Title

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The Future of the Painful Past: Archival Labor and the Materiality of the Digital in the

South Asian American Digital Archive

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~~In her essay "History, memory, and the genre of testimony," Aleida Assmann (2006: 270-271) writes,~~

In her essay "History, memory, and the genre of testimony," Aleida Assmann (2006: 270-271) claims that "the historical archive stores information for the use of specialists," rather than the general public and argues that the archive is "not a form of presentation but of preservation" that "collects and stores information," and "does not arrange, exhibit, process, or interpret it."

> ~~The historical archive stores information for the use of specialists. An archive is not a museum; it is not designed for public access and popular presentation … There is, of course, some order and arrangement in the digital archive, too, but it is one that ensures only the retrieval of information, not an intellectually or emotionally effective display. The archive, in other words, is not a form of presentation but of preservation; it collects and stores information, it does not arrange, exhibit, process, or interpret it.~~

Assmann goes on to assert that archives are "pure potential" that must be activated by historians, curators, or artists——"agents other than archivists"——in order to be made meaningful (Assmann 2006: 271). This construction of archives as unmediated storehouses of raw materials in search of expert interpreters constitutes a fundamental misunderstanding of archives and

archival labor that is, unfortunately, quite common; much humanities-based research that theorizes 'the archive' fails to recognize archives as institutions and archival studies as a distinct field with its own literature, debates, and experts (Gilliland 2010).[1]

 Indeed, much of the exploration of archives within memory studies is marked by the effacement of the archivist, the erasure of archival labor and expertise, and the denial of archives as always already mediated sites of memory construction, despite some significant scholarship to the contrary (Derrida 1996; Hamilton et al. 2002; Stoler 2009). Though memory studies are inherently interdisciplinary, the unique contributions of archival studies have, for the most part, gone ignored.

 This chapter inserts an archival studies perspective into memory studies by uncovering the archival labor and expertise involved in the presentation of a single record in an online archive. By tracing the 'social life' (Appadurai 1986) of a suicide note in the South Asian American Digital Archive——its creation, preservation, archivization, appraisal, digitization, and reception——I hope to expose the complex social, ethical, and technical issues that mediate the appearance of records in digital archives. This discussion will bring to fore the materiality of digital records, unveiling how digitizing paper records transforms them from one material form to another and, in so doing, constitutes a series of technical, professional, and ethical judgments. It will also expose the role of the archivist in producing and exposing historical meanings and silences, elaborating on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (1995) observation that not all records become

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1 While closely related to public history, archival studies is generally seen as a field within information studies. The majority of archival studies programs are located within library science departments or schools of information. Archival studies is also commonly known as archival science, with more humanities-oriented scholars preferring the former and more social science-oriented scholars preferring the latter.

archives. This chapter ultimately affirms the importance of the archivist, archival labor and expertise, and archives as social institutions in shaping collective memory of painful pasts.

Before this investigation begins, it is necessary to briefly define collective memory from an archival perspective, and trace how the concept has been used in archival studies. Within archival studies, collective memory has come to mean "a group's representation of its past in terms of shared origins, values, and experiences" (Hedstrom 2010: 165-166), overlapping significantly with prevailing notions of social memory. This chapter further distinguishes between history as the official stories that are told about the past by a guild of trained historians (Trouillot 1995), and collective memory as the ways in which everyday people socially construct the past through shared forms of remembrance and forgetting, while at the same time acknowledging that history and collective memory are often entangled in complex and multidirectional ways (Caswell 2010; Frisch 1990; see also Brunstedt, this volume). From an archival studies perspective, archives are used to create (and not merely collect) public expressions of collective memory, such as movies, television shows, political speeches, books, museum displays, memorials, and tribunals. In turn, archives——what winds up in them, who uses them, and how——are also shaped by society's shared interest in the past. In this way, the relationship between archives and collective memory can be conceived as a Mobius strip, with each element feeding into the other *ad infinitum*.

Memory is just one of several ongoing theoretical preoccupations in archival studies. Canadian archivist Terry Cook describes how archivists have been cautioned to balance two competing orientations——archives as memory and archives as evidence——in what has become "a kind of fractured schizophrenia" in the field (Cook 2013: 100). Cook then adds two other elements to construct a four-phased linear progression of archival paradigms from evidence

~~to memory to identity to community (Cook 2013). While it is more accurate to see these four elements as both concurrent themes and competing priorities rather than as a linear progression, Cook's formulation calls attention to collective memory as a central concept in the field.~~

As Margaret Hedstrom points out, some early work in archival studies simplistically equated archives with collective memory, but more nuanced understandings of the relationship between the two have since emerged (Hedstrom 2010). Hedstrom calls attention to a few key themes: the role of technology in transmitting memory from individuals to communities; the materiality of memory as embodied in (that is, represented in material form) by archival records; the importance of archival functions like appraisal and description in molding collective memory; and the ways in which archives are used to counter the forgetting or effacement of key events, sites, figures, or perspectives (Hedstrom 2010). Building on this work, Trond Jacobsen, together with Ricardo Punzalan and Margaret Hedstrom (2013: 219-220), conducted a citation analysis of references to collective memory in three top archival studies journals, revealing four major threads: archives as a "symbolic foundation for collective memory;" "critiques [of] the role of records, archives, and archivists in the creation, construction, and propagation of social memory;" explorations of the "relationships among archives, memory, and social power;" and investigations of memory as a mode of "rethinking the nature of records as evidence," that is, exploring the complex relationship between archives, popular conceptions of the past, and epistemological claims about the nature of proof. Recent work on the role of archives in shaping collective memory of and countering silences about mass atrocity, human rights violations, and state-sanctioned injustice reveal just how rich this ongoing thread is (Caswell 2010; Duff et al. 2013; Punzalan 2009).

Building on this discussion, this chapter is concerned with notions of meanings and silences and the ways in which archivists and archival procedures differentially produce knowledge about particular events, figures, and sites at the exclusion of others. As such, this chapter stands on theoretical foundations laid by anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot and archival theorist Verne Harris. Trouillot examines the relationship between power, archival sources, and the creation of historical knowledge. He posits that silences are encoded in historical production at four key moments: "the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)" (Trouillot 1995: 26).[2] In other words, not all events are recorded, not all records are incorporated into archives, not all archives are used to tell stories, not all stories are used to write history. At each stage, the silences are compounded such that "the combined silences accrued through the first three steps of the process of historical production intermesh and solidify at the fourth and final moment when retrospective significance itself is produced" (Trouillot 1995: 59). In this way, "any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences," with silences reflecting specific instances of the assertion of power and not mere chance (Trouillot 1995: 27).

Influenced by Trouillot, but more substantially by Jacques Derrida, South African archivist Verne Harris argues that archives facilitate forgetting as much as remembering. In his seminal article, "The archival sliver: Power, memory, and archives in South Africa," Harris (2002: 64-65) complicates the construction of archives as raw material for collective memory, positing that ":

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2 Postmodern archival theorists may bristle at Trouillot's emphasis on facts, instead asserting that archives are repositories of evidence, which must be mobilized in support of an argument, rather than free-floating facts. Furthermore, Trouillot does not clarify if the narrative phase of his construction corresponds to collective memory.

The archival record provides just a sliver of a window into the event" and drawing attention to archival destruction, absence, silence, and decay. ~~. Even if archivists … were to preserve every record generated …, they would still only have a sliver of a window into that country's experience … But of course in practice, this record universum is substantially reduced through deliberate and inadvertent destruction by records creators and managers, leaving a sliver of a sliver from which archivists select what they will preserve. And they do not preserve much. Moreover, no record, no matter how well protected and cared for by archivists, enjoys an unlimited life span. Preservation strategies can, at best, aim to save versions of most archival records. So archives offer researchers a sliver of a sliver of a sliver.~~ "If, as many archivists are wont to argue, the repositories of archives are the world's central memory institutions, then we are in deep, amnesic trouble," he writes.~~.~~

For both Trouillot and Harris, power is key to understanding which traces of the past survive, which are destroyed, which are granted archival attention, and which are ignored. Yet, Harris differs from Trouillot in two keys ways. First, Harris focuses on the impact of elisions on collective memory rather than on official history (as previously differentiated), and second, unlike Trouillot, Harris is a trained archivist who has intimate understanding of archival functions such as appraisal, description, and preservation, and possesses the professional vocabulary and expertise in which to address them.

In light of these ongoing conversations both within and outside archival studies, this chapter unpacks the "accretions of meaning" (Edwards and Hart 2004a: 49) and "bundle[s] of silence" (Trouillot 1995: 27) encoded in the creation of a single digital record in an online

archive, and it explores the impact of such accretions and omissions on collective memory of a painful episode in South Asian American history. Like Harris, I am both a scholar of archival studies and a practicing archivist, and, through this chapter, I situate collective memory within the context of archival labor and expertise, highlighting the ways in which archival choices mediate the uneven production of historical sources. By tracing one letter through the archival process—and exposing 'shadow' records that did not make it through this same process——this chapter reveals how historical circumstance and archival decisions combine to produce a publicly accessible digital record. The chain of events by which this record was preserved, incorporated into an archive, digitized, and made available online constitutes a social process of memory-making. In this light, this chapter argues that archives are not storehouses for memory's inert raw materials (as Assmann would have it), but rather, hotly contested spaces through which meaning is actively constructed, memory is shaped, and forgetting becomes buried. Underlying this work is the assertion that archives——particularly online archives——are not reserved for elite academic users, but are sources of evidence about the past for much broader segments of society, including genealogists, K-12 students and educators, undergraduates, artists, activists, and interested community members.

Now that collective memory and silence have been situated as theoretical concepts in archival studies, this chapter will trace how they are made manifest in a tangible example.

Record Creation

In 1928, Vaishno Das Bagai, one of the first known Indian immigrants to the United States, checked into a hotel in San Jose, California, turned on the gas, and killed himself (Bagai n.d.). Bagai had moved to the United States in 1915 and joined the Ghadar Party, a political

organization advocating for an end to British colonial rule in India by any means necessary. He had become naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1921, but a 1923 Supreme Court case, *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, revoked his citizenship, as well as that of other Indian immigrants, based on racial grounds. Indians, the court ruled, while Aryan, were not white in the common sense of the term, and therefore did not meet the racial requirement for becoming naturalized U.S. citizens. The court's decision would have a profound impact on the nation's once-burgeoning Indian community, as thousands of immigrants, now barred from voting and owning property, returned to India (Lal 2008).[3]

Stripped of his citizenship, Bagai was no longer able to own his home, operate his import-export business and general store, or travel back and forth to India without accepting a British passport. "It was a depressing, frustrating time for him," said his granddaughter, Rani Bagai. "He felt like he had no good options" (Bagai 2013). He started plotting his suicide, taking out several life insurance policies to provide for his family after his death.

Bagai left behind several suicide notes. In his public note, published by the *San Francisco Examiner* under the title "Here's a Letter to the World From Suicide," Bagai positioned his suicide as an act of political protest (Bagai 1928). In it, he explained how he "came to America thinking, dreaming and hoping to make this land my home" (Bagai 1928). He continued (Bagai 1928), that, though "

We all made ourselves as much Americanized as possible," only "humility and insults" have ensued. . But they now come to me and say, I am no longer an American citizen. They will

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[3] As Lal notes, the citizenship of the American wives of these Indian immigrants was also revoked. It would not be until the 1965 National Origins Act that South Asians began migrating to the United States again in sizeable numbers.

not permit me to buy my home and… they even shall not issue me a passport to go back to India. Now what am I? What have I made of myself and my children? We cannot exercise our rights, we cannot leave this country. Humility and insults, who is responsible for all this? Myself and American government [sic].

As this note reveals, the emotional burden of being a stateless person, a racialized body in an adopted homeland, was too much for Bagai to bear.

In a second handwritten note he left behind to his wife, Kala Bagai, Bagai explained that he could not envision a future as a British subject after he had worked so hard to escape his past as one. "Please forgive me and try to forget me," he pleads. The letter instructs Kala to retrieve his formal will in their safe. In a third letter, this one typed and presumably left in the safe, he details practical and financial arrangements for Kala and , including a list of all his life insurance policies and a warning to be cautious of fiscal matters with the lawyer. Bagai tells his wife she can share this letter with their three sons, but underlines in red ink "no one else should read this."

In archival terms, all three of Bagai's letters are records. Records, according to the prevailing definition in archival studies, are "persistent representations of activities" (Yeo 2007: 334) that travel through space and time (Ketelaar 2004). While records contain information, they are distinct from other forms of documents in that they serve primarily as evidence of action. Bagai's letters may tell us information about how South Asian Americans were treated in the wake of the revocation of their citizenship, but they have archival value primarily because they are evidence. While we can read information about Bagai's suicide in secondary sources, his letters provide evidence that his suicide took place, evidence of his motivations, and evidence of his state of mind immediately prior to the event. From an archival perspective, the records are

proof of activity and can be mobilized by archivists and users in different contexts as they are preserved and made accessible across distances and epochs.

Preservation

Vaishno Das Bagai's suicide was shrouded in mystery for his granddaughter, Rani Bagai. Growing up, she had heard many stories about her biological grandfather, but he had died decades before she was born, and his death was spoken about in hushed tones. She was not told about his suicide until she was a teenager. "There was a sense of embarrassment in Indian culture about suicide. It just wasn't talked about," Rani said. "I always felt there was a deep dark secret that we weren't supposed to mention, but I wasn't sure why" (Bagai 2013). Rani's grandmother, Kala, had remarried after Vaishno Das Bagai's death, and Rani referred to her grandmother's second husband, Mahesh Chandra, as grandfather. Like Vaishno Das Bagai, Mahesh Chandra was actively involved in the Indian anti-colonial struggle.

In 1981, Mahesh Chandra passed away. Two years later, Rani's grandmother, Kala Bagai Chandra, passed away. The couple left behind suitcases and trunks full of records: rare political and religious pamphlets, diaries, newspaper clippings, photographs, and correspondence. Among this invaluable trove of historical materials, Rani found Vaishno Das Bagai's suicide notes.

Rani decided to keep everything she could get her hands on. At first, she thought the collection would just be of personal interest. But then, as sShe describedsaid (Bagai 2013), ":

I love old relics and mementos and sentimental things and of course I loved going through the trunks of my grandmother. I see this [anti-colonial] literature in there and … I see some of the pain … and the commitment to this movement [for Indian independence] … and I sensed that

this history meant so much to these people … ~~I was thinking at the beginning that I just want to keep it so that I can read some of it myself because … I'll learn a lot of stuff I never knew that's not in the history books … how Indians were looked at by Americans here, and how they were treated, just like … the Chinese and Japanese, [how] they were just seen as laborers, nothing else. And I thought wow, I just need to keep this for myself. But I also had this sense …~~ that someone else wants to see this as well.~~.~~" She continued, "~~There are people who would love to read this; it can't just be me …~~ It can't just get thrown in the trash like it could have been so easily. So I insisted on taking it all home with me, boxing it up."

For decades, the materials sat in Rani's Los Angeles house in their original state. "I decided at one point that I need to start going through it and look at what it is that I actually have here … I began organizing and cataloging and arranging things … I began to get a handle on it …" (Bagai 2013). She grouped like publications together in folders and put these folders in well-ordered boxes. She placed papers in plastic sleeves, created binders for each of her grandfathers and grandmother, and placed letters, including Vaishno Das's suicide notes, into these binders.

In archival terms, Rani preserved her grandfather's letters. Preservation is the "act of keeping from harm, injury, decay, or destruction, especially through noninvasive treatment" (Society of American Archivists n.d.a). Preservation is designed to prolong the materiality of an object for as long as that object has importance to society. It is not a default course of action for all materials; it is a conscious and ongoing commitment to a record or collection of records through time and space based on a value judgment. Records must be deemed worthy of preservation in order to be preserved. As preservation experts David Grattan and John Moses write, "For objects to be preserved, they must engage the user in some way, they must have a

constituency … that cares about their survival" (Grattan and Moses 2006: 45). By slipping her grandfather's papers into plastic sleeves, binders, and boxes, Rani was making a conscious decision that these records were worth stewarding for future use.

Archivization

Around 2008, Erika Lee and Judy Yung, two historians working on a book about early Asian immigration to the U.S., contacted Rani (Bagai 2013; Lee and Yung 2010). They had read a 1915 newspaper clipping from the *San Francisco Post-Call* that featured a striking photograph of Kala and her young son Ram (Rani's father) arriving at Angel Island, and they wanted to know more (Nose Diamond Latest Fad Arrives Here from India, 1915). Rani shared her family's materials with them, which they used to write a chapter on early Indian immigrants in their book *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*.

In 2012, at the Association for Asian American Studies annual meeting, Erika Lee attended a presentation on the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) given by SAADA board member Manan Desai.[4] SAADA is a volunteer-run U.S.-based online community archival repository that I co-founded in 2008 with my colleague Samip Mallick. SAADA is the only non-profit organization dedicated to documenting, preserving and providing access to the rich history of South Asians in the United States. ~~As SAADA board members, we see ourselves not just as archivists, but also as activists who activate traces of the past to mobilize visions of a more just future (Caswell forthcoming). In this regard, we hope that our work documenting past struggles against colonialism, racism, and exploitation inspires ongoing activism against hate crimes, discrimination, and exclusion.~~ SAADA is radically focused on access and has no central physical location; SAADA volunteers digitize historic materials and collect born-digital sources,

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4 The website of SAADA can be accessed at www.saadigitalarchive.org.

archivally describe them in a culturally appropriate manner, link them to related materials in the archives, and make them freely accessible online to anyone in the world with an internet connection. After digitization, the physical materials remain with the individual, family, organization, or repository from which they originated, following what is known in archival studies as a 'post-custodial model,' because the donor does not transfer physical custody of the records to the archives.

Lee told Desai about Rani's materials, and, intrigued by their historical value, Desai contacted me about the possibility of digitizing the materials for inclusion in the archives. I contacted Rani, and in October of 2012, we had our first meeting. Rani recalls (Bagai 2013), ":

As soon as Michelle described … the digitization process… and how the photos and the manuscripts and archives would be stored, I was just so enthusiastic…. I said, "Yes!" This is exactly what this [collection] needs because this paper is just going to disintegrate and disappear in a few years. It needs to be captured in digital format. At least then it can be copied as other formats arise in the future…." She continued (Bagai 2013), "… In a library…, even in a university, if its paper, someone has to know where it is, a librarian has to know … how to find it and give it to the person who needs it … That's not easy. wWhereas this way, … this is perfect. iIt can be searched for easily with key words." Bagai asserted, "So I was very enthusiastic about working with Michelle on this. I had no hesitation. In fact, I thought this can be done two ways. I can do this now digitally and then the actual paper itself can also be stored somewhere … [This history] will definitely not be buried."

After this initial meeting with Rani, I organized a group of volunteers from UCLA to digitize her family's materials.[5] After our second meeting, Rani signed SAADA's Loan for Duplication Agreement, and I left with the first box of materials, which we planned to borrow, appraise, scan, and return to Rani in exchange for the next box.

From an archival perspective, Rani 'deemed' SAADA worthy of caring for (digital copies of) her family's papers and I (as an archivist) 'deemed' Rani's collection worthy of archiving (Harris 2012: 150). There are two layers of archivization here: Rani's deeming and mine. For Derrida (1996) and Harris, archivization takes place outside of and before my professional authority as an archivist, at the moment when Rani deemed her grandfather's "trace to be worthy of protection, preservation and the other interventions which we call archival" (Harris 2012: 150). For me, there is a second level of archivization at the point of my judgment as an archivist, at the moment when I deemed these traces worthy of inclusion in SAADA. This initial point of contact between donor and archivist is a mutual exchange that reveals both how archiving is a social process and how archives are social institutions. Archivists make value judgments. Donors make value judgments. These judgments determine what is offered to an archive, what might be subject to subsequent archival processes, what might be available for future users. At this point of archivization, Rani's stories about her grandfather have the potential to become public; they move from individual memory to collective memory.[6]

Appraisal

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5 The volunteers for this project were UCLA Master's in Library and Information Studies students, Carolyn Lee and Emily McNish, and an alumna of that program, Amanda Hogg.

6 My use of the term archivization here differs from that of Derrida (1996), who sees as archivization the formation of an external trace during records creation (cf. Ketelaar 2001).

Contrary to common misperception, archivists do not keep everything. We are not packrats, but curators, skillfully selecting important records. Appraisal is the process by which archivists determine the enduring value of records offered to a repository. Selection is the process by which archivists pick which records to keep based on the value determined during appraisal. Value is not an objective quality that exists outside of context, but rather is inextricably linked to the mission and policies of the particular archival repository for which the archivist works, the training and philosophy of the archivist and the repository, the political, historical, and cultural milieu in which the archivist works, and the archivist's professional ethics and personal values. Through the appraisal process, archivists determine which materials to keep, which to get rid of, which materials become the raw materials of history and collective memory, and which will be gone forever. It is the primary mode through which archivists act as gatekeepers to the past. It is not a science, but an art.

Appraising materials for an exclusively digital post-custodial repository like SAADA differs significantly from appraising materials for acquisition in traditional archives. First, digitization is extremely labor intensive. Whereas in a traditional repository, more records take up more shelf space, in an exclusively digital repository, more records require workers to scan more pages. Archivists working for online-only repositories must factor in the labor and time it takes to digitize each record deemed worthy of digitization. In SAADA's case, this labor is done on an entirely volunteer basis; I would not want to waste my volunteers' time scanning materials that are not of utmost importance. Secondly, appraisal for digitization becomes less dire of an act than traditional appraisal because materials that are not deemed worthy of digitization are not destroyed; they still physically exist and can, hypothetically at least, be accessed by determined researchers, or ~~even digitized by~~<u>placed in</u> other repositories. Yet, while the consequences are not

as dire as traditional appraisal, appraisal for digitization determines which records will become

easily accessible in a digital form, thereby influencing which stories get told, how, and by whom.

In this light, assessing the value of Rani Bagai's materials was not an easy task. Viewed in

isolation, the materials clearly tell a compelling narrative about a single immigrant family.

Viewed in the context of Asian American history and politics, these materials situate South

Asians as a century-old community in the U.S., document the largely untold story of the Indian

American anti-colonial struggle, and counter dominant narratives of South Asians as successful,

apolitical recent immigrants who exemplify 'model minority' ideals. However, given this clear

historic import, not all of Rani's materials fit ~~fit~~ within the scope of SAADA's mission and

collection development policy (SAADA n.d.a), which states that we focus exclusively on South

Asians in the U.S. . ~~SAADA's mission statement (SAADA n.d.a) specifies~~,

~~The South Asian American Digital Archive … document[s] and provide[s] access to the diverse~~

~~and relatively unknown stories of South Asian Americans.~~ Our collection reflects the vast range

of experiences of the South Asian diaspora in the United States, including those who trace their

heritage to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the many South

Asian diaspo~~ra communities across the globe.~~

SAADA's Collection Policy further specifies that materials related to pre-1965

immigration and political involvement and activism are of particular interest (SAADA n.d.b).

Clearly all three of Vaishno Das Bagai's suicide notes fall within the scope of SAADA's

mission and were deemed worthy of inclusion, but what to do with pamphlets published in

Amritsar, India, advocating for Indian independence or Irish Marxist literature that links the Irish

and Indian anti-colonial struggles, or copies of Indian newspapers commemorating Gandhi's

death? While of obvious historic value, these materials fall outside the scope of SAADA's focus

on documenting South Asian *American* history. Of course, it can be argued that, by virtue of

being read by an early South Asian American immigrant, these materials are also a vital trace of

South Asian American history and evidence that early South Asian American immigrants saw

their activism as part of a transnational struggle against colonialism. But, given the time and

labor constraints and the inevitable acquisition of all of the physical materials by a traditional

repository, we made appraisal decisions not to include many items in Rani's collections in

SAADA. We were not arguing that the materials we did not select were not valuable, but rather

that they were not of utmost value to SAADA at the moment. In this way, appraisal presents

another opportunity for archivists to shape collective memory, to imbue certain historical

moments with meaning, to silence others, and to do so at specific moments in time during which

aspects of the past resonate in particular ways.

Digitization

As we have seen so far, all three of Vaishno Das Bagai's suicide notes (the public note

published in the newspaper, the handwritten note to his wife left at the scene, the typed letter to

his wife left in the safe) have made it through some crucial steps; they have been kept by his wife

and preserved by his granddaughter, they have been included in a collection offered up to an

archive, they have been determined by an archivist to be of value. Yet, as the next stage in their

social life reveals, digitization can be another site of elision. Not everything is meant to be

digitized; not everything *is* digitized.

As Rani handed me the binder in which she had so carefully encased her grandfather's suicide notes in plastic sheeting, she asked me not to digitize the two private letters to her grandmother. It is one thing to digitize a letter created explicitly for publication, it is another thing entirely to digitize a letter marked, in underlined red ink, "no one else should read this."

This is a familiar dilemma for archivists and an inherent violation for records creators. What to do with materials not meant for your eyes, let alone that of countless future researchers? The majority of materials kept in archives were not created with public consumption in mind. An archivist's job is frequently voyeuristic, exposing the intimate details of the dead, often without their explicit consent. This brings to the fore a pervasive ethical tension in archival work, with archivists bearing the burden of keeping secrets in some cases, or deciding that making private records public is in the best interest of the common good in others. In many cases, we can only make our best decisions, weighing the ethics of privacy with the benefits of future use and hope that our donors' ghosts have mercy on us.

Digitization adds another layer of 'public' to 'public consumption.' This is clearly not a level of publicity that Vaishno Das Bagai could have conceived, but we can infer, based on that rationally premeditated red ink, that he would not have wanted the public to read his private notes to his wife, even 85 years after the fact. Back in my office, I honored Vaishno Das's wishes and Rani's instructions and directed the volunteers to skip over the two private notes by marking them with Post-It notes that read "DO NOT SCAN." Obeying these instructions, the volunteers skipped over the private notes. They took the public suicide letter out of its plastic sleeve, placed it on the bed of a scanner, pressed the scan button, waited roughly two minutes as the high resolution TIFF file was created, cropped the file to remove excess space while still leaving a

border, and saved a copy on a file on the hard drive of my computer. They then returned the

public letter back to its sleeve and moved on to scan the next record.

So what is lost here? What traces of the past are elided by my decision to honor Rani's

wishes? What are SAADA users missing when they read the published suicide note only? What

are they missing when they are not even made aware that the private notes exist? What secrets do

I keep as the archivist deciding not to scan the notes and how might these secrets change how

users interpret the past? The point here is not that an accurate view of South Asian American

history cannot be written without these two private notes, but rather, that the archive is always

mediated, always filtered through historical circumstance, always a complex amalgamation of

the will of the creator, the donor, and the archivist. The archive is not just an inert storehouse of

"pure potential" (Assmann 2006: 271) waiting to be activated by a user, but it has already been

activated multiple times by the records' creator, user, inheritor, and archivist. No archival record

is a pure source of memory; it is always the result of a series of choices marked by mediation,

interpretation, and elision. Omissions are inherently part of the creative process of remembering,

"illustrat[ing] how the multiple trajectories of forgetting are active parts of memory work" (Mills

2008: 83). As Derrida (1996) pointed out, to archive something is to forget it, to un-commit from

memory, to store it externally.

Yet, despite the loss of Vaishno Das Bagai's private suicide notes in the digitization

process, something new is gained. Contrary to popular understanding, the digitization process

exemplified here does not extract the content of records from their materiality, but rather

catalyzes a chain of events that creates new objects and guides new relationships between people

and these objects. As SAADA volunteers placed the public suicide note on the scanner and

pressed the scan button, the TIFF file they created is both digital and material. Digital files are

things in space. They take up room. Space is not infinite. Choices must be made. Scanning the

letter transformed it into a string of ones and zeros, but these ones and zeros exist in the material

world; they move through cables, they are stored on servers, they require computers to decode

them and people to activate them. "We access electronic texts and data with machines made of

metal, plastic, and polymers," Marlene Manoff writes. "Networks composed of fiber optic cables,

wires, switches, routers, and hubs enable us to acquire and make available our electronic

collections" (Manoff 2006: 312). Similarly, Jean-Francois Blanchette reminds us, "information

cannot exist outside of given instantiations in material forms," "bits are necessarily both logical

and material entities," and "computing systems are suffused through and through with constraints

of their materiality" (Blanchette 2011: 1042). The new digital file we created from the raw

material of Bagai's letter is a material object, suffused with a different form of physicality,

defined by the constraints and capabilities of hardware, software, cables, and servers. As Johanna

Drucker writes, "the stripping away of material information when a document is stored in binary

form is not a move from material to immaterial form, but from one material condition to another"

(Drucker 2009: 147). ~~As Blanchette and Drucker remind us, T~~technical understanding of how

digital files work is critical to the theoretical discourse surrounding digitization.

My assertion of the materiality of the digital stands in contrast to a popular strand of

discourse that sets up the material and the digital as "a series of oppositions" (Witcomb 2007:

35). This still-common line of thinking fetishizes the digital as a radically new form of

disembodied existence that, while operating through quasi-magical technology, squashes the

unparalleled aura of being in the presence of originals (Sassoon 1998, 2004). For many scholars,

theorizing the digital (particularly the digitization of photographs), the process provokes a sense

of loss, "cannibalising and regurgitating" original materials (Willis 1990: 199) or creating merely

"a digital ghost" of the original (Sassoon 2004: 190). For these scholars, "the materiality of many images evaporates into a series of electronic pulses," causing the connection between object and beholder to be severed (Edwards and Hart 2004b: 14). Without an understanding of the material and technical processes by which digital files are created, preserved, and retrieved or the labor that is involved in such processes, such objects are dismissed as lesser imitations rather than new and crucial sites of materialized memory processes. As Fiona Cameron writes, "The digital historical object has been undervalued and subject to suspicion because its labor of production has been concealed and therefore bears less evidence of authorship, provenance, [and] originality" (Cameron 2007: 70). By exposing the materiality of digital labor, I argue that digitization is a process marked by both foreclosure and creativity, rupture and synthesis, elision and meaning-making~~, all of which contribute to the ongoing process of constructing collective memory~~.

In the interest of exposing the labor behind archival processes, I now briefly explain what happened to the digital file of the suicide note once created. The digital file was then uploaded to a shared server space hosted by UCLA, where SAADA Executive Director Samip Mallick accessed it in the SAADA offices in Philadelphia. Samip then made backup copies of the file for storage on secure servers and in the cloud, uploaded the photos to the SAADA server, entered detailed metadata that provided context to the files,[7] and then made them public. Informed by interpretation, conviction, and expertise, a host of decisions made by SAADA volunteers and board members over five years resulted in the infrastructure and apparatuses that enabled the completion of this process, resulting in the digital file of the letter being made accessible online.

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7 The creation of metadata is called archival description and presents yet another layer of mediation between the archivist and the record. I have skipped over describing this step in detail for the purpose of space.

As for the material records, after all of the records that SAADA wanted in a particular box were scanned, the box was returned to Rani Bagai in exchange for a new box that reinitiated the same process with other materials. While Rani may eventually donate the physical materials to a repository, she is now keeping them in her home.

As this section has revealed, digitization is a social process, involving a complex network of relationships between record creator and donor, between archivist and donor, among archivists and/or archival volunteers, and between archivists and users. Adding to this are layers of imagined relationships between the creator of the record and the archivist (who makes decisions based, in part, on what he or she perceives to be the creator's intent), and between the creator of the record and the user (who makes inferences about the creator's intentions based on evidence found in the record). Most importantly, the social process of memory making happens among users, as, together, they enact the digitized records to shape collective memory of the South Asian American past, as we now investigate.

Use

Since May 13, 2013, Vaishno Das Bagai's public suicide note has been posted on SAADA, where it is freely available online to anyone in the world with a computer or mobile device and an internet connection. Need we be reminded, use of digital archives is also material; the internet relies on signals travelling in space, users rely on equipment and bodies that exist in space to access digital archives, institutions rely on physical infrastructure to operate digital archives. On SAADA, the digital form of the suicide note is linked to related materials on early South Asian American immigration and anti-colonial activism, reflecting SAADA's collection development priorities in both those areas, and placing the letter within the context of a century

of political struggle. This new context, made possible by the digital, breathes new life into this

suicide note, allowing future users to activate it in ways we cannot currently predict, giving the

record a "trajectory" (Latour 2010: 8) we cannot currently name.

While it is too soon to gauge just who will use this record and how, we do know that it

was viewed 23 times in the first six weeks it was available online from users as dispersed as

Houston, Bethlehem, Cupertino, and St. Petersburg. Two weeks after it was posted on SAADA,

the suicide note was cited on the South Asian American blog "The Aerogram" in a post about

Vaishno Das Bagai entitled, "A Man Without a Country" (Yalamanchali 2013). Together with

other items in the collection, it has also been used by the organizers of the Berkeley South Asian

Radical History Walking Tour, a regular event that brings people to sites of South Asian

American history in the Bay Area and raises money for progressive South Asian American

causes (Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour n.d.). It is clear from these brief

glimpses of use that the note is already shaping how community members collectively remember

Vaishno Das Bagai, early immigration, and the century-old history of South Asian American

political activism. While, like all archivists, we have no control over how people ultimately make

use of our records, we hope that Bagai's suicide note and all of our materials will change the way

community members conceive of the South Asian American past and envision the future, that

they will be used to inspire creative ways for communities to coalesce around common goals for

the inclusion and recognition of immigrant communities, and that they will be invoked as tools

for social justice (Caswell ~~forthcoming~~2014).

Although we have no guarantees about how Vaishno Das Bagai himself would react to

the new life SAADA archivists have breathed into his public suicide note, his granddaughter has

some speculations. She said (Bagai 2013), "

I think it would please my grandfather quite a bit to know that his battles and his frustrations which ended so sadly are not lost, that others can read about them and learn what was going on at that time .… "[This] is a chapter that [has been] somewhat overlooked … My grandparents would be astounded … They would be so happy … to know that … this history is preserved and that their grandkids and great grandkids could learn something about early California history, San Francisco history, Indian history.

Through our archival interventions, SAADA volunteers hope that we have honored Bagai's legacy by drawing attention to the political struggle for which he paid the ultimate price. Some 85 years after Vaishno Das Bagai's suicide, in a medium he himself would not have imagined, his legacy of political activism lives on.

Yet, despite our best efforts to carry on Bagai's legacy, our understanding of his actions is incomplete. The digital files we have created are slivers, not storehouses; fragments, not totalities. As Trouillot and Harris might caution, we should never be lulled into thinking that all events generated records, nor that all records made it into archives. It is only through a series of chance events, historical circumstances, ethical and familial obligations, material formulations, and personal and professional commitments that one of Bagai's three suicide letters was made accessible. The other events, the other records, the other stories and slivers are lost to us. This tracing has confirmed Mills and Walker's assertion that "memory is not something out there to be discovered but a process that is continually changed through the active engagement of people in remembering" (Mills and Walker 2008: 7-8). SAADA archivists did not discover the memory of

Vaishno Das Bagai's suicide; they helped shape it in an ongoing social process that will

ultimately be determined by future users of the digitized records.

This chapter has traced the creation, preservation, archivization, appraisal, digitization,

and use of a single record in order to highlight the complicated processes by which archivists

assert their voices in the forging of collective memory. While tracing a single record is a useful

heuristic device, this exercise has offered a false promise by interpreting this record in isolation

from the other records in Bagai's collection. As an archival studies perspective demands, records

are always to be interpreted in the context of their surrounding materials; they are primarily

collections of collections, not collections of individual records. Each record is inextricably tied to

the others in its collection in an interrelationship that is known as "the archival bond" (Society of

American Archivists, n.d.b). Each of the records in Bagai's collection has its own biography,

each marked by elisions and accretions, each part of a larger story that it both must be read in the

context of and that it contextualizes.

As this chapter has shown, SAADA archivists have created a silence in the historic record

by honoring Vaishno Das Bagai's wish to keep his personal suicide notes private. While this

particular silence has been exposed through this chapter, every archival collection is rife with

unexposed silences. At the same time, by digitizing his public suicide note, we have helped shape

and revive collective memory of a watershed—and nearly forgotten—moment in South Asian

American history. The role of the archivist in shaping collective memory is never simple; it is

always marked by complex layers of absence and presence, personal judgment and professional

obligation, clusters of meaning and "bundle[s] of silence" (Trouillot 1995: 27). As archivists

working to preserve traces of this painful past, as community members who have inherited its

legacy, and as activists working to build a more just future, it is imperative that archival labor be

made visible, that the digital is understood as a material form, that the cracks and fissures of

silence in archives be exposed, and that users see archives as the highly mediated sites of

memory construction that they are.

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