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## Summoning the Ghosts: Records as Agents in Community Archives

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# Summoning the Ghosts: Records as Agents in Community Archives

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## Summoning the Ghosts: Records as Agents in Community Archives

“To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories.” –Avery Gordon (2011)

### Introduction

Compelled by what she encountered in the University of California, Irvine’s Southeast Asian Archive, artist Trinh Mai became determined to honor those who lost their lives in the Vietnam War through her artwork. Mai drew from photographs and letters found within the archives to create a body of work titled *Quiet*, a series of ghostly painted portraits overlaid with text from the letters of family members written to an international agency, pleading for help to find their missing loved ones. The work, which was installed at the Old Orange County Courthouse in Santa Ana, California, took on a life of its own. Ghostly faces and dispersed text floated upon Vietnamese mourning sashes that shifted subtly and ethereally in response to the bodies in the room that moved around them. Mai spoke of an interaction she had with a viewer of the work:

This gentleman walks in, and I had never met him before, and he looks up, and he just starts crying. And he was trying to talk to me, and you could tell he was just kind of trying to hold back his tears. He said, “I’m so sorry, my brother and sister had died during the war, this is forty years ago and it’s coming out right now.” And he just could not stop crying. And for him to share that he suppressed this, and then to be in this space where there’s Vietnamese faces all around these bigger than life-size portraits of them, and these stories that are swirling around him . . . that’s that spirit that just lives within these things.

This notion of records as dynamic, sentient, and generative agents, capable of inciting spectral presence, and moving people into new ways of being was echoed through the focus groups we conducted with fifty-four community members at five different Southern California–based community archives.

Archival scholars have explored how a range of archival activations, interventions, and interactions continue to change and build meaning in records. This is evidenced through the use of records in the art-making process, in the writing of history, and in their employment as agents of accountability in the pursuit of reparations. Despite archival literature that is centered on this potential for the activation of records, little empirical data has been collected to assess how users of community archives conceive of the agency of records.<sup>1</sup>

Based on findings from our focus group data, this paper explores how members of the communities documented and represented by marginalized identity-based community archives conceive of records as agents, embodied with the voices of past lives, and capable of performing

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<sup>1</sup> For more on records as agents, see Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014); Eric Ketelaar, “Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2001): 131–41; Kathy Carbone, “Artists and Records: Moving History and Memory,” *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2017): 100–118.

in service of their users. Users widely expressed the critical role that records play in the performance of desire and identity, materializing the longing that community members feel to see their voices represented. Across sites, users also emphasized that mainstream historical narratives are haunted by their absences, stressing how critical community archives are in filling in these gaps. These focus groups surfaced the notion of records as haunted, the silences of those not represented inciting a spectral presence among the traditional telling of history.

Our research evidences both the practical and symbolic implications of seeing records as agents, and signals a shift in how we conceive of the ability of community archives to combat symbolic annihilation. Within archival studies Michelle Caswell has utilized symbolic annihilation, a term first coined by feminist media scholars in the 1970s, to describe the way that marginalized communities are ignored, misrepresented, or maligned by mainstream media.<sup>2</sup> As evidenced by the focus group data, community archives users conceive of the agency of records as their ability to serve as evidence in counter narratives, embodying the voices of those who would otherwise be absent within the historical record. For some marginalized communities who are systematically and structurally conditioned to believe their stories do not matter, the conception of records as agents materializes the desire to see themselves represented in history. If the oppressive structures of dominant archival institutions fuel the ghostly voices of marginalized communities, then community archives serve the critical function of filling in the gaps left by hauntings.

Through the identification of two reoccurring themes—the agency of records, and records as haunted objects—this paper explores the question: How do community members conceive of the power of records stewarded by community archives?

## **Literature Review**

### *Definition of records*

Both archival scholars and practitioners have long debated the characteristics that define a record and have been unable to reach a consensus on a universal definition. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) defines records in a number of ways, including:

1. A written or printed work of a legal or official nature that may be used as evidence or proof; a document.
2. Data or information that has been fixed on some medium; that has content, context, and structure; and that is used as an extension of human memory or to demonstrate accountability.
3. Data or information in a fixed form that is created or received in the course of individual or institutional activity and set aside (preserved) as evidence of that activity for future reference.
4. An instrument filed for public notice (constructive notice).
5. A phonograph record.

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<sup>2</sup> Michelle Caswell, “Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight against Symbolic Annihilation,” *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 26–37.

6. A collection of related data elements treated as a unit, such as the fields in a row in a database table.
7. An entry describing a work in a catalog; a catalog record.<sup>3</sup>

In all these characterizations, it is evident that SAA's definition of a record is bound to the physical form that the record inhabits. SAA emphasizes the role of records as keepers of evidence, proof, and future reference, affirming how records are to be defined primarily through the information they hold. Yet, this definition is limited to fixed physical instantiations, and is quite restrictive as a result.

Geoffrey Yeo notes that the struggle to reach an agreed-upon definition of a record stems from the lack of consensus on whether such a definition would ultimately provide any further meaning to records themselves. Yeo cites this difficulty in arriving at unanimity as a result of postmodernist frameworks, and the continuing departure from positivist conceptions of archives and records. Yeo thus advocates for a *representational approach* to understanding records, characterizing records as “persistent representations of activities, created by participants or observers of those activities or by their authorized proxies.”<sup>4</sup> This definition allows for a more fluid and flexible conception of records that is not tied to a singular viewpoint.

Others have focused on the ways that we can define records in relation to their affective influence. For Kathy Carbone, the definition of a record is formed by how humans are impacted and shaped by them. Carbone states, “records are not solely representations of particular realities, but through the forces of their materiality and the presence of human bodies and activity they invoke, are affectively charged objects able to move people into new ways of being and doing.”<sup>5</sup> Carbone draws attention to the way in which records are intimately linked to the body, capable of evoking “bodily shifts” and summoning “affective powers” that hold the potential to elicit direct action and mobilize affective interactions.<sup>6</sup> This conception shifts the sole function of records away from representation, and instead invites the possibility of focusing on how records can more broadly enact social change.

Michelle Caswell also reinforces this conception of records when she states that “records are agents that actively influence human lives, society, and politics.”<sup>7</sup> Specifically in the context of records documenting marginalized communities, and records documenting human rights abuses, the power of records lies within their potential to be activated for social and political change. Caswell evidences the way that Khmer Rouge administrative records, specifically the mug shots taken of prisoners at Tuol Sleng prison, have transformed from records entwined with a brutal regime to records that are reactivated to instead “reunite disparate information, hold mass murderers accountable, and memorialize the dead.”<sup>8</sup> Through the creation of new records such as tribunal footage or photographs of people viewing the mug shots, the original intent of the

<sup>3</sup> “Glossary Terms,” Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology, Society of American Archivists, accessed June 3, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/r>.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Yeo, “Concepts of Record (1): Evidence, Information, and Persistent Representations,” *The American Archivist* 70, no. 2 (2007): 337.

<sup>5</sup> Carbone, “Artists and Records,” 102.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 159.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 12.

records are subverted, expanding the definition of records as not dictated solely by their physical form, but also in how they are activated in service of their users.<sup>9</sup>

Sue McKemmish advocates for the adoption of a pluralist framework in order to highlight the fact that records cannot be solely defined by their subject content or informational value. A clear influence on Carbone and Caswell, McKemmish characterizes a continuum conception of records in which their “evidentiary, transactional and contextual nature” is emphasized.<sup>10</sup> Thus, a definition of records that was previously wedded to their status as evidentiary documentation is expanded in order to allow for a more multidimensional conception of records in which a record is “always in the process of becoming.”<sup>11</sup> This allows for a conception of records that is ever-shifting, with continuous human interaction building upon and constantly evolving the meaning of records.

Shannon Faulkhead notes how for many people, but especially for Indigenous communities, oral tradition is a central means by which information is recorded and preserved in its passage through generations. Faulkhead pushes the boundary of the traditional definition of a record when she states that “a record can be . . . an actual person, a community, or the land itself.”<sup>12</sup> As this form of oral record-keeping has largely been ignored within mainstream discourses, it becomes evident how critical expanding the definition of a record becomes for filling in historical gaps and making space for underrepresented voices. Expanding the definition of records away from Western-oriented and textual documents not only breaks away from oppressive standards, but also allows for the “affective powers” to infiltrate one’s experience of records, as Carbone advocates. Faulkhead reinforces this by highlighting the idea that “records are not simply pieces of paper, recording, images, or multimedia materials. They are important sources of knowledge that interact with individuals and communities on various levels through time and space.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, Faulkhead stresses that the meaning of records is not inherently tied to their material nature, but resides in the relationships that people and communities form with them.

Expanding on Michelle Caswell’s notion of the archival imaginary, in which she points to the “dynamic way in which communities creatively and collectively re-envision the future through archival interventions in representation of the shared future,” Caswell and Anne Gilliland have proposed two new terms: impossible archival imaginaries and imagined records.<sup>14</sup> The term *impossible* archival imaginaries furthers the notion of archival imaginaries in order to account for

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<sup>9</sup> Caswell frames these activations from within a records continuum perspective, in which the reuses of mug shots shift the power from oppressive records creators to survivors and victim’s family members.

<sup>10</sup> Sue McKemmish, “Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 4 (2001): 334.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Shannon Faulkhead, “Connecting through Records: Narratives of Koorie Victoria,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 37, no. 2 (2009): 67.

<sup>13</sup> Faulkhead, “Connecting through Records,” 82.

<sup>14</sup> Michelle Caswell, “Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives,” in *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada*, ed. Dominique Daniel and Amalia Levi (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014), 49; Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined,” *Archival Science* 16 (2016): 55.

situations in which “the archive and its hoped-for contents are absent or forever unattainable.”<sup>15</sup> Imagined records are the subsequent by-products of those imaginaries, “created to provide evidence of affective reactions to such actions and acts as well as to the absence of desired documentation about them.”<sup>16</sup> Caswell and Gilliland cite the nonexistent video footage of Michael Brown’s murder as an imagined record, serving to “instantiate the possibility of a justice that has not yet arrived.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, imagined records hold the potential to serve as collective desire, acting as the embodiment of shared hopes, fears, and aspirations.

Given these varied approaches to defining and expanding definitions of records, it is evident that a multidimensional approach must be applied to defining records. As Yeo notes, “In the postmodernist frame of reference, all definitions are dangerous.”<sup>18</sup> This is especially true for records documenting marginalized communities, as adhering to traditional and hegemonic definitions often puts communities at risk of further erasure, misrepresentation, and marginalization.

### Records as Agents

The notion that material objects hold agency, that inanimate objects have the capacity to exert power independently of their human creators or users, is a somewhat radical and contested concept within the humanities. Cultural theorist W. J. T. Mitchell, in his examination of visual culture, arrives at the question, “what do pictures want?” In asking this, Mitchell posits that images actually come alive, want things, and are capable of desiring to be heard.<sup>19</sup> Mitchell states, “the question to ask of pictures from the standpoint of a poetics is not just what they mean or do, but what they *want*—what claim they make upon us, and how we are to respond.”<sup>20</sup> Foundational to this question is the belief that the relationships we hold with records are reciprocal. For our purposes within archival studies, it is vital to go beyond the literal question of “what do pictures want?” which, as even Mitchell cautions, involves the somewhat problematic personification of inanimate objects. In asking, “what do pictures want?” we can instead focus on the ways records are far from static. Although Mitchell ultimately confesses that images may not have literal wants or desires, entertaining this idea within a framework for examining images allows for their power and influence to surface, and holds very real implications for and responses from those who view them.

Social-cultural sociologist Arjun Appadurai highlights the agency of records that stems not necessarily from the material itself, but from the activation of records. Appadurai states, “All design, all agency and all intentionalities come from the uses we make of the archive, not from

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<sup>15</sup> Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries, 61. The impossible nature of these imaginaries arises from the reality that they are archivally impossible, and therefore unable to produce evidence in the traditional sense of actualized records.

<sup>16</sup> Gilliland and Caswell, “Records and Their Imaginaries, 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>18</sup> Yeo, “Concepts of Record,” 316.

<sup>19</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 9, 45.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, vx.

the archive itself.”<sup>21</sup> Appadurai is particularly interested in exploring these notions within the archives of immigrant communities. As Lidia Curti notes, “For Arjun Appadurai, memory is precious for migrants. He considers the diasporic archive a new form of agency, a desiring machine, and a link from personal to collective memory.”<sup>22</sup> This connection between archives and desire highlights Appadurai’s conception of the archive as a sentient space. He states, “Rather than being the tomb of the trace, the archive is itself an aspiration rather than a recollection.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, Appadurai posits that we move away from an interpretation of records as inanimate, and instead invites the notion of records existing in a space of longing and desire.

Within archival studies literature, Michelle Caswell has explored the notion of agency in the ways that survivors and victims’ family members reclaim records documenting human rights abuses in liberatory ways. Through this reclamation, records are transformed into “agents of social change for the future.”<sup>24</sup> Caswell emphasizes how, through subverting their original intent, these records are able to take on their own lives, performing in service of their users as opposed to their oppressive record creators. Wendy Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David A. Wallace emphasize the *evidential* value of records, granting records the power in serving as agents of accountability.<sup>25</sup> Building from a conception of records that highlights their power in inciting change in real-world and material ways, we can begin to conceive of the notion of records as agents imbued with an autonomous sense of purpose and will.

Although records inhabit myriad forms, photographs are often cited as the medium in which the agency of records becomes most visible. Visual and historical anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards speaks of the way “we accord photographs a certain agency in the making of history, allowing them to become social actors, impressing, articulating and constructing fields of social actions in ways that would not have occurred if they did not exist.”<sup>26</sup> Edwards introduces the idea that photographs, acting as autonomous agents, are able to perform in service of their users. Edwards also notes the way that photographs are capable of “replacing embodied experiences and connecting with spiritual ones.”<sup>27</sup> From this, we are able to see how Edward’s conception of records includes the possibility for users to connect with records on both sociohistorical and metaphysical levels.

## Records as Haunted

The notion of haunting is one that has been explored across the humanities, from art history to cultural theory. Sociologist Avery Gordon has written extensively on haunting, advocating for the framework of haunting as a way to draw attention to that which is repressed, absent, or silent.

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<sup>21</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Archive and Aspiration,” in *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, ed. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulde (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2003), 15–16.

<sup>22</sup> Lidia Curti, “Beyond White Walls,” in *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and Museum Practices*, ed. Beatrice Ferrara (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, 2012), 195.

<sup>23</sup> Appadurai, “Archive and Aspiration,” 16.

<sup>24</sup> Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Wendy Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David A. Wallace, “Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (2013): 332.

<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 17.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Edwards, “Photography and the Material Performance of the Past,” *History and Theory* 48, no. 4 (2009): 135.

Gordon states, “Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way . . . we’re notified that what’s been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, messing or interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us.”<sup>28</sup> Gordon points to that fact that hauntings are always just below the surface, and it is only through the acknowledgment of ghosts that one is able to confront those whose voices may be missing or have been stifled. The framework of haunting is particularly useful for thinking about the notable absence of records documenting marginalized communities from mainstream archival institutions.

Adapting Avery Gordon’s notion of haunting to the archival field invites the gaps within historical narratives to begin to surface. Gordon states, “If we want to study social life well, and if in addition we want to contribute, in however small a measure, to changing it, we must learn how to identify hauntings and reckon with ghosts, must learn how to make contact with what is without doubt often painful, difficult, and unsettling.”<sup>29</sup> As Gordon suggests, confronting the ghosts—the missing narratives in archives—puts archivists into an incredibly challenging and vulnerable position because it acknowledges the inherent biases within archival practice and subsequently opens up all preceding archival actions for critique. However, as Gordon points out, “Haunting is part of our social world, and understanding it is essential to grasping the nature of our society and for changing it.”<sup>30</sup> To acknowledge the ghosts is to give a name to what is already forever lingering within archives, whether in the official records created by oppressive regimes, the unnamed enslaved people in nineteenth-century photographs, or the perpetuation of racist ideology through the use of euphemistic descriptive language. As Gordon states, “haunting is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life.”<sup>31</sup>

Community archives are overrun with ghosts. In Gordon’s words, “To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories.”<sup>32</sup> Building off Gordon’s work, the framework of haunting has been readily applied by archival scholars. Archival studies scholar J. J. Ghaddar speaks of the Canadian national archive as haunted both by the national guilt caused by colonial violence and by the Indigenous voices that have become engulfed by settler narratives. Ghaddar notes how this engulfment “transforms Indigenous people into spectres in the archive, phantoms that haunt the Canadian national archival memory.”<sup>33</sup> Ghaddar points to the way that records documenting colonial violence, such as those gathered by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, are critical in pursuing reconciliation. Author Walter Jacobs similarly speaks of the ways records can be activated on the path toward collective healing. Jacobs states, “If we deliberately investigate these ghosts, we can learn to take control over troubling memories; we may turn destructive haunting into something more enabling.”<sup>34</sup> These

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<sup>28</sup> Avery Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011): 2.

<sup>29</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting,” 2.

<sup>32</sup> Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 17.

<sup>33</sup> J. J. Ghaddar, “The Spectre in the Archive: Truth, Reconciliation, and Indigenous Archival Memory,” *Archivaria* 82 (2016): 23.

<sup>34</sup> Walter R. Jacobs, *Ghostbox: A Memoir* (New York: IUniverse, 2007), 7.

concepts are not destined to remain in the abstract, but have the potential for real-world implications through their integration into practical archival work.

Scholar and human rights activist Viviane Saleh-Hanna draws from Jacques Derrida's work on Hauntology to introduce the term Black Feminist Hauntology, a framework in which the haunted object is revealed as "masculine hetero-normative Whiteness."<sup>35</sup> Saleh-Hanna explores the ways in which racial colonialism and white supremacy continue to haunt society based on a widespread practice of intentional amnesia. Black Feminist Hauntology therefore "opens a window to envision and articulate the overbearing silence—reimagined as enforced or willed forgetfulness surrounding colonial violence and its racializing ways."<sup>36</sup> What Saleh-Hanna refers to as a willed forgetfulness reminds us that the haunting of white supremacist and colonialist legacies is widespread, yet often invisible within mainstream archival institutions. Saleh-Hanna also identifies the voices that are missing—the sociological ghost, which she imagines as a Black feminist in order to surface the intellectual contributions of Black women that have "not been articulated or documented in White-ologies."<sup>37</sup> Thus, a dual conception of haunting is introduced—one in which white supremacy, as an ingrained structure within dominant historical narratives, continues to perpetuate ghost stories—and one in which the histories of marginalized communities are identified as ghostly voices, always beneath the surface, waiting to be heard.

## Research Sites

Between November 2016 and May 2017, the UCLA Community Archives Lab research team conducted ten focus groups with fifty-four community members in Southern California. The focus groups took place at five different sites: Lambda Archives, Southeast Asian Archive (SEAA) at the University of California, Irvine, Little Tokyo Historical Society (LTHS), La Historia Society of El Monte, and the Studio for Southern California History. Each site varied in location, scale, affiliation, community, and history, the details of which are described below.

Lambda Archives of San Diego is a nonprofit collection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) history whose mission is to collect, preserve, and teach the LGBT history of the San Diego and northern Baja California region. Although the bulk of the collections date to after 1970, some of the materials reach back to the 1920s, and include a broad range of formats such as photographs, ephemera, audio and video, and newspaper clippings collected from community members and their families. Lambda not only collects material relating to the communities' past history, but is also active in documenting current events related to LGBT issues.

Little Tokyo Historical Society is a volunteer-run, nonprofit organization founded by Little Tokyo community members in 2006. The organization is located in downtown Los Angeles and has a mission of commemorating the history and heritage of Japanese and Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo. Little Tokyo Historical Society is especially vital given the forced removal and incarceration of Little Tokyo's Japanese American residents during World War II. While Little Tokyo has not regained its thriving prewar Japanese American community, the neighborhood

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<sup>35</sup> Viviane Saleh-Hanna, "Black Feminist Hauntology," *Champ Pénal* 12 (2015), 32.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

remains a center of commercial and cultural activity for Japanese Americans. What sets Little Tokyo Historical Society apart is that rather than attempting to view the Japanese American experience with a national, state, or even citywide scope, its sole focus is on the history of the Little Tokyo neighborhood.

La Historia Society was founded in 1998 in the city of El Monte, California with the mission of preserving and promoting the cultural history of the barrios of El Monte. Through their programming and collections, La Historia Society aims to provide a voice for the Mexican American population of El Monte. The organization was founded by Mexican American community members who noticed that, despite El Monte being historically comprised of Mexican American farm laborers, there was a lack of representation of their community in the official El Monte Historical Society Museum. La Historia Society established its own museum in 2001, and displays photographs of the city's nine barrios (neighborhoods).

The Southeast Asian Archive was founded in 1987 at the University of California, Irvine in order to document the large influx of refugees and immigrants from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam to the United States, with a focus on materials related to Southeast Asian Americans in Orange County and California. The archive includes collections documenting the multidimensional experiences of Southeast Asians including refugee and immigrant resettlement and the development of Southeast Asian American communities. The archive was established through the initiative of Southeast Asian community members and carried forward by librarian Anne Frank who proposed the collaboration with UCI. Now directed by Thuy Vo Dang, the Southeast Asian Archive works closely with local Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian communities in order to collect, describe, and make accessible their stories.

The Studio for Southern California History is a nonprofit organization founded in 2005 by public historian Sharon Sekhon with the mission of providing an alternative model of public history. The studio is dedicated to critically chronicling and sharing the social history of Los Angeles and Southern California in order to foster a sense of place. The studio is dedicated to making their archives as accessible as possible by aggregating historical documents to produce resources for educators, students, and the general public as well as providing illustrated timelines, interactive maps, documented community art projects, and lesson plans. The studio is focused on participatory practice in order to create a space in which users can formulate their own place in history.

These sites were selected in order to represent the diversity of community archives in Southern California. Sites vary in the marginalized identities they seek to represent, as well as the governing bodies to which they report, which range from complete autonomy as independent nonprofit organizations, to affiliation with large public universities. Given these vast differences among community archives, including variation in identity, collections, funding, and user groups, it is difficult to compare these archives without collapsing important differences between communities and archives. Considering these difficulties, we highlight the importance of knowing the context of these findings as they pertain to their respective communities.

In our initial planning of this research project, we established community archives users as our focus group participants. However, in time it became apparent that in community archives it is

often difficult to make distinctions between users, staff, volunteers, and donors of materials. While our primary subject remained the community archives user, we decided to shift our requisites of who constituted a community archives user to include the perspectives of staff, volunteers, and donors who are members of the community served and represented by community archives. The resulting data therefore represents both those who are served by the community archives sites, and the people who are behind providing those services.

## Methods

From November 2016 to May 2017, the research team conducted ten focus groups with a total of fifty-four community members at five different community archives sites in Southern California. We defined community-based archives as grassroots efforts by marginalized communities to document their own histories; while such organizations take a variety of forms and may collaborate to varying degrees with mainstream university or government repositories, a defining characteristic of community archives is that community members themselves maintain some degree of autonomy over the collections in terms of physical custody, appraisal, description, and/or access practices.<sup>38</sup>

In conducting our focus groups, the research team utilized a semi-structured protocol to gather data.<sup>39</sup> Institutional review board approval was secured prior to contacting sites and collecting data. In order to recruit participants, we created flyers to post at the sites, and asked archivists to publicize the focus groups through word of mouth. We recognize that this process is not entirely free from bias, but is essential in protecting user privacy, as direct recruitment of archival users by researchers constitutes a violation of user privacy. In addition, protocols followed were in line with similar user studies in the archives field.<sup>40</sup> Focus group sessions ranged from 60 to 120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. Sites each received a \$500 stipend, and focus group participants were compensated with a \$15 Amazon gift card.

Focus group participants were given the choice to either remain anonymous or be credited by name. We wanted to offer the opportunity for participants to be acknowledged by name in order to give credit to the words and ideas brought forth during the interviews. Out of the fifty-four focus group participants, only two opted to remain anonymous. This research paper includes full quotations in order to preserve the context of the statements given by participants.

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Researchers initially conducted the first of a total of three rounds of coding transcripts in order to identify overarching themes and subcategories. Researchers employed constant comparative analysis and coding procedures developed in grounded theory such as selective coding, open coding, and axial coding.<sup>41</sup> The research team

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<sup>38</sup> Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy, and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* 9, no. 1 (2009): 75.

<sup>39</sup> To see a copy of the interview protocol, see appendix 2 in "Assessing the Affective Impact of Community Archives: A Toolkit," UCLA Community Archives Lab, November 2018, <https://communityarchiveslab.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/InitialToolkit-compressed.pdf>.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Conway and Ricardo Punzalan, "Fields of Vision: Towards a New Theory of Visual Literacy for Digitized Archival Photographs," *Archivaria* 71 (2011): 63–97.

<sup>41</sup> Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1990).

used a consensus-based process to consolidate and verify the themes and ensure they were comprehensive and mutually exclusive. On the research team's second pass at transcript analysis, they utilized the newly revised codebook in order to refine the themes. One team member conducted a final analysis and recoding of transcripts in order to ensure quality, consistency, and accuracy of independent coders.

Our team conducted research using an interpretivist paradigm that is grounded in the belief that social reality is constructed between researchers and subjects.<sup>42</sup> We were influenced by the framework of empirical data-driven theory generation posited in first-generation grounded theory methodology.<sup>43</sup> In line with second-generation grounded theory methodology, we also acknowledge the multitude of ways in which we bring our own biases, experiences, identities, communities, and positionalities to our work.<sup>44</sup>

Given our interpretivist orientation, we feel it is essential to be transparent about our own positionality and the ways in which it impacted the data we collected and the subsequent literature that has come out of the research. Some researchers identified with the communities in which research was conducted, while at other times researchers were outsiders to those communities. The first author of this paper identifies as a mixed-race, Chinese American cisgender woman from a middle-class background. The second author of this paper identifies as a Chicano from a working-class background. The third author of this paper identifies as a queer Filipinx American with a middle-class background. The fourth author identifies as a white, disabled, gender nonconforming queer person from a middle-class background. The fifth author identifies as a white, straight, cisgender woman who grew up working class and is in the first generation of her family to graduate from high school.

The research team worked together to develop an open discourse about the ways in which their different identities and community affiliations were ultimately an asset to the research. Together, we believe this multiplicity allowed the team to have a broader perspective than if the research had been conducted by a single individual. Instead of trying to standardize the way we collected data, we decided to recognize and embrace the ways that our own identities and communities shaped the way we interpreted data. We acknowledge these differences and the ways in which our varying status as being part of or outside a community led to distinct data sets.

## Findings

Two themes related to the nature of records consistently emerged in our focus group data. The first theme was that of the agency of records, with community members conceiving of records as having lives of their own. This was particularly emphasized in the way that records perform identity, and the desire for representation for individuals, as well as for communities. The second theme was records as haunted objects, both in the way that users spoke of records as apparitions, and how they identified mainstream historical narratives as haunted by their silences. Neither of these themes were prompted or designated prior to conducting the focus groups. Rather, in the

<sup>42</sup> Alison Jane Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Barney G. Glaser, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1992).

<sup>44</sup> Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006).

course of speaking about their experience within community archives and the archives' impact, these themes emerged independently and concurrently among the focus group participants.

### *Theme 1: Records as performative agents*

Speaking about the impact of the University of California, Irvine's Southeast Asian Archive, undergraduate student Sophaline Chuong reflected, "this archive doesn't live as just an archive in an institution, [it's] living and breathing and it's being enacted and engaged in the classroom and the community." This sentiment was echoed across sites, with focus group participants expressing that for them, records do not exist as static objects, but instead have a distinct social life that is able to act in service to themselves as individuals, and in service to their communities. In particular, users noted the way in which records animated a sense of belonging within their community. At La Historia Society, Marlene Rodriguez, a lifelong resident of El Monte, noted the impact of the family photographs that line the halls of La Historia Society, stating, "Those people on the wall, they're a part of me . . . it's really important . . . you feel at home when you come here, you feel like [you] belong." This is especially vital given the lack of representation Mexican American community members have in the official El Monte Historical Society Museum. For users like Marlene, the records held and displayed at La Historia Society reaffirm the historical basis on which she is able to claim her place and the place of her ancestors within the community. Records thus are actors or agents in the performance of identity for users of community archives.

The importance of younger generations knowing the history of El Monte—and the ways that records transmit this history—was widely echoed among users of La Historia Society. Board member Teresa Gutierrez is the granddaughter of the founder of La Historia Society, and expressed that the Society was needed in order to foster the development of self-identity within the community. As Teresa pointed out, this is due in part to the fact that for

us Chicanos, our history is not present in the textbooks, it's very silenced. And so the fact that we can have this, and that they can identify in some way, if not belonging in the city but identify, hey this brown face is up, I can identify to that and . . . connect that to their history so that they don't have any questions about who they are.

These users illustrate the potential for records as performative agents, capable of performing the vital function of instigating the development and strengthening of identity in subsequent generations of communities of color. Records thus take on a life of their own, encompassing embodied experience and performing the desire for representation in a way that transcends space, time, and generations. For marginalized communities, this conception of records as having their own sense of will or purpose quell doubts about the power that their histories hold.

Records also perform in service of their users by validating lived experience as a legitimate and valuable contribution to academia. At the Studio for Southern California History, an educator in the Center for Community Learning at UCLA detailed her experience introducing students to materials at the Studio. The user described one student in particular that stuck with them:

The student who I remember graduated and got a job was a Chicana student, first generation college student, didn't really feel like she belonged on [the UCLA] campus and felt like she was really kind of struggling to find her place, and the Studio validated neighborhoods that looked like her neighborhood where she grew up, she was interested in history that resonated with what she understood, and she wrote about those things in class and she wanted to be a part of contributing to that. She was able to use her skills, I think she was able to do some translation to work [on] one of the oral histories they were collecting, and to sort of see that someone cared about history, that mattered to her.

Particularly within higher education, it is critical for students from marginalized communities to not only see their community's stories documented, but to feel as though their real-world experience holds value within academia. For individuals such as the UCLA student that was described, records are intimately commingled with desire: the desire to be heard; the desire to contribute; and finally, the desire to see yourself represented in history. Records thus exhibit agency in materializing these desires—in making them concrete and autonomous and able to take on a life of their own by exerting power over how one conceives of not only their place within history, but also of their will to shape the narrative.

Users also spoke of records as actors in that their sheer physical presence is capable of spurring the telling of hidden narratives. Trinh Mai expressed her belief in the potential of family records to inspire intergenerational dialogue, including “the photographs in your very own family archive. Pull out that photo album and see if there's anything written in the back of it, and sit there with your mom and ask. Or, don't ask, and just show her a picture, she'll start talking.” This conception of records as holding the power to evoke conversations and reveal stories that would otherwise have gone untold demonstrates the way that users conceived of the agency of records.

Our findings also revealed that users cited the depth of emotion that records were capable of eliciting. When asked about how he felt upon coming to the Southeast Asian Archive, UCI student Kevin Duc Pham stated, “it makes me very emotional. I've teared up a couple times just seeing what these people went through, what they've had to experience.” Also at the Southeast Asian Archive, Trinh Mai noted how records documenting the experience of Vietnamese refugees allowed her to “feel their fear,” noting how, “when we're connected emotionally like that, it tugs at something, and it really pulls at our curiosity, and it moves something inside of us that makes us want to know more.” Across our focus groups sites, users echoed this capacity of records in eliciting visceral and affective reactions, in addition to possessing the agency in facilitating meaning for those who access, activate, and interpret them. Records are agents in the performance of identity for both individuals and the community. This holds real-world implications for the way that members of marginalized communities interpret their history and subsequently their value as individuals within their community and society at large. Within this collective effort, community members often expressed that a gateway to the past could be accessed, creating a space in which to summon and enter into conversation with past lives.

## *Theme 2: Records as haunted*

Across sites, users emphasized the way that records were able to conjure those who were no longer living. Val Rodriguez, a long-term resident of El Monte, also reflected on the photographs that line the halls of La Historia Society, stating, “some of those guys are gone, they passed away . . . they died, they got killed . . . so those pictures, what they mean to me, it reminds me of their struggles, of my struggles.” This illustrates that for users of community archives, records are not only capable of summoning the presence of the dead, but also of drawing a connection between their own experience and the experiences of those who came before them.

This connection was particularly important and especially poignant for Trinh Mai, who incorporated letters from the Southeast Asian Archive into her artwork. Mai spoke of the lasting impact of these letters, which were written by Vietnamese families pleading for their lost loved ones to be found:

When I created that installation with the mourning sashes, I had retyped these letters. I made ninety-two of them. So I retyped these letters ninety-two times and painted ninety-two portraits. And so I’m . . . I became so consumed in their stories. And I have such a vivid imagination, so I could see all these things happening. Like when the mother is saying, “In the spirit of humanity please help us find our daughters. They traveled with fourteen others on foot, arrived at the refugee camp in Thailand and we haven’t heard from them.” I’m watching this happen, and I could see the way the light is shining through the trees and I could smell like the damp of the jungle, and watching these children sit at the foot of the tree, afraid . . . and I was such a mess those, I don’t know, four or five months I was working on that series, and I had never experienced anything like that before, in making art. And I just didn’t know that I could.

As evidenced not only by the artwork that resulted from Mai’s use of the archives, but also by the poignant and moving effect that the material had on her, users of community archives see records as being continuously haunted by past lives. Mai’s reflection also reveals that these responses are not just limited to those who utilize the primary source records, but hold reverberative powers in impacting others through their future activations and visibility. Mai, speaking further on the experience she had with the gentleman who had a particularly emotional reaction to her work, stated that the spirit within records “moves people, and people can connect with that, even if they don’t know what it means. He hadn’t read the statement, but he could feel something. So this archive has a potential to help people heal.” Mai’s experience illustrates that the spectral presence within community archives is capable of moving people into new ways of being and feeling, as well as holding the power to foster connections and bonds within communities.

Other users, reflecting on the past lives of records, considered how their own interaction with the archives ultimately influences the voices of record subjects who have passed on. Doctoral student Patricia Nguyen is using the Southeast Asian Archive to research Vietnamese refugees and those who were incarcerated in reeducation camps in Vietnam. Nguyen expressed how her

understanding of records as haunted impacts the way she conducts her research. Nguyen reflected:

It's really interesting to think about what does it mean to look through an archive, and coming in with a research question, but then also being guided in a more non-traditional methodology to be propelled to look into certain files or things in a way where the spirit kind of guides you. And I think about this in terms of Avery Gordon's work in *Ghostly Matters*, and thinking about her interventions in methods and research, and so what does that mean when we're working with materials of people who have faced violent dispossession, and stories of disappeared, of those who have disappeared, and stories of those who have lost their lives. And thinking about what are the ethics of being a researcher in that? And how do you witness the material in front of you and touch it in a way that honors their lives?

Nguyen's conception of the spirits within the archive guiding her research reveals the extent to which users of community archives conceive of records not only as agents, but also as haunted.

Another way that users spoke about records as haunted was expressed in the view that mainstream historical narratives were haunted by their absences. Across sites, users voiced the idea that community archives play a vital role in filling in these gaps. A user at the Studio for Southern California, who wished to remain unnamed, cited the importance of the archive's autonomy, stating, "part of what they are doing is responding to these absences within certain institutional or academic history." Bill Watanabe, a long-term Little Tokyo resident and Little Tokyo Historical Society user, reflected on human rights activist Sei Fujii, stating, "we have a civil rights pioneer, a civil rights hero that nobody knows about. So that's been part of our historical society work is to let people know yeah, there are stories like that that are significant." Watanabe, along with other users from across sites reveal that if not for community archives, the expansive and meaningful parts of history contributed by marginalized communities would continue to haunt greater historical narratives. Community archives thus play a critical role by saving space for the telling of ghost stories.

Given that confronting these hidden histories is often both painful and challenging, the methods for extracting such narratives must stray from normative modes of archival practice, and an exploratory approach that allows space for nuance must be adopted. Filmmaker Paul Detwiler, who is a user of Lambda Archives, spoke about the concept of queering the archives as a way to interpret records through a queer lens in order to uncover invisible LGBT histories:

That was one of the things about these histories, you've got to kind of recreate them because there's these hidden histories or these fragmented histories or these edited histories from the families or from the government wherever that saved these materials. It's almost like to make sense of these . . . the historians and the archivists have to look at that material with that kind of queer sensitivity and intuition to say . . . what's not being said here. . . It's hard to explain but like there's a creativity in the queer archives because that makes it queer because the literal history of straight

heteronormative things is always well here's the facts. The establishment said here's the facts and you just follow it and it's all laid out but the queer suppressed history and the hidden history we've got to work to recreate it.

As this and other findings indicate, dominant methods of documentation and stewardship are not sufficient to uncover and make visible the hauntings within mainstream historical narratives. Thus, the community-based practices that are inherent within community archives are critical for summoning ghosts in productive, tactful, and meaningful ways.

## **Discussion**

Records have long been cited both for their evidential value and their subsequent potential as agents of accountability.<sup>45</sup> Based on the data gathered from our focus groups, our findings indicate that for some community archives users, records go far beyond their evidential and informational value. Records perform for their users in a myriad of ways—whether in the performance of personal or community identity, or uncovering a spectral presence among dominant narratives, for community archives users, records are far from static.

Records thus exhibit agency in materializing both individual and collective desire for representation within larger historical narratives. Through the agency of records, such desires are visualized and manifested in a way that allows records to take on a life of their own. Thus, communities are not only empowered to conceive of their place within history, but are also called to impact and shape the stories that are told.

Our research indicates that for those who find themselves absent, maligned, or excluded from traditionally told history, records are able to act as autonomous beings—living and breathing and performing user's desires so that the longing for representation can inhabit a material form. Our findings revealed that this was especially true for students who are children of immigrants and first-generation students. Given the lack of inclusion of their personal and family history within mainstream archives, community archives can play a vital role in validating lived experience as well as materializing the desire to see oneself represented in history.

Our findings carry practical implications, affirming that archivists not only have a responsibility to help fill the silences of the institutions in which they work, but are also personally accountable to ghosts—possessing an ethical imperative to portray the silenced in a way that not only honors them, but acknowledges their long run of historical and cultural contributions. A large component of this work is acknowledging perhaps the greatest form of haunting overall—that of white supremacy. Legal scholar Frances Lee Ansley defines white supremacy as “a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Duff et al., “Social Justice Impact of Archives”; Wendy M. Duff and Joan M. Cherry, “Archival Orientation for Undergraduate Students: An Exploratory Study of Impact,” *American Archivist* 71, no. 2 (2008): 499–529.

<sup>46</sup> Frances Lee Ansley, “Stirring the Ashes: Race, Class, and the Future of Civil Rights Scholarship,” *Cornell Law Review* 74, no. 6 (1989): 993.

Evidenced in everything from the oppressive language in the archival description of mainstream repositories, to the failure of the archives profession to increasingly recruit and retain diverse members, white supremacy is a continual and institutionally ingrained presence within archives, playing an enduring and integral role in the persistence of ghostly voices.<sup>47</sup> Michelle Caswell writes that it is the obligation of library and information science (LIS) professionals to bring to light the ways in which white privilege is embedded within archival institutions in order to lay out concrete steps for dismantling white supremacy within archival studies and practice.<sup>48</sup> While demographics can shift, white supremacy is itself a structure, and one that is deeply embedded within archives. However, as Caswell notes, “people create structures, people enable structures, and people can also disrupt and dismantle them.”<sup>49</sup>

It is critical that mainstream archival institutions ask themselves, “What is the impact of being haunted by white supremacy?” As evidenced by scholarship on hauntology, and particularly highlighted through the investigation of ghostly voices, the unwillingness to confront racist colonial legacies inflicts perpetual violence on those unable to operate within the framework of hetero-normative Whiteness. When white supremacy goes unnamed, there can be no potential for filling in the gaps left in history by haunting. Community archives offer key lessons that are especially pertinent to mainstream archival institutions that collect from communities of color. When these materials are subjected to dominant archival practices that are built on, dependent upon, and that continue to perpetuate white supremacist ideologies, these institutions are failing to ethically steward these communities’ histories. Additionally, community archives perform vital work in dismantling dominant histories that hold great influence in the perpetuation of white supremacist ideologies. By presenting alternate versions of history, community archives create space in which to shine a light on ghostly voices, allowing them to finally speak their stories, and their desires.

Our findings also make evident that, for some users of community archives, records are seen as imbued with the lingering agency of past lives. Acknowledging this agency allows for the voices of the disappeared, suppressed, or silenced to reclaim agency through their activation by users. This conception of records as agents also indicates that these records are far from dormant in their ability to generate affective and generative relationships with contemporary members of the community. Records are thus performative agents, facilitating critical connections within communities, as well as with those who are no longer with us.

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<sup>47</sup> For more on the challenges and failure to recruit and retain people of color in the library and archives profession, see Rebecca Hankins and Miguel Juárez, *Where Are All the Librarians of Color? The Experiences of People of Color in Academia* (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2016); April Hathcock, “Why Don’t You Want to Keep Us?” *At the Intersection* (blog), January 2019; Jennifer Vinopal, “The Quest for Diversity in Library Staffing: From Awareness to Action,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 16, 2016, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2016/quest-for-diversity/>.

<sup>48</sup> Michelle Caswell, “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives,” *The Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2017): 222–35.

<sup>49</sup> Caswell, “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy,” 225.

As sociologists Benjamin R. Smith and Richard Vokes note, “Like ghosts, photographs ‘stand in for’ relationships that cannot or can no longer be performed directly.”<sup>50</sup> This highlights the crucial role that records play in surfacing and inviting the telling of ghost stories within communities. Community archives can thus be seen as the medium, bridging communities with the ghostly voices of the repressed, the misrepresented, and the marginalized. Records perform identity for individuals, as well as within communities, bringing what was once haunted into the light.

## Conclusion

There is still much work to be done to fully understand the numerous ways that community archives members talk about the agency of records. This research is part of a larger initiative to uncover the impact that community archives have on their users. An important and fundamental aspect of our findings reveals that records are able to liberate, make visible, and act as agents for their users. If we begin to view records as agents, then we can begin to reimagine traditional conceptions of records and help uncover the potential for records to empower and perform in service of their users.

Our findings communicate the value of community archives by introducing empirical evidence to demonstrate community-based conceptions of records as haunted. Surfacing the ways in which white supremacy continues to haunt mainstream archival institutions points to how the historically oppressive structures of these institutions disallows the liberatory expression of stories from marginalized communities. Community archives thus play a critical role in documenting invisible histories by providing a productive space in which to summon the ghosts.

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<sup>50</sup> Benjamin R. Smith and Richard Vokes, “Introduction: Haunting Images,” *Visual Anthropology* 21, no. 4 (2008): 284.

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