

KEYNOTE

“So that Future Organizers Won’t Have to Reinvent the Wheel”: Activating Digital Archives for Liberatory Uses

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Grounded in the emerging field of critical archival studies, this talk will look toward the radical politics of independent, minoritized identity-based community archives to envision new liberatory possibilities for memory work.

Based on participant observation and interviews with users at community archives sites, the talk will explore how communities activate digital collections to build solidarities across and within communities, trouble linear progress narratives, and disrupt cycles of oppression. Caswell will introduce a new concept, *corollary records*, to describe the activation of archives that document a precedented moment in time, that is, a time in which the same or similar oppressions that are currently occurring have also previously occurred.

She will then argue that at their most useful, records can be activated in *corollary moments* in the present, so that community members can learn activist tactics and strategies and get inspiration to keep going. “We have been here before, we have survived this before, we have resisted before,” corollary records assert, “*here’s how.*” She will then give concrete examples of archives catalyzing liberatory uses of corollary records through artists and activist residency programs, advocacy efforts, and community-led mutual aid projects. Caswell will explore the temporal, representational, and material aspects of liberatory memory work, ultimately arguing that archival disruptions in time and space should be neither about the past nor the future, but about the liberatory affects and effects of memory work in the present.

Thank you. I want to thank Becca Quon and Nancy Adams and all the staff at CLIR for inviting me and organizing the Digitizing Hidden Collections symposium. It is an honor to be here today with you all.

I am Michelle Caswell, I am co-director of the UCLA Community Archives Lab, co-founder of the South Asian American Digital Archive.

I know that I am in a room full of recipients of the Digitizing Hidden Collections grants and I have massive respect for you all. I approach you all with a great deal of humility. You are out there every day doing the work of selecting, digitizing, and describing collections created by and representing

minoritized communities. Some of you do this at considerable personal costs and against the general stream of priorities at your institutions. I want to acknowledge how much labor and expertise and chutzpah that takes.

I know from my own work with the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) how tedious digitization work can be, how exacting, and sometimes how isolating, but I also know how important it is and how rewarding it is when someone activates a record you digitized to see themselves in history and to work toward a better place in the present, to generate new scholarship, new art, and new political organizing.

Today, I will share with you some examples of digitized records being activated for new art and organizing and why these activations are so crucial for building a more just world in the present. I will take you on the journey I have travelled as a scholar and archivist and I will challenge you to ask yourself: Now what? Now that we have digitized and described and made accessible these incredible collections, now what? What do we do with them? How do we compel their use? And not just any kind of use, but how do we compel the liberatory uses of digitized records? And again, I approach this with humility, having not entirely figured it out myself, but, I hope, pointing us all into new directions beyond dominant archival rhetoric that has asked us to be neutral and impartial to the users of our collections or has very narrowly conceived of users as academic researchers writing published scholarship. Historians are absolutely important, but they are not our only important potential user group, as I hope I will show you in the next 50 minutes or so.

The title of my talk today is “So that Future Organizers Won’t Have to Reinvent the Wheel”: Activating Digital Archives for Liberatory Uses. The talk is based on two sets of work: First, my most recent book, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, which came out in 2021 from Routledge Press. Specifically, part of today’s presentation is pulled from chapter three, which is called “From Representation to Liberation.” That chapter draws from my experiences as a co-founder and ongoing volunteer for and advisor to the South Asian American Digital Archive or SAADA, as well as with focus group interviews my research team and I conducted with users of six different community archives sites in Southern California.

Secondly, I will present some unpublished data based on interviews and focus groups my excellent graduate student researcher Anna Robinson-Sweet has conducted with people who narrate their oral histories to two different community archives: SAADA and the Texas After Violence Project, or TAVP. TAVP is a community-based archives that documents the stories of survivors of state violence in Texas. This latter research was conducted as part of an IMLS-funded project led by TAVP that employs community-engaged participatory action research to investigate participants’ motivations for participating in an online archive. That research asks: How does it feel to tell your story? How does it feel to have your story preserved indefinitely in a digital archive? Who might use these records and how? The answers to these questions build on the work I have been doing for the past decade on the emotional impact of archival use.

As some of you might know, my previous work has addressed the ways in which marginalized identity-based community archives counter the symbolic annihilation of oppressed communities, that is, the ways that predominantly white university and government archives have underrepresented, misrepresented, or completely ignored communities of color and LGBTQ+ communities (Tuchman 1978, 3–38; Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez 2016). I have posited that

community archives counter symbolic annihilation with representational belonging, empowering people who have been 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. To assert, I am here, we were here, we belong here.

My more recent work builds on and goes beyond these previous findings. More specifically, I will address the relationship between liberatory appraisal and liberatory outreach, arguing that archives should build on recuperative and representational collecting initiatives to activate records to stop cycles of oppression. I will introduce the concept of *corollary records*, to show how records from similar moments in history can be activated in the present.

I will also argue that more robust and accurate representation of minoritized communities is a limited (and limiting) end goal for archives, however important. I argue that archives must aim for more than representation, leveraging the minoritized histories they have painstakingly recuperated for liberatory ends. Through strategic outreach with activists, artists, and other community members, archivists can ensure the records in their care are activated to stop oppression in the present. Ultimately, I argue that archives must pair liberatory appraisal with liberatory activation in order to resist the white temporal imaginary.

I know that many of you work for university archives at dominant institutions. Many of these institutions are stuck—when we try to challenge dominant practices within them we are often met with brick walls. These brick walls are fortified by white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy. I think that we can all turn to community archives for inspiration, for new theory, and for new strategies on how to dismantle these brick walls and envision and enact new liberatory ways of doing archives.

But first, I should clarify what I mean when I say community archives. Diverging from centuries of archival thinking about government and bureaucratic records, the past decade has seen the rapid expansion of inquiries into what we now call community archives. The first attempts to describe the community archives phenomenon emerge from the UK. Writing in 2009, Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd write “A community is any group of people who come together and present themselves as such and a ‘community archive’ is the product of their attempts to document the history of their commonality” (2009, 75). The same research team wrote “The defining characteristic of community archives is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality on their own terms” (2009, 73).

This definition is a great opening shot, but it requires some refinement in our current context, I think. More specifically, I argue that we cannot discuss the phenomenon of community archives in the US without addressing power inequities. Here we can broadly divide community archives into two categories—those that represent and serve dominant communities, such as some historical societies that are often invested in white supremacist histories as a way to maintain or increase local property values, and those that represent and serve underrepresented, marginalized, and/or oppressed communities. It is the latter group of community archives that my research addresses. We might call them, more specifically, minoritized identity-based community archives in which the history held in common coalesces around a shared history of oppression, be it white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, ableism, and their complex intersections.

Furthermore, I think it is important to distinguish independent community archives from community-driven or community-accountable collecting projects located within dominant institutions. These efforts are incredibly important, but have different issues in terms of autonomy, independence, agility, sustainability, etc. So, to be absolutely clear, when I say “community archives” I mean “independent minoritized identity-based community archives,” which is clunky and doesn’t easily translate into a nice acronym.

And another point of clarification: Although this talk draws on my experiences as co-founder and volunteer for SAADA, I have not directly worked on the specific activation projects discussed herein, other than digitizing many of the collections from which the projects draw. That said, I am in constant conversation with SAADA’s executive director Samip Mallick, and I often provide informal advice on project ideas and implementation. As such, I cannot claim to stand entirely apart from the SAADA work addressed in this talk. I make no assertions of being an outside researcher (though I am a white outsider to the South Asian American community), but rather I am an integral component of the phenomena my work describes, in a manner consistent with participant observation as a research method. I also cannot claim ownership or take credit for most of the archival labor described herein and shift from using “we” to “they” pronouns in discussing the work of SAADA staff when appropriate.

I’ll get started where I usually do, with the South Asian American Digital Archive, or SAADA.

Speaking at a July 2020 community-wide open Zoom meeting, SAADA Executive Director Samip Mallick said, “As an organization, even though we are thinking about and engaging with the past, our work has really always been about the present, the now.” The meeting was called by Mallick in the midst of three intertwined crises: a global pandemic that has disproportionately devastated Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities; the ongoing state-sanctioned murder of Black Americans brought to the fore by the murder of George Floyd; and inept, malfeasant, white supremacist national leadership in the White House. “We have some good news to share in the midst of this challenging time,” Mallick’s invitation promised.

The July 2020 meeting was an opportunity to celebrate the organization’s twelfth birthday, to announce a new grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that would help support the organization for the next two years, and to launch a fundraising campaign with supporters. It was also an opportunity to demonstrate the archives’ value by drawing on corollary moments from the community’s past to make sense of the seemingly senseless and increasing overwhelming present. At that moment, that meant activating records in SAADA’s collections to inspire action around three major events: the COVID-19 epidemic, the movement for Black lives, and the upcoming 2020 election.

“There is little doubt we are living through a historic moment,” reads the opening text of SAADA’s participatory initiative to document South Asian American experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Launched in April 2020, the project, **Letters from 6’ Away**, asks South Asian Americans to write a letter to their future selves about their experiences with the pandemic. With the creator’s permission, the letters are included in the archives and mailed to the creator in the future, “in hopefully better days ahead.” Participants respond to a series of prompts online, upload a photograph of themselves, designate degrees of privacy or publicity from a continuum of options

provided, and submit a mailing address in which they would like their letters to be sent back to themselves in the future. There is also a space to honor a loved one who has passed during the crisis.

The submissions are deeply personal and self-reflexive, yet collectively offer a window into a wider community ethos of grief, feelings of isolation, and the search for solace. In these letters, historic traumas surface and resurface as South Asian Americans learn to cope with the new reality. For example, in her public entry to the project, Samira Ghosh of Texas writes “I would remember the first news that we need to store food. My first instinct was to buy rice and salt at Gandhi Bazar [sic]. It was a reaction to a historic trauma that my community went through. Bengal had a big man-made famine post WW2 and rice and salt were in scarcity. I had heard stories of what my family went through. I was surprised that this deep-seated insecurity had surfaced.”

The Bengal Famine of 1943 emerges as a powerful intergenerational memory, being relived even though the writer herself had not directly experienced it. She continues that getting groceries delivered in the early days of quarantine “felt like Christmas morning.” For some participants, the pandemic surfaced deeply ingrained traumas and enacted circular temporalities as if history was repeating itself, oceans and decades away, in a vastly different context.

The letters are created to be read at a noncorollary moment in the near future. It is the hope that, in the future, when the pandemic has presumably subsided (or at least its demands on us are presumably different), that activating these records by reading them will reveal some new insight into what will then be that present moment.

The project builds community by providing a platform for letters to be shared with each other. But, more importantly, it underscores the affective importance of the creation of records to participants—those who write letters to themselves feel validated, heard, documented in the historic record, even if they choose not to share their letters with others. In the future, the project transforms records creators into records users as participants read their own letters from the not-so-distant past. In so doing, it inaugurates a cyclical temporality, catalyzing movement back and forth along a pendulum swinging back and forth between now, two and a half years ago, two and a half years from now.

After inviting attendees of the July 2020 community meeting to participate in the Letters from 6' Away project, Mallick then pivoted to the other crisis on everyone's minds: the proliferation of and impunity for state-sponsored violence against Black people. South Asian Americans have a complicated history with the American racial hierarchy, as many records in SAADA attest; some early immigrants from India aligned themselves with whiteness to varying degrees of success, while others passed as Black. The 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Act that enabled South Asians to immigrate to the US in larger numbers would not have been possible without the Civil Rights movement. Yet anti-Black racism remains an ongoing problem within the community, despite the efforts of many South Asian American activists.

For Mallick, the July 2020 meeting was an opportunity to further position SAADA as an organization committed to justice for Black people. Acknowledging complex histories, he drew connections between the ongoing Movement for Black Lives and corollary moments in history in which South Asian Americans were involved in activism for Black liberation. Yet, he also directly confronted anti-Black racism within the community and did not gloss over its history

of aspirational (mis)alignment with white supremacy. “In response to the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and too many others, we are sharing stories from our community’s past that help engage our community today in the struggle against anti-Black racism,” Mallick said.

He then recounted **the story of H. G. Mudgal**, an Indian immigrant to Harlem in the 1920s, who became the editor of Marcus Garvey’s newspaper and an outspoken activist for Black independence. “H. G. Mudgal’s story is a reminder both of the historical possibilities and duties for South Asians to engage in solidarity with Black communities, but moreover, the urgency now for us to engage in those solidarities and to address anti-Blackness within our own communities,” he said. Mallick continued, “To be able to share these stories from the past, to be able to engage with contemporary discourse and dialogue and movements has been really rewarding and enriching for us an organization and I hope they help to move our community as well.”

Mallick’s comments reflect a temporality of urgency, in which records from the past are invoked to inspire contemporary political action. In this way, the 1920s are set up as a corollary moment to the 2020s, and records documenting H. G. Mudgal from the 1920s are set up as corollary records to those being created by South Asian American activists fighting anti-Black racism now. By catalyzing corollary records from corollary moments, Mallick showed precedent for South Asian American solidarity with Black Americans, evoking “historical possibilities,” as he put it, that align the community with the contemporary Movement for Black Lives. These activations forge a cyclical temporality that dispenses with the racial progress narratives of white time; instead of insisting that “it gets better” for minoritized communities, these efforts show how oppressive histories repeat, how “historical possibilities” can be invoked to forge affinities and solidarities in the present, how a precedent of anti-racist activism can inspire action for Black lives in the now. In this work, archives become urgently relevant and crucially contemporary. The current moment demands more from the archives than simply documenting these stories of solidarity in hopes some future users might find them. SAADA catalyzes these records into action to forge corollary moments across cycles of time and to create a temporality of urgency for the communities it serves and represents.

I will show you another example. Through its social media pages, SAADA also highlighted contemporary artwork that draws on archival records and historical knowledge for ongoing activism for Black liberation. In June 2020, for example, the organization highlighted a series of drawings by Shebani Rao, a contemporary illustrator whose prior work has used records in SAADA to depict South Asian American historical figures. Rao’s drawings, shared on the SAADA site, portray a variety of older South Asian American immigrants, “aunties and uncles” as younger South Asian Americans might characterize them, in a range of clothing styles and skin colors, talking about the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. In Rao’s drawings, these aunties and uncles place the murders of Black people by the police within the context of a long history of violence against Black communities and describe ongoing protests against this violence. “The mainstream news describes these protests as riots. Remember, even our struggle against the British—which Black activists in America supported—was also described as riots! Let’s be on the right side of history and support our Black community as they fight for freedom and safety!” The drawings end with a call to “Donate to end state violence against Black people TODAY!” and a list of websites of Black-led activist organizations and bail funds where such donations can be made (Rao 2020). The work is intended for younger generations of South

Asian Americans to pick whichever auntie or uncle image best resonates with them and to share it with their parents' generation.

Rao's posters invoke a corollary moment—Indian independence from colonial rule—to garner South Asian American support for the contemporary Movement for Black Lives. By showing how the word riot was weaponized against South Asians in a just struggle against British rule, Rao asks South Asian Americans to question the use of the term to describe protests against impunity for the murders of Black Americans. In so doing, Rao forges a solidarity across space, time, and community, creating a corollary moment between Black and South Asian communities. The posters also give language to younger South Asian Americans attempting to have conversations about anti-Black racism with their own family members. As such, they compel action.

Mallick's final announcement at the July 2020 meeting also conveyed the urgency of the past by forging yet another corollary moment with the present. Looking ahead to the November 2020 US presidential election, Mallick discussed a **video** SAADA produced in May 2020 featuring Rani Bagai, whose grandparents, Vaishno Das and Kala Bagai, were among the first immigrants from India to the US, arriving in 1915. I will play it for you now.

In this brief video Rani Bagai articulated a cyclical temporality, later echoed by Mallick at the community meeting, that refuses the logic of white racial progress narratives. Progress is not a given, the granting of an ever-increasing number of rights is not inevitable. Rather, these messages communicate: South Asian Americans did not always have these rights, their ancestors fought for them, they could be rescinded, we might have to fight for them again. Oppressive histories repeat themselves; the threat of this repetition looms large. In just two minutes, this video counters white temporalities that assume the inevitability and desirability of a just, post-racial future. Instead, we see a community weathering repeated attacks throughout history and using traces of the past to ward off the next attack in the present, drawing on records from corollary moments, in this case the 1923 dismantling of citizenship rights, to catalyze voter registration in 2020. There is a temporal urgency to the past here and to archival activations of the past.

In each of these three cases, SAADA is drawing on what I call corollary records from corollary moments to catalyze political consciousness and action in the now. Corollary records document reoccurring moments in time in which the same or similar oppressions get repeated. A corollary moment is a point in time with historical precedence. At their most useful, records can be activated in corollary moments in the present, so that community members can learn activist tactics and strategies and get inspiration to keep going. "We have been here before, we have survived this before, we have resisted before," corollary records assert, "here's how." By activating corollary records, SAADA's community members are, if only for a second, interrupting reoccurring oppressions by learning from previous generations of community members facing corollary moments. This is one way archives can dismantle systemic oppression and engage in liberatory memory work—by catalyzing the activation of corollary records in the past to inspire and strategize activism in the present.

These examples mark an important shift for the organization, a movement from collecting records for recuperative and representational purposes, what I would call a form of liberatory appraisal, towards using and encouraging others to use those records against oppression in what I call liberatory activation.

In the initial years of working with SAADA, Mallick, other volunteers, and I were stunned with the amount of materials we found that dated back before 1965, when US immigration law changed to enable greater numbers of South Asians into the US. Back in 2008 when we founded SAADA, we had read about California's early Punjabi-Mexican communities and heard rumors about a few anti-colonial activists along the West Coast of the US and Canada from the turn of the twentieth century, but we had no idea the wealth of records we would find once we really started to look (Leonard 1994). We feverishly digitized as many pre-1965 records as we could find, thrilled to fill in some of the gaps and silences we had found when we looked for South Asian American stories in mainstream repositories like the US National Archives and Records Administration and dozens of university archives.

Our initial aims were recuperative in the sense that we were trying to recuperate lost histories, pulling them back from oblivion into the community's consciousness.¹ Our work was also representational in the sense that we were trying to increase the amount and types of representations of South Asians in US stories about the past. Recuperative and representational collecting kept us busy for nearly a decade and, guided by a very broad appraisal policy, we discovered (and digitized) more than we had ever anticipated about South Asian American history.

Building on Duff and Harris's naming of "liberatory description," I characterize these initial recuperative and representational collecting impulses as forms of liberatory appraisal (2002, 285). In placing value in materials created by minoritized communities, in appraising them as worthy of retention and preservation, and in thinking about the affective, material, and political consequences of such decisions on the communities represented in such records, archivists engaged in representational and recuperative collecting can be said to engage in liberatory appraisal.

Still, for SAADA's staff and communities, representing brown people in US history has never been enough, as important as it is. For years, Mallick and community members have discussed how, if the archives only collected the records of the most prominent South Asian Americans, the collection would replicate the same forms of erasure it sought to combat. What good would a South Asian American archives be if it only validated the experiences of straight cis upper caste Hindu Indian men? Keenly aware of these archival silences, Mallick consciously sought out collections created by South Asian American people and organizations further minoritized by gender, caste, sexuality, region, religion, ability, and class.

Over the years, it became increasingly clear that, for SAADA's collection to be inclusive of those most minoritized within South Asian American communities, we would have to think outside of the box of dominant Western archival appraisal, catalyzing the creation of new records rather than searching for preexisting records to digitize alone.

In 2019, with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, SAADA launched the Archival Creators Fellowship Program, which partners with Fellows to create archival collections that reflect the histories and perspectives of some of the most marginalized groups within the South Asian American community: Dalit women; Indo-Guyanese immigrants; and queer and trans people are just some of the communities that have been included.²

¹ My use of the word *recuperative* here is indebted to Anjali Arondekar's "recuperative hermeneutics" and the limits of "archival recovery." Anjali Arondekar. 2009. *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1.

² SAADA, Archival Creators Fellowship Program, <https://www.saada.org/acfp2019>. Funding for the project has been renewed and will continue through at least 2022 with six additional Fellows.

Here is one example, the Archives of Queer Brown Feelings, collected by Mustafa Saifuddin. I encourage you to go back and spend some time here.

Each of these collections has a significant oral history and storytelling component that depart from dominant archival practices; for example, they allow for participants to remain anonymous if they so choose, given the real threat of violence Dalit, trans, queer, and gender nonconforming community members face. SAADA is now in its third round of archival creator fellows and the work they have done has been staggeringly beautiful and simultaneously heartbreaking and life affirming and has added to the archives immeasurably.

The project reveals how, in the absence of robust preexisting documentation, recuperation alone is not enough. While it is crucial to catalyze the generation of new records that fill in gaps, in order to truly center minoritized communities, archives must respect silences, resist surveillance, and honor consent. This will mean changing commonly accepted practices and policies.

Our initial twin impulses of recuperation and representation were motivated by what I would come to describe as countering the symbolic annihilation of South Asian Americans with representational belonging. By finding, digitizing, and providing access to as many records documenting the early history of South Asian Americans as we could, we were countering the community's symbolic annihilation in history with a powerful assertion of existence and belonging.

Clearly, experiences of seeing yourself and your community in history after being excluded or misrepresented due to racism and/or hetero-patriarchy are emotionally powerful. Nearly every interview and focus group I have conducted with the volunteers, staff, users of, and donors to minoritized community-based archives over the past decade confirms the affective impact of robust representation after repeated and extended experiences of symbolic annihilation in mainstream archives. This affective impact, archives provoking the feeling of self-recognition in minoritized communities, can be an important emotional element of liberation. It is joyous to see yourself robustly represented after feeling symbolically annihilated. This joy is inherently political in a system designed to oppress.

It is important to note that symbolic and actual annihilation are intimately related. Symbolic annihilation both precedes and succeeds actual annihilation such that individuals and communities are rendered expendable, invisible, or nonexistent before they are subject to violence, particularly state-sanctioned violence. And then, after violence, such murderous acts are often rendered invisible or expunged from the record, magnifying and mimicking the violence itself. Every dehumanizing misrepresentation in archives that says "you are not quite human" and every archival absence that says "you are not important enough to collect" adds up to create the conditions that enable mass murder and/or genocide to occur. After such violence happens, every dehumanizing misrepresentation of that violence in archives that says "you deserved it anyway" and every archival absence of that violence says "your death is not important enough to note" also adds up to the conditions that justify mass murder and/or genocide, grant impunity for it, and enable it to occur again, setting us all up for the fallout next time.

Given this link between symbolic and actual annihilation, any discussion of liberatory archives must assert the importance of robust representation and recuperative collecting. Liberatory appraisal strategies such as these seek to center oppressed positionalities by assigning archival value based on the needs of oppressed communities; these needs may include valuing records

for evidentiary purposes as in the case of potential legal redress or, for affective purposes, in the case of countering symbolic annihilation with representational belonging. It matters if you can see yourself represented in history. It matters if others can see you represented in history. But still, representation is not the only or ultimate goal of liberatory memory work.

Too often recuperative collecting projects fall into a trap of respectability that is ultimately counter to the aims of liberation. A politics of respectability insists on collecting records that conform to dominant expectations about what a minoritized community should be (Lee 2016). This is true of many university-led projects that seek to recuperate the history of minoritized communities by documenting their prominent “firsts”—the first politician from a given community, the first business leader, the first actor. Filling archives with celebratory success stories from prominent leaders can reinforce harmful stereotypes that blame oppressed people for their own oppression; many Asian American community archives, for example, can undergird “model minority” myths that thinly veil anti-Black racism (Prasad 2001). Such collections, whether they are in dominant or community-led archives, are about inclusion within oppressive structures rather than about liberation from them. They pander to dominant groups instead of resist domination.

Furthermore, as many trans activists have noted, the heightened visibility brought about by increased representation can further expose vulnerable communities to violence and other forms of oppression. This paradox, simultaneously holding in tension representation and endangerment, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, speaks directly to cyclical temporalities, as minoritized communities respond to repeating cycles of oppression and flashes of liberation. The desire or need to be seen and heard changes over time in response to the larger political climate. Visibility, one might ask, for whom? In this context, recuperative and representational collecting can be exploitative, extractive, and harmful, the result of oppressive appraisal practices, if downstream use is not considered.

Given this complexity, more representational collecting is not necessarily the result of liberatory appraisal, but it can be. Recuperative and representational collecting can be liberatory appraisal strategies if they are part of a larger liberatory project. Thus, liberatory appraisal is the process of determining the value of records in regards to their potential activation for liberation struggles. Contrary to the past century of dominant Western appraisal theory, liberatory appraisal considers the potential uses of records in making appraisal decisions and further asks whose uses and for what aims. In this sense, liberatory appraisal is intimately tied to liberatory outreach, as it is only in the activation of records that their full liberatory potential can be realized. Its undergirding assumption is that archives can catalyze particular kinds of use (political, artistic, activist) by modeling that use in their own practices and by targeting outreach efforts to groups engaged in liberatory work.

Archives, it has become increasingly clear to me, must leverage the recuperative and representational imperatives to activate corollary records across corollary moments in the present for liberation from oppressive systems. The work of archives and the work of activism, the work of representation and the work of liberation, cannot occur on separate but parallel tracks; they must be intertwined. I add here the notion of liberatory activation to describe those interventions in and uses of records that seek to dismantle systems of oppression and imagine and enact new possible worlds. It is not enough for archival institutions to collect records documenting minoritized

communities and/or activist movements with a vague notion of potential future use; these records must be activated by archivists and users for liberation struggles now. Archives, like many other cultural, social, and legal institutions, have a largely unrealized liberatory potential.

Realizing the imperative for liberatory archival activation changed how I did work for SAADA and how I discussed SAADA's work with others in the organization. After a decade of recuperative and representational work with SAADA, Mallick, myself, and other SAADA community members subtly began to shift focus from collecting more representative records to activating the significant body of records we have already collected towards liberatory ends. This is an ongoing journey. The projects described in this talk are important milestones in this pivot, but there is still a long way to go. These initiatives signal an important pivot towards liberatory activation and foreshadow future work.

SAADA's shift from liberatory appraisal to liberatory activation marks a new relationship to time for SAADA. First and most obviously, it reveals the maturation of the organization after more than a decade of collecting; now that we have a significant body of materials, we can encourage their use. But it does more than that, reshaping the role and responsibility of archives in cyclical, rather than linear time. In a cyclical temporality in which oppressive history repeats, the need, desire, and ability to be represented in archives fluctuates over time. This temporal construction resists the white temporal imaginary that asserts the linearity of time and the inevitability of progress. In catalyzing the activation of records to build corollary moments across time, space, and community, SAADA demonstrates that liberatory appraisal can propel the liberatory activation of records in the current moment. Liberatory activations will shift over time, as the political climate and needs of minoritized communities shift in response to repetitions of oppression. Refusing the stable logics of white temporality is a critical aspect of liberatory memory work, that must be enacted in tandem with material redistribution of resources, as I argue in my book.

I want to share with you now some quotes from interviews and focus groups with users of community archives and with people who have narrated their oral histories for inclusion in community archives. I think these quotes are illustrative of what potential users, that is users outside of the narrow dominant formulation of users as academic researchers, want from archives.

Back in 2017, my research team and I conducted some focus groups with users of Lambda Archives, an LGBTQ+ archives in San Diego. One such user, Angela Risi, a recent college graduate, spoke brilliantly about how archival materials can inspire new activism and teach key political strategies from the past. She said:

... I found the meeting minutes of when the Gay Liberation Front was proposed to be passed as a recognized student organization and it was approved.... That was one thing I was really impressed by, especially with activism happening today. I think that people think that activists who came before our time were this entity that had power and control and were official, but the records show it's just a handful of people to get together and scribble some things down on a notepad and that it evolves into something you could never have foreseen.... I don't know if [activists] are currently using [the archives] but I think certainly one way that they could use it is just as pure motivation to believe in the work that they're doing and see it is important, and ... also to learn how activism has and hasn't been successful in this specific context of the city of San Diego, what tactics have worked, what haven't....

She went on to address how strategies gay and lesbian communities historically used to fight police raids on gay bars could be used to fight police brutality today. Notice that the imagined use here, of organizers finding inspiration and strategies and tactics is almost wistful, right? Angela doesn't know if organizers are using archives, but she hopes they do.

More recently, the interviews and focus groups my graduate student researcher, Anna Robinson-Sweet, has been doing with South Asian Americans who told their stories to SAADA and formerly incarcerated people who told their oral histories to the Texas After Violence Project, confirm that members of other minoritized communities share this kind of wistful imagined use of archives by organizers.

For example, activist and artist Yalini Dream gave an oral history for inclusion in a SAADA project documenting Sri Lankan Tamil feminism. When asked why she decided to share her story for inclusion in an archives, Dream said:

... My hope and ideal is that in 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 100 years that engagement with these [Tamil feminist queer] conversations will have grown and there will be greater interest in how these ideas percolated.... People feel like they have to reinvent the wheel over and over and over again and or people are put in a position where they have to learn as they go, which has been the position that I've been in for most of my political life and artistic life.... There's a gap in eldership for my generation within Tamil feminist queer community. So, I'm probably amongst the few Ilandai Tamil queer... folks my age who is actually engaging with and mentoring and supporting the leadership of younger folks. And I didn't have that for myself.... I felt that absence so wanted it for a younger generation.... Maybe this interview [I did for SAADA] could be mentorship access for younger generations so they don't have to feel like they're creating the wheel from scratch, that they can actually take things from where we've got them to ... and then, you know, dissect it, critique it, challenge it, evolve it, ... so we're not like getting stuck in the same place over and over again because of lack of access to information and ideas that have already been, hard fought to be part of the public discourse.

Here, we see a very specific imagined user and use for this oral history record: younger and future generations of Sri Lankan Tamil feminist queer activists who can learn strategies and tactics from now-current organizers and take their activism a step further because of it. The imagined uses are not vague, they are specific; the imagined users are not academics, they are community organizers. Yet, while wishes are clear, the language is circumspect: maybe, could be. There is a potential here that is not yet realized.

I will give you another example, this one from the Texas After Violence Project. Kirsten Ricketts gave her oral history about her experiences being incarcerated. She said:

So, that's why I agreed to do the video in the first place is because we so desperately need changes within our criminal justice system for those who are currently incarcerated, especially in the State of Texas; this is a horrible place to be incarcerated. And so, I just wanted to be as open, honest, and transparent as I could to make sure that that, you know, people might be drawn to stand up and do something for their loved ones as well.

The oral history was told and the record was created not for some unknown future apolitical user, but with a very specific political aim in mind—that listeners are activated to stand up and advocate for incarcerated people after listening to Ricketts’s story. The imagined use of the record compels action for material shift. Again though, the language is pregnant with potential. Might be. Not will be.

Here, I think, community archives practices can point all of us in the right direction. We are not just collecting, digitizing, and stewarding these records for some unknown users in some vague future that might never come. We must engage in liberatory outreach now, to connect organizers working for material liberation to the records in our care so that they may find inspiration, learn tactics and strategies, build on their predecessors’ work, and move beyond reinventing the wheel.

We can do this through concerted marketing and outreach efforts. We can identify organizers in our local areas, reach out to them, invite them into our archives, conduct workshops with them to engage them with our collections, craft policies that make them feel welcome. We can apply for funding to create artist and activist in residency programs so that we can pay community members to activate the records. I want to ask all of us, myself included: Now that we have digitized the records, what is our strategy for liberatory outreach?

I am asserting here that we must activate the digitized records in our care for material shifts. Here I identify two critical components of material redistribution for liberatory memory work: redistribution in society writ large and in the archival realm specifically. In the American context, liberatory memory work must support the activation of records for reparations for Black people and land reclamation for Indigenous people. Focusing more narrowly on archival practice, liberatory memory work must support the redistribution of resources from well-endowed predominantly white, elitist institutions to chronically underfunded community archives that serve and represent minoritized communities.

In 2016, I was part of a group of three American memory workers—Jarrett Drake and the now late activist and historian Doria Johnson (who is deeply missed), and myself—who formed a delegation to participate in the Nelson Mandela Centre’s international dialogue series on how to use memory-for-justice in post-conflict societies. Participation in this series posed a temporal challenge for us as Americans: how do you relate to memory workers in post-conflict societies, when you come from a society which is not only not post-conflict, but fully in the midst of a 500-year-old conflict that (at least in 2016) most white Americans do not even acknowledge? It became nearly impossible to relate to our colleagues from places like Bosnia, Rwanda, and Argentina, places where there had been a clear break, a regime change, an official reversal of policy, followed by a public accounting for crimes and, to varying degrees, a formal mechanism for reparations, redistribution, and/or justice.

To reflect on this disorienting experience, the three of us co-authored an essay that advocates for what we called a “liberation theology for memory work.” This brief essay helped us make sense of our experiences and laid the groundwork for this chapter by outlining temporal, affective, and material concerns. Our essay states:

“The past was never singular, nor will the future be. In order to generate these futures, memory work should be dangerous. It should seek not only to acknowledge past trauma, but to repair it. It should aim to upend hierarchies of power, to distribute resources more equitably, to enable

complex forms of self-representation, and to restore the humanity of those for whom it has been denied” (Johnson, Drake, and Caswell).

This frames the stakes of liberatory memory work, extending the boundaries of such work well beyond formal sites of knowledge production and transmission such as archives, libraries, and museums. What is at stake, ultimately, is not just how we remember the past, but how we distribute power—its temporal, affective, and material instantiations—in the present.

After this general outlining of the stakes of liberatory memory work, we then specified what this means for US memory workers. We wrote:

“In our immediate context ... [liberatory memory work] means using our skills as archivists, public historians, and academics to end the state-sponsored murder and mass incarceration of Black people and the continued genocide and displacement of Indigenous peoples, to dismantle systems of white supremacy, to actively resist the oppression of the most vulnerable amongst us, and to re-envision forms of justice that repair and restore rather than violate and harm individuals and communities” (Johnson, Drake, and Caswell).

Herein lies the tangible, material answer for the question of what liberatory memory work can accomplish—nothing less than the redistribution of wealth and land in support of Black and Indigenous liberation struggles.

Memory workers, and archivists in particular, can take a lead role in the movement for material reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans in the US. There is much debate about what forms these reparations might take, including direct cash payments to the descendants of Africans enslaved in the US. As several prison abolitionists have made clear the deep connections between enslavement and the ongoing scourge of police violence and mass incarceration, any movement towards material reparation for Black Americans must be linked to dismantling the police and the prison industrial complex to have lasting material liberatory consequences.

If archivists think outside of the confines of neutrality and the constraints of professionalism, we can take part in this struggle. Archivists are experts on records. We can use our expertise in records to communicate their potential and their shortcomings, what got recorded and what did not, and why. We can activate the records in our care in support of efforts towards material reparations for descendants of enslaved Africans. We can provide space for descendants of enslaved people to publicize their legal claims for reparations, as archivists at Shift Design and the Texas After Violence Project did in 2019 in a public conversation with Tamara Lanier, who sued Harvard University for ownership of daguerreotypes taken of her enslaved ancestors (Texas After Violence Project and Shift Design 2019). If we are employed by institutions with such oppressive policies and procedures, we can refuse to abide by them and make our refusals public. We can also describe the records that we do have in ways that aid descendants in making legal claims.

We can mobilize the records in our care regarding previous successful claims to reparation to show that material reparations are not unrealistic dreams, but have historical precedent. Nazi records were used to figure out which Holocaust survivors were entitled to payment from the German Claims Conference (Claims Conference). US government records were used to figure

out which Japanese Americans were incarcerated during WWII and entitled to a cash payment (Hastings 2011). Cambodian archivists have activated records in their care to both convince UN officials to launch a tribunal and provide evidence to convict Khmer Rouge officials of genocide (Caswell 2014). Archivists have done this before. We can do it again, more concertedly, and on a larger scale.

I want to add to these imperatives a more specific demand for material redistribution as it pertains to the funding of archives. We need a redistribution of resources away from large predominantly white cultural institutions towards community-based archives representing and serving minoritized communities. As Bergis Jules has noted, foundations, government agencies, and high-net-worth individual donors have all, until very recently, excluded community archives from the funding sources on which mainstream museums and archives rely (Jules). White supremacy, as evidenced in extended divestment from the communities served and represented by community archives, extractive relationships with universities, and the biases of funding agencies, has caused the chronic underfunding of community archives. Meanwhile, funding structures based on the logics of capitalism and white supremacy have resulted in an overinvestment in predominantly white cultural institutions that house mainstream archives.

For example, I have seen an LA-based community archives launch a life-changing exhibition on a \$12,000 annual budget organized by an army of volunteers while, across town in an hour of traffic, the Getty Center spends millions conserving every last trace of white male detritus that very few, if any, people will ever touch, by design. Decisions about what to keep, how to describe it, and how to activate it should not be made solely by educated white people walled up in a white marble fortress in the hills of Brentwood; the BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities that sustain community archives should have access to the same amount and sources of funding to make autonomous decisions about their own materials. The impact of such a reallocation would be astounding, as community archives would be able to pay for dedicated staff and infrastructure, extending their scope and reach beyond our current imaginations. Again, I think community archives can be guide posts for new practices and theories for all kinds of archives, but they can't do anything if they can't afford to keep their doors open.

In closing, the relationship between representation and liberation in community archives is not either/or; it can and should be both/and. Archives can counter symbolic annihilation through liberatory appraisal that robustly represents and re-centers the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable communities without extraction or exploitation. Recuperative and representational collecting efforts can provide important material to counter symbolic annihilation with representational belonging and change dominant narratives of dehumanization that lead to the actual annihilation of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ communities. But archives should not stop there. We can push for liberatory use and outreach, activating corollary records in our collections to stop cyclical oppression in the now. Liberatory memory work implicates all aspects of the archival endeavor, from appraisal, to digitization, and description, and most importantly, to outreach. Our work is not over after digitization. Let's compel liberatory uses of the records we steward in the present, so that future generations of organizers don't have to reinvent the wheel.

Thank you! ●

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