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# Fostering Transformation

## Ethnic Studies as Critical Intervention for Primary Source Pedagogy

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*This chapter makes a case for critical engagement with ethnic studies and community-based archives through primary source instruction. The research project Transforming Knowledge/Transforming Libraries (TKTL) examined how libraries might become essential partners in providing ethnic studies students with the tools and language to present, preserve, and disseminate community history. This chapter discusses the TKTL primary source workshop design and offers a reflection on data collected over two years, including responses from student participants who were awakened, empowered, and transformed by the experience of critically engaging history through these workshops. This pedagogical method may activate the power and agency of students as records creators, building new generations of stewards of community history.*

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### Introduction

Academic libraries play a crucial role in teaching students to ask questions about what and how we know about history. This chapter makes a case for critical engagement with ethnic studies and community-based archives through primary source instruction. In

2017, the University of California, Irvine, Libraries was awarded a three-year Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant in the community anchors category for the research project Transforming Knowledge/Transforming Libraries (TKTL), which examined how libraries might become essential partners in providing ethnic studies students with the tools and language to present, preserve, and disseminate community history. TKTL explored the following questions:

- How can libraries bridge the gap between ethnic studies theory and community-based archives practice?
- What are the outcomes of undergraduate students applying what they learn in ethnic studies combined with their lived experience in contributing to community archives?

The pedagogical model designed by the principal investigators of TKTL includes an adaptable, scalable means for student engagement with primary source materials by incorporating community-based archives principles and practices within primary source literacy instruction, foregrounding students' lived experiences, and centering marginalized histories. We were intentional about the design of the workshop activities to foster a sense of belonging and inclusiveness in the primary source instruction classroom. This included selecting material from our collections that allowed students to relate to and see themselves represented in history.

Self-representation is at the core of both community-based archives and ethnic studies. Community-based archives are, as defined in the *South Asian American Digital Archive*, “independent grassroots efforts emerging from within communities to collect, preserve, and make accessible records documenting their own histories outside of mainstream archival institutions.”<sup>1</sup> Ethnic studies interrogates and challenges the production of knowledge in educational institutions that serve as means to dominate and subordinate people of color in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Emerging out of the social movements of the 1960s, this interdisciplinary field explores social cultural theories related to race, ethnicity, identity, and relations of power.

Both community-based archives and ethnic studies address the issue of communities being left out, removed, or underrepresented in the historical record. Each area empowers individuals and communities by directly engaging them in critical analysis (in the case of ethnic studies) or in the creation and distribution (in the case of community archives) of their own knowledge and information. Community-based archives and ethnic studies scholarship have a symbiotic relationship, building upon each other. Grassroots social movements and archiving marginalized histories are necessary conditions and methodologies to create and challenge historical knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

We define *community-centered archives* as a process of working collaboratively with communities to document, preserve, and provide access to their histories. Our use of the term *community-centered archives* signals our location inside an institution; it is our effort to be transparent about our positionality while remaining committed to the tenets of community-based archives. In the process of doing this work, we made a point to acknowledge that, as representatives of an academic institution, we do not represent a community-based archive. Yet, we support a community-centered approach to archives.

This chapter focuses on the design of the TKTL primary source workshop. The workshop introduced students enrolled in Asian American Studies, Chicano/Latino Studies and African American Studies courses to the intersections of social justice imperatives and theoretical frameworks of community-based archives and ethnic studies and explored the implications of absences, erasures, and misinformation in the archives. Self-reflection *while* engaging with archives successfully encourages students to think about their own power to transform the historical record and redefine what libraries are and can be.

Academic librarians want to enter into a space and say, “Look at what we have for you!” and share resources in a comprehensive, authoritative way. What would it look like to say instead, “We are building this collection.... we may have something, but it isn’t exhaustive, there are gaps, and you are part of identifying issues and reshaping the archive...”? Collections do not necessarily have to be diverse to employ this approach of critically interrogating absences or the incompleteness of or constructed nature of archives. Workshop activities like those from TKTL allow for consideration of the context for collection gaps and imagining ways to address them. Instead of training students to see themselves as consumers of history, we encourage them to be creators and owners of history.

Below, the authors discuss the TKTL primary source workshop design and offer reflection on the data collected over two years, including responses from student participants who were awakened, empowered, and transformed by the experience of critically engaging history through these workshops. This pedagogical method may activate the power and agency of students as records creators, building new generations of stewards of community history.

## Pedagogy: Workshop Design

The design of the classroom workshops built upon established strengths in teaching primary source analysis to undergraduate students and extended a model of inclusive teaching.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, we foregrounded our subjectivities by sharing openly with the students our backgrounds and relationships with archives and archival work. This openness allowed for trust and rapport-building, framing the classroom as a space where lived experiences matter. We coupled this with community-based archives theory and a critical interrogation of the selected materials in relation to cultural identity, self-reflection, and course-specific connections. As librarians, we provided these workshops in the context of an ethnic studies class, where students receive instruction on power and the creation of knowledge, as well as agency and resistance of marginalized communities. The workshop consisted of a brief contextual presentation, discussion, and engagement with archival materials to provide a space for students to critique the creation of archives and imagine ways that historically marginalized communities might see themselves in history.

The workshop begins with an overarching question: “Who controls history?” This encouraged participants to reflect on one of the party slogans in George Orwell’s *1984*: “Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past.” This introduction prodded students to think critically about how we know what we know about history and where authors of history find the tools to write it. Our workshop then

segued to defining the difference between traditional and community-based archives and helped students see how community-based archives can challenge traditional power dynamics involved in the identification, collection, preservation, and provision of access to history. Having a discussion around the political imperatives of preserving history primed students to seek out absences and consider alternative narratives while reviewing historical records during the hands-on activities.

Delving deeper into the value of community-centered archives, the workshop provided examples of how such intentional practices may counter the symbolic annihilation of historically marginalized groups by fostering “representational belonging.”<sup>5</sup> Archival studies scholars Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramírez describe the concept of symbolic annihilation to refer to the absence of disenfranchised groups from the historical record.<sup>6</sup> When individuals and communities do not see themselves or people who look like them in the historical record, they may feel that their experiences are not valid or important. In the classroom, we explained the three facets of representational belonging, providing examples from our experiences of archival stewardship.<sup>7</sup>

Following a discussion of these concepts (archives, power, symbolic annihilation, and representational belonging), we asked students to participate in two activities. The first activity provided an opportunity to both teach primary source literacy skills and give students the opportunity to see examples of materials that represent an underrepresented community’s perspective. We carefully selected materials in consultation with participating faculty and, whenever possible, we brought out materials from our collection that resonated with the course themes.<sup>8</sup> This approach differs from traditional primary source instruction by going beyond the show-and-tell model (in which library professionals tell the story of a primary source) and instead centering student engagement with material to create opportunities for developing their own understanding of the significance and meaning of the material. This approach supports student creation of counternarratives.<sup>9</sup>

For Activity 2, we sought to give students the opportunity to reflect on who they are instead of assessing whether students could demonstrate mastery of primary source analysis or how to find archival materials in a repository. We were open to the intersectional ways students responded to the question of their own positionality as they experienced and reflected upon absences in the archives. We encouraged students to consider the various aspects of who they are including their age, where they grew up, their hobbies, career goals, passions, and the like. This served two purposes: (1) to allow students to think beyond race and ethnicity as the only markers of absence and misrepresentations in the historical record; and (2) to help reinforce that the critical interrogation of the archives and the historical record is not an activity exclusively for or about people of color.

### **Seeing Yourself in History (Activity 2)**

On your own, please answer the following:

1. List the community/communities with which you identify.
2. What stories, records, or images about your community might be missing from archives?

3. Expand on your answers from question 2. Why is this important? What can they tell us about your community?
4. What's the impact of not seeing your family or your community in the historical record? How does it make you feel?

## Research Findings

The research team gathered data in the form of an entrance and exit survey, as well as student responses to Activity 2.<sup>10</sup> The entrance survey was administered in the beginning of the quarter with the goal of acquiring demographic information about the students to understand their backgrounds and how familiar they were with archives and libraries. Following the entrance survey, students participated in the workshop activities where they were asked to reflect on where they might see themselves in history. Last, the exit survey was carried out at the end of the quarter to measure the impact of the workshop on students, what they felt they learned, and how their views changed about archives and libraries. Nearly 720 students participated in the project, with 718 students submitting the entrance survey, 418 students completing the exit survey, and 686 students participating in the workshop.<sup>11</sup>

When students are given the opportunity to learn about community-based archives and libraries in relation to ethnic studies, the data demonstrates that they are impacted positively and acquire a more meaningful understanding of archives and libraries after exploring intersections of ethnic studies and community-based archives. Four major themes emerged from the data that illustrate what students took away from the workshop. Students learned about the principles and practice of archives and libraries; the importance of archives and libraries in preserving history; power dynamics found in archives and libraries; and career opportunities. Furthermore, the workshop allowed students to think critically and personally about archives.

Prior to the workshop, the majority of students mentioned that they viewed the library as a place where they could find resources for their research. This view of the library changed after the workshop. For example, students indicated that they learned about the *principles* of archives and libraries. Although students knew what archives were, they were not familiar with how the university acquires collections or what purpose archives serve. In this regard, they came to understand what archives are, why they matter, and how they themselves might become engaged as records creators. In a similar vein, students came to appreciate the work of archives and libraries in preserving history. Many students mentioned overlooking library and archives work initially but later understood the significance and made connections to ethnic studies and their own communities.

Students also learned about the power dynamics present in archives and libraries. Students became aware of how decisions are made about what to collect and preserve and how this leads to exclusion of histories and narratives from historically marginalized communities in archives, leading communities to not see themselves represented in archives. Lastly, learning about the work of archives and libraries exposed students to a new potential career. The overwhelming majority of students indicated not being

interested in pursuing a career in the field because they did not know it was a career option or were not aware of the work archivists and librarians do. Many students expressed interest in the field after the workshop.

In particular, the workshops allowed students to reflect on where they might see themselves in history, offering students opportunities to think critically and personally about archives. This was possibly the most significant impact for the students. Many students expressed feelings of marginalization when asked how they feel when they do *not* see themselves represented in archives. These included feeling less important, not mattering, erasure, exclusion, and sadness. In their own words, students expressed the importance of challenging the silences, erasures, and marginalization in traditional archival institutions. Student responses included:

“Not seeing myself and my community reflected in my studies at school or in the media made me feel disconnected and invalidated. Taking this course has really changed my perspective and empowered me to consider my family’s background and my community’s history as a valid and significant part of American history.”

“As a queer Asian American woman, I often feel like no community exists or can be easily seen by the public. Who we are, where we congregate, how we communicate or carry out our lives is rarely documented. I’d really love to know and learn about Asian American involvement in the Gay Rights Movement so that I can feel more included as part of that community. In SF, where I’m from, there are various drag shows and performances whose main performers are Asian American. I feel like recording events and performances like those would really help highlight our existence and involvement in the LGBTQ community. Because of the lack of representation, my place in the community feels precarious and non-existent.”

Hence, the impact of the workshop went beyond students learning about archives and libraries, forging a connection between their own personal histories and the importance of their local community knowledge and narratives. Students expressed wanting to see more representation through photographs, music, art, oral histories, and other items. Learning about community-based and community-centered archives reinforced two important themes for the students: that their histories are important and that they matter. A number of students became motivated to document their own personal and community histories after their participation in the project.

## Project Analysis

We hypothesized that foregrounding students’ lived experiences and presenting them with opportunities for learning skills in community-centered archives would contribute to building more diverse and inclusive archives and, by extension, the profession itself. We hoped that qualitative data would legitimize and verify the theory that archival symbolic annihilation has real-life implications for what and who belongs in the archives. In better understanding who students are and the absences they see in the historical record, library professionals can discover ways to make much-needed change. From a



pedagogical perspective, we identified a need to redefine the ways that library and archives educators might measure success in the classroom. How can we put a more inclusive, intersectional, student-centered pedagogy into conversation with the desired outcomes of primary source literacy?

Early on in the project, we began to teach nearly all of the workshops with at least three of our team members together.<sup>12</sup> This may be one factor that has contributed to the workshop's successful outcomes. Students would approach us individually for personal interaction, perhaps because of our job titles, or perhaps something about each of us sharing our own lived experiences evoked identification or recognition for these students. Foregrounding our own situated knowledge and subjectivities became a core part of our teaching and outreach strategy. That we four all showed up as much as possible gave students more options and opportunity to forge connections. Because this research project suggests that *affect* matters, we worked to create a space to foster the feeling of belonging or the ability to imagine oneself in a place, in history, once deemed unfamiliar or out of reach. The second activity of the workshop was essential to achieving this goal by prioritizing the students themselves, as defined by themselves. We asked students to challenge the traditional notion of archival collecting that usually happens from positions of power and privilege. When identifying archives deemed worthy of collecting, what has been prioritized is physical removal of materials from a group or organization into the legal and physical custody of a formal institutional archive. Activity 2 centered the perspectives of students in identifying the archival preservation and access needs of marginalized communities.

The group discussion and reflection that followed these in-class activities varied but repeatedly resulted in qualitative responses that illustrated a more personal connection to the *idea* of archives—what they are and what they might be with the intervention of the student. An inclusive teaching approach in archival or primary source instruction, based on our research findings, is more effective at engaging students and holding their attention because they become embedded in the process of history-making. By valuing their contributions and lived experience, we may foster a sense of belonging in the classroom space and prompt them to imagine how they might foster representational belonging in archives. Nearly all students who participated in the workshop voluntarily responded fully to the in-class activities and nearly 90 percent of these students provided a reflective, engaged response (positive or negative). In this way, we conclude that primary source instruction is more effective when success is measured through an inclusive teaching philosophy as well as documented student engagement with questions of power and positionality in archives.

## Conclusion

The TKTL project identified a crucial connection between the social justice imperatives of ethnic studies and the grassroots principles of community-based archives.<sup>13</sup> Students rarely think about the role of libraries and archives in shaping or erasing historical narratives. The TKTL workshop model, at its core, requires library workers to think transparently and critically about how collections are incomplete and invites critical interrogation



into the principles of neutrality and objectivity in the creation of archives. Academic library workers must likewise have an openness about their own positionality, subjectivity, and privilege in the classroom and in their roles as collection stewards.

Incorporating the core components of critical ethnic studies into primary source instruction means to emphasize inclusiveness, equity, and transparency in the classroom. In an archival context, this means treating the classroom as a space where intention and positionality are central: selecting archival materials, teaching about privilege and biases, critiquing erasure and absence, and ultimately, fostering a sense of belonging in the archives and the classroom. As we question core ideas about objectivity and neutrality from the vantage point of archives practitioners, we also encourage students to critically engage with institutional archives and community archives in ways that may be meaningful in their own lives. Our findings reveal that creating a learning experience imbued with ethnic studies' and community-based archives' questions of power and self-representation result in the creation of a space where all students can thrive.

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

1. Michelle Caswell, "SAADA and the Community-Based Archives Model: What's a Community-Based Archives Anyway?" *South Asian American Digital Archive* (blog), April 18, 2012, [www.saadigitalarchive.org/blog/20120418-704](http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/blog/20120418-704).
2. Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "The History, Development, and Future of Ethnic Studies," *Phi Delta Kappan* 75, no. 1 (1993): 50–54; Christine E. Sleeter and Miguel Zavala, *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2020).

3. Ethnic studies scholars are often positioned within humanities and social sciences. Scholars in these areas have provided critical frameworks for engaging memory, power, and positionality. They also insist on looking at alternative sites of knowledge production as “archives.” See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) and Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith, “Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction,” *Signs* 28, no. 1 (2002): 1–19.
4. For an example of UCI Libraries’ community-centered archives workshop see: Tribbett, Krystal, Thuy Vo Dang, and Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, “Community-Centered Archives Workshop,” eScholarship, UCI Libraries, University of California Irvine, January 1, 2021. Video, 25:07. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2zd2z3c0>.
5. Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario Ramírez, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing’: Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives,” *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 56–81, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56>; Michelle Caswell et al., “‘To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise’: Community Archives and the Importance of Representation,” *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2016): 5–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2016.1260445>.
6. Caswell, Cifor, and Ramírez, “To Suddenly Discover Yourself.”
7. The three facets of representational belonging are epistemological (we were here), ontological (I am here), and social (we belong here). Where these facets intersect is where we arrive at representational belonging in the archival context. See Caswell et al., “To Be Able to Imagine.”
8. Activity 1, Interrogating Primary Sources, involves asking students to address the following questions in pairs: Who wrote or made this primary source? What are some things you can infer about the person based on the object? Why was it written or made? What sort of things can you infer about the community(ies) in which the author is a member based on the primary source?
9. Primary source literacy instruction is emphasized in the literature of special collections librarianship. See Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina, *Using Primary Sources* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2014).
10. More detailed information on research findings and data, including quotes from student participants, can be found in Audra Eagle Yun et al., “Transforming Knowledge, Transforming Libraries Research Project Dataset,” July 1, 2020, distributed by Dryad, <https://doi.org/10.7280/D1HX1N>, and Audra Eagle Yun et al., *Transforming Knowledge, Transforming Libraries: Researching the Intersections of Ethnic Studies and Community Archives: Final Report* (Irvine: UCI Libraries, University of California, Irvine, June 30, 2020), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/47c2h0dd>.
11. There was a considerable drop-off between the submissions for the entrance and exit surveys. The research team believes the drop-off reflects students withdrawing from a course, not showing up for class on the day the exit survey was carried out, or deciding not to complete the exit survey given that it was optional and unrelated to their grade in the course.
12. Our four-person instruction team includes varied racial and gender identifications as well as educational paths to librarianship, with two of us holding formal library training and the other two holding PhDs in ethnic studies and history.
13. “Transforming Knowledge, Transforming Libraries Virtual Summit Proceedings.” eScholarship, UCI Libraries, University of California Irvine, May 1, 2020. Video, 8:32:56. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4t35n0pq>.

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