is invested in consolidating

wealth and power within the upper class through the dispossession and oppression of non-elites.⁴² Seale instead argues that librarians take a more critical approach to literacy and begin to imagine alternatives to neoliberalist measurements. What those alternatives may be is still the subject of much discussion.

As non-profit organizations (or components of non-profit organizations), the community archives we describe are increasingly forced to articulate their value in tangible – and often quantitative – ways to funders in the prevalent neoliberal framework.⁴³ Such requirements may include reporting back to funders increases in the number of users, their scores on educational metrics and the number of collections acquired, or square feet of collections processed. Even as we acknowledge the ways in which neoliberalism has informed the development of impact metrics in archival studies, we hope that the model proposed here moves beyond such market logic by instead focusing on that which is not easily quantifiable or even measurable. In stressing the intangible and affective impact of community archives, we hope to rethink, reframe and re-centre the discussion on the individuals and communities such organizations serve, both on and in *their own terms*.

Methodology

This research is based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 17 community archives founders, volunteers and staff at 12 sites in Southern California (Table 1). The sites for this investigation were chosen by consensus of the research team. The team first reviewed and agreed upon the broad definition of community archives found in the work of archival scholars Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Shepherd, who define community as ‘any manner of people who come together and present themselves as such, and [posit] a “community archive” is the product of their attempts to document the history of their commonality.’⁴⁴ However, in choosing sites, the research team also considered the ways in which

Table 1. Sites, identities and number of interview subjects.^a

Community archives site	Identity upon which community archive is formed ^b	Location	Number of interview subjects at site
The Compton 125 Historical Society	Geographic	Compton, CA	3
The Little Tokyo Historical Society	Geographic, ethnic	Los Angeles, CA	1
Center for the Study of Political Graphics	Political, ethnic, racial	Los Angeles, CA	3
Korean American Digital Archive	Ethnic	Los Angeles, CA	1
Documenting the Now Project	Racial and Political	Riverside, CA	1
Chinese Historical Society of Southern California	Ethnic	Los Angeles, CA	1
Lambda Archives	Sexuality and Geographic	San Diego, CA	1
UC-Irvine Southeast Asian Archives	Ethnic	Irvine, CA	1
ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at USC	Sexuality	Los Angeles, CA	1
La Historia Society Museum and Archive	Ethnic and Geographic	El Monte, CA	2
Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC)	Ethnic, Geographic, Political	Los Angeles, CA	1
Transgender Living Archives	Gender	Los Angeles, CA	1

^aThere was an additional interview subject not listed in this table whose anonymity we are protecting due to immigration status.

^bWe recognize that identities are intersectional and have named here only the primary identity upon which the community archive has been formed.

power, politics and identity factor into the definition of community archives in the US context, stressing both that 'power is central to this conversation,' and that many of the archives who fit under the 'community archives' umbrella have coalesced around marginalized identities, often making the term 'identity-based community archive' more specific, if cumbersome.⁴⁵ As such, the community archives sites included in this research focus on the collection of materials of marginalized groups, such as those that deal with political, ethnic, racial, geographic or gender and sexual identities, by those marginalized groups themselves. Recognizing that various models for community archives administration exist, we chose to include community archives housed at academic institutions if they defined themselves as such, retained close ties to the target community and enabled community members to exercise some degree of autonomy over the collection, either by determining collection development priorities, making appraisal decisions, describing the materials and/or creating outreach programmes. What we refer to as 'mainstream archives' throughout is defined in opposition to community archives, or rather, those archival institutions that either do not collect materials created by marginalized communities or that do not involve the communities themselves in a decision-making capacity in collecting those materials. We recognize that this distinction is not always clear-cut, but selected sites fall squarely within the community archives category according to these working definitions. For practical reasons, sites considered for inclusion were limited to the Southern California area, spanning between San Diego and Los Angeles.

Once these parameters were set, the research team recruited participants both through their own networks and through conversations with community archives staff and volunteers at the 2015 Archives Bazaar, an annual daylong event at the University of Southern California hosted by L.A. as Subject, an alliance of libraries, museums and other archival and cultural organizations.⁴⁶ We initially contacted 15 sites, 3 of which declined to participate in this research, for a total of 12 sites (see Table 1). Rather than choose a representative sample that would allow us to generalize, our aim for this research was to examine information-rich cases that would provide a 'thick description' of a phenomenon that has not yet been fully explored in scholarly literature.⁴⁷

The first three authors of this paper conducted interviews during a four-month period, from October 2015 to January 2016, using a pre-established semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix 1). Institutional Review Board approval was granted prior to initial contact and data collection. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed using a transcription service. Transcripts were subject to three rounds of coding. First, each researcher did a preliminary round of coding on their own transcripts in order to develop overarching themes and subcategories. These codes were developed anew based on the data and were not adopted from previous research. The identified themes were then narrowed, expanded and/or verified by the research team using a consensus-based decision-making process to ensure that the codes were exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Members of the team then analysed again their own transcripts using the codebook. Finally, as a way to address discrepancy in coding done by individual coders, the fourth author (who did not conduct any of the interviews) analysed and re-coded the full transcript set in order to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Participants were given the option to remain confidential or to be identified by name. Sixteen of the 17 participants agreed to be identified by name. We have chosen to use a pseudonym for one other participant who identified as an undocumented immigrant, so as

not to jeopardize her well-being. We argue that, contrary to the dominant conventions of social science research, it is important to attribute quotations to interview subjects by name with their consent as a way of giving intellectual credit and to affirm that knowledge is mutually and collaboratively constructed. We have purposefully left the excerpts from the interviews quite long so that the voices of the participants can be heard. Participants identified by name gave final approval for their quotes to be attributed.

Given the interpretivist paradigm in which this research was conducted, the authors feel it is important to acknowledge their own positionality in relation to the communities examined. The first author of this paper identifies as a straight white woman who grew up working class and is in the first generation of her family to graduate from high school. She believes her experience as the co-founder of a well-known community archives (not one profiled in this article) positively impacted the depth of the data she collected, as interview subjects could relate to her as a community archives insider despite her outsider status in terms of other identity markers. The second author identifies as a Latina, heterosexual, cisgendered woman with a working-class background. She is a first-generation college student, with a transnational family, and identifies as being closely tied to the Mexican-American borderlands. The third author of this paper is a white queer man from a middle-class background in Southern California, and first became involved in community organizing in his early teens. He has been a community archives volunteer (though not at an archives represented in this paper), and is a current master's student who plans to work as an archivist. The fourth author of this paper identifies as a white queer woman from a middle-class background. She has worked as an archivist and has done research independent of this project at a number of the community archives represented in this article.

The authors want to acknowledge that, in addition to all of the typical limitations posed by empirical research such as sampling bias, this project was limited by the very nature of inquiry into social identity. Identities and communities are continually shifting, yet social science research records and fixes these identities in a particular moment in time. It is especially challenging to address issues of representation and oppression across identities and communities without flattening important historical, social and political differences. Our aim is to uncover reoccurring themes and issues across individuals and communities and to report respectfully on such themes in a way that acknowledges difference without reinscribing it.

Findings

The interviews uncovered two series of findings. First, community archives founders, volunteers and staff feel 'symbolic annihilated' by mainstream media and archives and such exclusion and misrepresentation have severely negative personal and social consequences. Secondly, community archives founders, volunteers and staff speak of the importance of their archival work in ways that strongly confirmed the proposed ontological, epistemological and social impact framework. This article will now address each of these findings in detail.

Exclusion from mainstream media and narratives

Nearly all of the respondents described the ways in which mainstream media excludes, misrepresents or distorts members of their community. Many spoke of never seeing anyone

from their community on the nightly news or in film or television, while others spoke of being grossly misrepresented in these media.

Annie Tang, a Chinese-American archivist and former volunteer for the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, discussed the profound psychological and ontological impact of the absence of Asian Americans in media. She said,

Representation to me is incredibly important because growing up as a young person, as a child, you rarely see that in mainstream media, which I know shouldn't be the best descriptor of the spectrum of society, but when you're a kid that's the easiest way that you can see what the world looks like. And when you don't see anyone that looks like you representing yourself in just what you think in general society you think, 'Is there something wrong with me? Why are people like me missing in the world?'

This experience of absence ultimately influenced Tang to change the narrative by becoming an archivist.

Misrepresentation in mainstream media is particularly fraught for archival practitioners working with black communities. For example, Bergis Jules, Co-Principal Investigator and Community Lead for the Documenting the Now project which archives social media content such as #BlackLivesMatter tweets, noted the stark disparity between how major news outlets were covering the protests of police violence in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, how the police documented the protests and how eye witnesses and participants tweeted about it. He said:

... the traditional news outlets show up [to protests against police violence] ... for reasons that support their existence. Police show up and document what's going on ... because they're interested in prosecuting [protestors] ... When the news agencies show up, ... they want to see buildings burn. They're not interested in watching people March, peacefully down the street, right? So they're not going to get a lot of those shots. They're not interested in people cleaning up after a few rowdy people break a few windows ... They want to see things being destroyed. They want to see fire, they want to see police teargasing people. They want to see people running away, they want to see chaos because that is what is exciting [for] television ... And, generally, both of those groups are interested in supporting the police narrative ... because massive news agencies aren't going to go out and promote unrest ... So I think there are three narratives that are always ... told in these events, that's the sort of protester on the ground, and the police themselves, and also the major news agencies who are out there trying to sell papers or ads.

For Jules, a major impetus for starting the Documenting the Now project is to make sure that narratives that run counter to police-generated documentation and mainstream media are preserved and made accessible.

Correcting and countering racist stereotypes found in mainstream media were also a motivating factor in the creation of the Compton 125 Historical Society. In mainstream media, Compton is commonly associated with violence, poverty and gang culture. Pauline Brown, Board Member, Compton 125 Historical Society, described:

Every day I see wonders happening in Compton, but you don't see newscast media over here, capturing that and putting it on their networks. So we have to tell our own story, and that's why I'm proud to be a part of this organization ... It's important that we do that, as people who actually live and work here, because if we don't then others won't know. And so, I know first-hand that Compton has great things happening on a daily basis, in fact there are more great things happening than what you see in the news that's negative. I tell people all the time, 'You show me one negative thing they've said about Compton today, and I can go show you 20 or 50 ... Personally, I can show you 20 or 50 to combat that.' But that's the way the media works ...

Brown explicitly linked misrepresentation in mainstream media with the reason for starting the archives.

Compton is known for its rap, gang-lifestyle and things like that. We felt it was imperative for us to share the wealth of the history of Compton as opposed to what the world knows about Compton ... And so the importance of us doing this is to break it all down, lift all of those layers, remove those curtains that are hiding the beauty of the city; the agriculture, the fruit that's here, the people, the sweetness of the land, and let people know that Compton was not founded in the 1970s; it was founded in 1888, and so there's history from there until now that needs to be told, which a lot of our people, and children, are growing up not knowing that first part of our history ... It is imperative that the generations that's coming up start to realize that there's more to their city and more to the story of where they come from, thus giving them a more greater appreciation for where they come from, where they live.

As our interviews revealed, images in media – both negative images and the lack of complex representation – have a profound impact on how community archives practitioners view the importance of their work.

Exclusion from mainstream archives

The exclusion and misrepresentation of communities of colour and LGBTQ communities are not confined to mainstream media; several respondents addressed the ways in which libraries, archives and/or museums silence or misrepresent their communities. This misrepresentation results in anger at, alienation from and disinterest in these cultural institutions. For example, Anibal Serrano, an intern at the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, described, 'I would go to my local museums, but I rarely saw something about my culture. So, I guess at an early age, [I thought history] was interesting but it had nothing to do with me.'

Similarly, Jules spoke at length about the failure of mainstream libraries and archives to represent communities of colour. As a student, Jules could not find much evidence of black history in his college's archives, an experience that left him feeling shut out of the larger campus community. He said,

... It is a huge deal when you are on a campus of 30,000 people and you can't go to the archives and find anything about black history ... One of the implications could be that you don't really get an opportunity to build a lasting connection with your institution of higher education ... You don't get to sort of have that lasting feeling of, 'I belong to this place.' The other one is, you're missing an opportunity to learn about yourself and your history in a really sort of personal kind of way. We all know what it feels like to work with primary source materials. There's something really arresting about seeing an original runaway slave poster, for example. And so, I think there's a lot that can be lost when those collections don't exist [in archives] and when we don't make an effort to bring them in.

Describing his professional mission as 'decentering whiteness in library and archives collections,' Jules further explained:

I think the ways that ... libraries and archives have been collecting traditionally has not been good for ... building representative collections and for collections documenting people of color. Collections documenting black people, documenting other minority groups are seen as sort of side projects ... As far as really thinking about documenting whole communities, academic institutions aren't necessarily interested in that because that is not what brings attention to the libraries, and to people who build collections ... Libraries work within universities, which are businesses, which have agendas, and which have mandates. And so a library functions in support of the university, and they want big things. They want celebrity because that is what attracts people to give money. And the collection of photographs [from a community member's basement] on the south side of Chicago is not really that interesting to [a major university repository] ... The interest is not there for them to go for those types of collections, and that's why you don't find a whole bunch of them in libraries and archives.

For Jules, himself employed as a university archivist, the virtual absence of community of colour in such repositories has transformed his professional practice. He asked, 'In 20 to 30 years, are people going to be able to find themselves in your collections? If the answer to that is "no," then you're doing something wrong.' Jules sees archiving social media as a corrective to those absences. He said, 'One way we could look to challenge that traditional practice is by looking at how people of color document their own, lived experiences, especially how they document that in a digital space.'

The community archives practitioners interviewed described how the failure of mainstream archives to represent communities of colour has had a major impact on both individual members of those communities and the communities as a whole. Pauline Brown of the Compton 125 Historical Society spoke at length about the sense of individual and communal loss that accompanies archival silences:

I felt that it was just such a disadvantage to the generations that's coming [to not know about the history of Compton], because history is very, very important. If you don't know your history, it's like, 'Where do I come from, I'm lost. Who do I belong to?' And I think that, in my opinion, some of the things that's going on with our younger generation [joining] gangs [is because they] do not have a solid base of knowledge of where they actually come from; they're trying to find an identity to put their foot. I feel that the lack, of them not knowing what their history's all about, has somewhat to do with how they're reaching out or trying to become involved in society. So [this] really drove the mission [of the historical society] home, the importance of us really doing it ... I get crazy about it. I want to shout it from the mountaintop to everybody that Compton is not just about hip hop and gangster lifestyle and everybody's going to get shot down. I'm very impassioned about it; it affects me in a way where when I saw that there were so much missing, I'm like, 'Okay, so now the people that actually live here, the children that live here, work here, people who pay taxes here, they're not even remembered? Nobody will ever know about them? The only thing people will know about is the shootings and who killed who?' I said, 'No, this is totally unfair.' So, I was just totally like livid and I'm like, 'Okay, we gotta do something to lift these layers.'

For Brown, creating a community archives is a way to enact a form of memory justice for those who would otherwise be forgotten. The affective dimensions – of anger and injustice at misrepresentation and also excitement at what archival collecting makes possible – were notable in this and other interviews.

Other respondents noted that, even within independent community-based archives, layers of silence and marginalization persist. Luz,⁴⁸ for example, noted that while she had worked at other LGBTQ and Chicano/a organizations, discussions of being an undocumented immigrant were seen as too overtly political and were discouraged in those environments. 'I felt overlooked,' Luz said. Similarly, Kelly Besser, founder of the Transgender Living Archives, described prior experiences volunteering for a gay men's archives as being exclusionary; 'There was also a lot of transphobia at the space and misogyny,' Besser said.

Several respondents noted that they were inspired to found or work for their organizations because of commonly held misperceptions that materials about their communities simply did not exist because they were not held at archives. Besser recalls wanting to write a paper on transgender history for a historical methodology class and being told by the professor that there was 'not enough information' to write anything other than a 'theoretical' paper. What Besser did find in LGBTQ archives was not encouraging. Besser said:

I went into a ... [LGBT repository], and what I found there [on transgender history] was devastating. Our materials weren't being preserved, they weren't cataloged, they weren't described. So literally, when I found some boxes, what I found were like records of death that were crumbling

in my hands ... So death and pathology ... women dying, trans women dying and then being identified in publications, such as newspapers, by the names that they hadn't chosen for themselves, which were their legal names. And then the sort of medicalization, the pathological terms used by the medical establishment to sort of describe them as crazy, or unstable. They weren't records of lives worth living, basically. So it's a lot of abuse, women getting beat, arrested for cross-dressing, picked up at bars, or being killed in the streets ... [I felt] heartbroken. I think I cried. But also, I try to find some hope in that, since it was happening at the same time as I was taking this community archives class [at UCLA], that was my inspiration to move forward and sort of map out, at least theoretically, what that would look like to create a Transgender Living Archives here in Los Angeles.

As Besser discusses, being doubly alienated as a trans person – first by being totally ignored by mainstream repositories and secondly by being misrepresented by a well-established community archives – had a profoundly negative affective impact that Besser ultimately used as a catalyst to start another community archives. Besser's experiences also make clear that the distinction between 'mainstream' and community archives is not always so clear cut; community archives can also symbolically annihilate those perceived to be on the margins of their communities.

Similarly, Thuy Vo Dang, a Vietnamese-American archivist at the UC-Irvine Southeast Asian Archives, recalled her experience as a college student struggling to find materials about her community:

I wanted to write a thesis about Vietnamese American Literature. And this was the late 1990s. And at that time, I remember my professor saying, 'What's that? And where would you even find primary resources, or any literature produced?' So I had to do a lot of work to try to find that material ... I feel like I really had to figure things out through ... I kind of stitched together a variety of different sources in order to make it work for my research, and there wasn't one repository that I could go to, or even any kind of centralized site of knowledge, really. It was very dispersed you kind of just had to go out there and figure it out, and talk to a lot of people ...

The absence of formal library and archival collections had a profoundly affective impact on Dang. She continued:

In many ways it was also very demoralizing, because I saw that none of this history was that important. It wasn't important to many people, that I had to make a case for it all the time. Every time I stood up to make a presentation in class I felt like I had to qualify it by saying, 'This is real, this is history,' and that Vietnam is a country, and not a war, and there is a culture and people. So these are all arguments that I felt like I had to make before I even got to say anything substantial. And so, if there had been an archive or repository of these primary sources to back me up, to give me legitimacy, I wouldn't have had to fight as hard. There were many times and it felt very discouraging, when I felt like I don't think I can do this, there's just not enough support.

As these interviews reveal, the experience of being excluded and misrepresented – from media, from mainstream libraries, archives and museums and even from community archives – has severely negative consequences on one's sense of belonging or place in the world. Although none of the respondents used the academic term 'symbolic annihilation' to describe the impact of absence or misrepresentation in media or archives, it is clear that this concept resonates.

Impact framework: ontological, epistemological and social

As this next section details, our interviews also confirmed our initial framework addressing the ontological, epistemological and social impact of representation in community archives.

Ontological impact

The experience of seeing oneself in history – and the changed sense of being that results from such reflection – was a reoccurring theme. Throughout, the interviews confirmed the importance of the ontological impact of community archives, which we define here as the ways in which representation changes how community members exist in, interact with and move through the world. Across the board, participants spoke about identifying with the materials in their care. Luz, for example, said, ‘I could identify [with the materials] because I’ve seen it happen.’ Participants described how seeing themselves represented for the first time changed the way they saw the world and their place in it. Furthermore, participants spoke about such ontological shifts in affective terms. Luz addressed the ways in which her self-confidence changed after engaging with materials that represent various layers of her intersectional identities. She said:

I think a lot of my identities are represented by the collection. For example, as a woman, as a Mexican woman, and as an undocumented woman, I see a lot of these histories in the [collection]. And I think specifically as an undocumented person, [seeing these materials] was one of my first times realizing that there was so much organizing and so much ... work and so many people who were going through the same things as me. And that was really validating and reaffirming.

For communities who are pathologized and/or demonized by mainstream media (and left out of or misrepresented by other community archives that purport to represent them), self-representation can catalyse a profound ontological change, from a position of loneliness and despair to one of solidarity and hope. Besser, for example, discussed the ways in which robust self-representation can be the difference between life and death for transgender people. Besser said:

I think the ability for our community members to see our lives represented or to see that there is a history, and that there are moments in our history that, although they haven’t been ... made available, that are about life and love and things that are antithetical to what we know is out there already that we’ve witnessed ... The police abuse, the death, all of this pain and violence. To create a living archive that really is about life, while not excluding those other moments I mentioned – violence is consistently a part of our community’s life – but just to be able to imagine otherwise, and to see records that are life affirming I think would just be valuable for everyone.

For Besser, self-representation in archives empowers community members to ‘imagine otherwise,’ to envision a life lived outside of current systems of oppression. In this sense, representation in community archives can move people from a sense of being stuck in their violent and abusive realities to affirmation and empowerment. This shift can be vital to one’s sense of self and well-being.

Epistemological impact

Respondents also spoke about the value of having empirical proof of their community’s existence. We refer to this type of impact as epistemological impact in the sense that community archives change the nature of *what* can be known about a community’s history and *how* it can be known.

For some participants, to have epistemological proof of their community’s existence took on a symbolic and affective value over and above what we would consider traditional evidential or informational value. For example, Tang explicitly connected her past feelings of

exclusion to the excitement over finding some proof of the two-centuries-old history of Chinese people in the US. Describing the impact of the work of the organization, she said:

This kind of harkens back to my earlier answer about how when you're a young person in this country and you don't see yourself represented elsewhere, there can be ... a lack of self-esteem and a lack of grounded-ness. And I feel that at least in this area of history, we can be grounded by being symbolic, even if it's just ... Even if it doesn't look like it has a lot of research value ... but let's say it's a Chinese pottery from the 1800s from Los Angeles. And there's nothing even written on it, it's just, you know, clay shards. But that in and of itself is incredibly symbolic that we were here 200 years ago, and we're not as foreign as a lot of Americans think we are. We've been here for a while, and we're here now.

Tang's response hints at the ways community-based appraisal and collection policies may challenge traditional dominant ideas of records and value in archival studies. The shard of pottery that Tang describes might never have been included in a mainstream repository, despite the immense symbolic importance it has for community members in that it provides empirical proof of the community's existence.

Bergis Jules also discussed the ways in which community archives change what can be known about the community. Referring to a recent project to take oral histories from victims and witnesses to police violence in Cleveland's Black community, he said:

The implications [of community archives] for the community are huge, even [if it is] just educating people. If you look at a project like [A People's Archive of Police Violence] that Jarrett Drake was running in Cleveland ... that project potentially has an opportunity to really wake people up. [Community members] know that this stuff is going on, and now they have an opportunity to share their own stories, right? And so I think the implications are huge as far as self-realization, or pride-building, or knowledge enhancement, all of those things. That's, I think, the power of some of these community-based archive projects.

Here, we saw how epistemological impact is not just about past proof of existence as Tang described, but also about validating contemporary experiences as knowledge of the *now*. Jules's use of the phrase 'wake people up' has particular significance in this context, as to 'be woke' or 'stay woke' colloquially signifies a form of oppositional political consciousness in the face of mainstream narratives. In this sense, community archives are both knowledge-producing and political consciousness-raising organizations; the two are inextricably linked. Again, community-based practice challenges dominant archival practices that might render such records un-archival by virtue of them being actively generated at the behest of archivists rather than being the by-product of some other routine organizational activity.

Social impact

Interview subjects whose work was organized around preserving the histories of communities of colour described how, in contrast to mainstream repositories, community archives helped them see their families reflected in history, and as a result, they felt a sense of inclusion or social belonging. Several spoke of the importance of discovering family members, neighbours and friends in community archives materials and the ways in which this kind of intimate discovery helps to forge a sense of community. For example, Dolores Gonzalez Haro of La Historia Society in El Monte spoke of being inspired to volunteer for the organization after attending a photography exhibition documenting her neighbourhood. She said, 'I went to that exhibit and I thought, "Oh, wow, this is my family on the wall. I know these people."' Participants addressed how a sense of familiarity with materials has larger social

consequences. Luz discussed the ways materials at her organization have enabled her to envision her place in both small local communities reflecting intersectional identities and larger global social movements. She said:

When I started coming across a lot of other Latin American [collections] ... it was just crazy for me to try to think, 'Oh this happened in this year, and this is how close I can get to going back in a way.' And it really humanized it for me ... I thought it was kind of cool to imagine the movements that are happening in my own home country. Or just seeing [collections] that talked about very specific issues that I had never heard talked about, like I would see materials that were talking about the intersections of queer and undocumented identities and about not wanting to split up families ... And I just thought it was so cool that there were people out there who were thinking of all these overlooked groups, all of our intersections and all of our very specific identities.

As this quote reveals, the communities that community archives reflect, build and shape are complex and intersectional, simultaneously real and imagined.

Pilar Castillo, an archivist at the Social and Public Art Resource Center, spoke in great detail about how immigrants can see themselves, their families and their communities reflected in the murals that the organization documents and preserves and the ways in which this representation builds community by enabling individuals to imagine their role in something greater. When asked about the impact of her work, Castillo said:

Well, I think ultimately it [contributes] to better a society, because it [involves] seeing a reflection of yourself. So if you have a community and a city that's full of immigrants, really, how do you create a really successful city or society? What bonds the people at that point? To be able to see a reflection of yourself in this foreign place, then you become more impassioned with it, you become more dedicated to it, you become a better citizen toward it. You have a mutual goal in creating a good society.

As this quote illustrates, our respondents thought community archives promote a sense of social cohesion among community members that benefits society as a whole.

Discussion

Our research confirmed that our proposed impact framework is widely applicable across the community archives we studied. This impact framework, represented by the Venn diagram below (Figure 1), reveals how the three types of impact – ontological, epistemological and social – may exist independently, and also overlap and support each other. In this way, individuals may experience one, two or all three kinds of impact as our interview data confirmed. Furthermore, there are complex connections between each circle, such that, for example, an individual may experience ontological and epistemological impact as inextricably linked (in the sense that proof of a community's existence may affirm one's sense of self or vice versa), but may not feel any sense of social impact or inclusion in the community or in the larger society as a result. Similarly, an individual may experience ontological and social impact in the sense that an affirmation of the individual's existence may be intricately tied to an affirmation of community belonging, without experiencing epistemological impact. These circles of impact will resonate with different individuals – and perhaps different communities – in different ways depending on personal, cultural, historical, political and social contexts.

Furthermore, we posit that at the intersection of these three types of impact rests the concept of 'representational belonging,' which Caswell, Cifor and Ramirez have defined elsewhere as 'the ways in which community archives empower people who have been

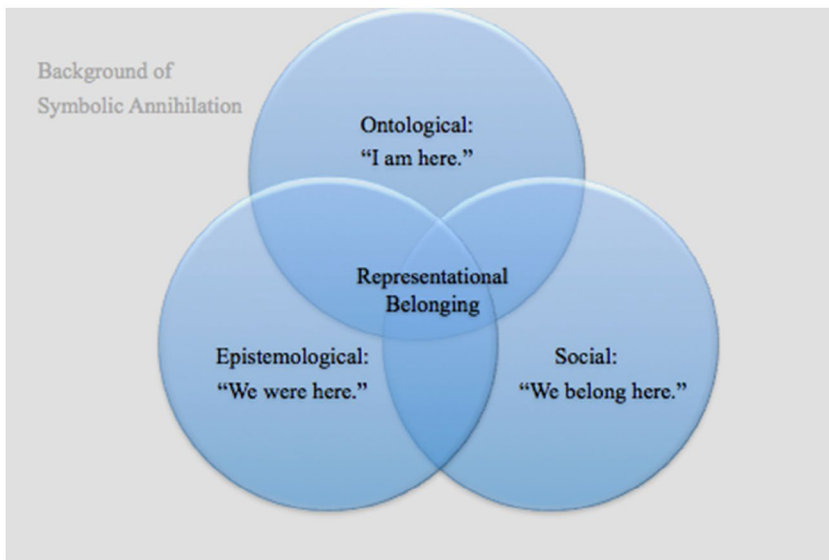


Figure 1. The impact of community archives in response to symbolic annihilation.

marginalized by mainstream media outlets and memory institutions to have the autonomy and authority to establish, enact, and reflect on their presence in ways that are complex, meaningful, substantive, and positive to them in a variety of symbolic contexts.⁴⁹ The model further acknowledges the affective layers that permeate each type of impact and are especially concentrated when the types of impact overlap to form the central concept of representational belonging. It is here, at the intersection of ontological, epistemological and social impact, that community archives display their greatest value.

Each type of impact emerges from the background of symbolic annihilation caused by systemic oppression. Our research confirmed that, by empowering members of communities that have been ignored or misrepresented by mainstream media and archives to realize ‘I am here,’ ‘We were here,’ and ‘We belong here,’ community archives have a profound impact on those individuals and communities whose histories they document.

The impact model outlined here diverges substantially from other prevailing forms of assessing impact in archives in its attention to issues of personal and communal identity, representation and marginalization. As our interviews uncovered, common models for discussing archival impact do not adequately represent the motivations, attitudes and feelings of those from marginalized communities who dedicate their time to creating or maintaining community archives. The impact of such organizations, our model posits, must be understood within the context of the systems of oppression against which they are formed.

What we have labelled ‘here’ may refer to the physical location of the community archives, or the imagined community itself coalesced around identity or the larger society, depending on the political, cultural and historical contexts, as well as individual preference and community dynamic. It need not be a physical space. Similarly, the notion of ‘belonging’ may refer to a specific community or the nation or world, depending on the perspective of the individual. Although many respondents discussed the ways in which representation in community archives helped them feel included in the greater American society, others overtly

resisted assimilationist models. Furthermore, the proposed model does not claim to be a totalizing model that represents the impact of community archives in all contexts, but rather represents the data our research team collected in this specific context. It is also important to note here that we found no significant distinction between the impact of independent community archives in combating symbolic annihilation and those community archives located within 'mainstream' university collections in which community members maintain some degree of control over the appraisal, description and use of the materials.

Conclusion

Now that we have studied the founders, staff and volunteers of community archives, much more work needs to be done to understand the users of the materials stewarded by such organizations. Our next research project will investigate if the proposed model adequately describes how users envision the impact of community archives on themselves and their communities. We encourage others to undertake similar research to examine if the phenomena we have described are unique to community archives in Southern California, or if they apply more broadly. More work needs to be done to test the proposed model, particularly to explore where the circles of impact overlap and where they diverge. More research is also needed to test the potential applicability of the proposed framework to assess the impact of mainstream archival organizations.

We are also interested in exploring how community archives might leverage this model to their own benefit. We simultaneously acknowledge the usefulness of articulating the importance of community archives to the communities they serve *and* offer a critique that such impact models are formed in a neoliberal context in which community organizations are increasingly expected to demonstrate measurable outcomes to funders. Rather than providing tools to generate quantitative data, our model hopes to shift the conversation by proposing a new way to think about impact.

Our research posits that the impact of community archives may fundamentally differ from prevailing conceptions of the impact of mainstream memory institutions. Given the ways in which community archives are formed in opposition to symbolic annihilation, we argue that they necessitate their own model of impact that centres the needs of marginalized communities. This is not to argue that mainstream archival institutions cannot have an impact on marginalized communities, but rather that the needs and effects of the communities themselves should be centred in any framework for discussing impact writ large. Further, we cannot assess the impact of community archives without first acknowledging the damaging and pervasive consequences of systems of oppression and the extent to which such organizations are formed to push back against such systems. It is here, in this 'pushing back' to dominant forms of representation and exclusion that symbolically annihilate marginalized groups, that community archives demonstrate their greatest value.

Notes

1. Gossett, "Historical Erasure as Violence."
2. Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, "To Suddenly Discover"
3. For more information on symbolic annihilation, see: Tuchman, "Introduction"; Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*; and Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History."

4. 'Imagine otherwise' is now a common phrase in critical theory and activism, but can also be traced to Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*.
5. Bastian and Alexander, "Introduction"; Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives?"; Daniel, "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience"; and Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community."
6. Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect"; Daniel, "Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience"; and Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History."
7. Barriault, "Archiving the Queer and Queering the Archives."
8. Flinn and Stevens, "It Is Nohmistri, Wimekin History."
9. Ibid.
10. Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives?"
11. Flinn and Stevens, "It Is Nohmistri, Wimekin History."
12. Shilton and Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement"
13. Hurley, "Parallel Provenance"; Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance"; and Bastian, *Owning Memory*.
14. Cook, "Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community."
15. Gilliland, *Conceptualizing 21st-Century Archives*, 20–21.
16. Barriault, "Archiving the Queer and Queering the Archives"; McCracken, "Community Archival Practice"; Ashmore, Craggs, and Neate, "Working-With"; de Leeuw, "Alice Through the Looking Glass"; Chazan, Baldwin, and Madokoro, "Aging, Activism, and the Archive"; Ramirez, "A Living Archive of Desire"; Gibbs, "The Heart of the Matter"; Corbman, "A Genealogy of the Lesbian Herstory Archives"; X, Campbell, and Stevens, "Love and Lubrication in the Archives"; Edelberg, "Archive Discipline"; Rawson, "Archival Justice: An Interview with Ben Power Alwin"; Theron and Kgositau, "The Emergence of a Grassroots African Trans Archive."
17. Notable exceptions include: Wakimoto, Bruce, and Partridge, "Archivist as Activist"; and Sheffield, "The Emergence, Development and Survival."
18. Kaplan, "Many Paths to Partial Truths"
19. Tuchman, *Hearth and Home*; and Tuchman, "Women's Depiction by the Mass Media."
20. Tuchman, *Hearth and Home*, 10.
21. Merskin, "Sending Up Signals," 335. For a discussion of representations of other racial groups, see also: Mazon, *The Zoot-Suit Riots*. Merskin, "The Construction of Arabs as Enemies"; Klein and Shiffman, "Underrepresentation and Symbolic Annihilation of Socially Disenfranchised Groups," 56–7.
22. Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*. See also: Alderman and Campbell, "Symbolic Excavation and the Artifact Politics of Remembering Slavery"; Modlin Jr., "Tales Told on the Tour."
23. Eichstedt and Small, *Representations of Slavery*, 107.
24. Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History."
25. Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing"
26. Brophy, "The Development of a Model," 44.
27. Archival Metrics Investigators, <http://www.archivalmetrics.org/>. The site contains an extensive bibliography about impact.
28. Wavell et al., *Impact Evaluation of Museums, Archives and Libraries*, 6. See also: Duff et al., "Social Justice Impact of Archives."
29. Horton and Spence, 'Scoping the Economic and Social Impact of Archives,' 49–50. See also: Duff et al., "Social Justice Impact of Archives." Duff and Cherry, "Archival Orientation for Undergraduate Students."
30. Marsh et al., "Stories of Impact."
31. Ibid., 32–3.
32. Thorpe and Galassi, "Rediscovering Indigenous Languages"
33. Ibid., 83.
34. Wavell et al., *Impact Evaluation of Museums, Archives and Libraries*, 19–20.
35. Duff et al., "Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation."
36. Yaco and Hardy, "Historians, Archivists, and Social Activism."
37. Community Archives Development Group, "Impact of Community Archives"

38. For example, the report found that 50% of community archives in the UK receive funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. While we lack formal statistics in the US, very few community archives in the US receive support from the federal government. *Ibid.*
39. Punzalan and Caswell, "Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice," 34; Cifor and Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique".
40. Nicholson, "The McDonaldization of Academic Libraries"; Buschman, "Talkin' 'Bout My (Neoliberal) Generation"; Beilin, "Promoting and Resisting Student 'Success'"; and Cope, "Neoliberalism and Library & Information Science."
41. Eisenhower and Smith, "The Library as Stuck Place," 314.
42. Seale, "The Neoliberal Library," 40.
43. For a critique of what has been termed 'the nonprofit industrial complex,' see: Mananzala and Spade, "The Nonprofit Industrial Complex and Trans Resistance."
44. Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives?" 75.
45. For a more thorough discussion of community archives and power, see: Caswell, "SAADA and the Community-based Archives Model." For a discussion of 'identity-based community archives,' see: Caswell, "Inventing New Archival Imaginaries."
46. L.A. as Subject, "Archives Bazaar."
47. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 3–30.
48. A pseudonym is being used to protect this subject, who is an undocumented immigrant.
49. Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing," 57.

Funding

This work was supported by the UCLA Hellman Fellowship and the Dean's Student Support Initiative of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at UCLA.

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Appendix 1. Semi-structured interview protocol

- (1) What is your title? In what capacity do you work for your organization? What do you hope to accomplish in this role?
- (2) How long have you worked/volunteered for a community archives? How did you come to be involved in this organization? Why did you think it was important to get involved in this organization?
- (3) Would you describe yourself as a member of the community whose history your organization documents?
- (4) Prior to working with your organization, had you looked for members of your community in archives or museums? What did you find? Can you describe this experience? How did you feel? Did you feel these materials were representative of the community you were interested in or apart of?
- (5) When did you first find out about your organization? What was your first reaction to it? How did first finding materials in the collection make you feel?
- (6) How does your work with the organization make you feel?
- (7) Do you feel the records in your organization are representative of the history of the community you are a part of? Why or why not?
- (8) How would you describe the importance of your organization's work to someone who has never seen it before?
- (9) Do you consider yourself to be a community activist? Why or why not? If so, what does involvement with your organization bring to your role as a community advocate or activist?
- (10) Is there anything we haven't asked that you would like to discuss?