

Virtual Belonging: Assessing the Affective Impact of Digital Records Creation in Community Archives

The Texas After Violence Project (TAVP), in partnership with the UCLA Community Archives Lab and the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), requests \$750,000 for a three-year Research in Service to Practice Grant to conduct empirical research on and develop tools to assess the affective impact of digital technologies on the creation of records documenting minoritized communities by community-based archives (CBAs). This research project is the next phase of the successful IMLS-funded project “Assessing the Use of Community Archives” (IMLS# RE-31-16-0117-16) completed by Michelle Caswell (Director of the Community Archives Lab) in 2018, which resulted in several publications¹ and the creation of a toolkit for CBAs to collect, analyze, and leverage information about the affective impacts of their work on the communities they serve and represent. By expanding the initial framework to address both the creation of records (rather than just their use) and the impact of digital technologies (rather than just analog archives), the proposed project scales up Caswell’s initial research and addresses many of the emerging needs of archives in the wake of the post-COVID dependence on digital technologies across the archives, museum, and LIS fields.

The proposed project thus directly aligns with the IMLS strategic goal of helping libraries, museums, and archives build capacity to improve the well-being of their communities by sharing and adopting best practices and innovations, serving as trusted spaces for community engagement and dialogue, and ensuring informed decisions about their practices. The project will also be a significant contribution to the memory work, missions, and long-term sustainability of CBAs across the US. Notably, the project is led by two CBAs, with an academic institution serving as a partner, reversing the traditional research relationship that too often extracts from rather than enriches community-based organizations and ensuring that community needs always remain the central focal point. Since 2007, TAVP has collected and archived 400+ hours of oral history interviews with people whose lives have been impacted by state-sanctioned violence, including police violence, mass incarceration, and the death penalty. TAVP’s collection also includes historical records, case records, creative works, and other materials. Founded in 2008, SAADA collects, preserves, and shares stories of South Asian Americans, and through its post-custodial digital archives, participatory storytelling initiatives, and educational outreach shapes public understanding about the more than 5.4 million people in the U.S. whose stories have been excluded from traditional repositories. By centering the voices of minoritized communities and archives that represent and serve them, the project will contribute to scholarship and practice where equity and social justice intersect with the work of archives, museums, and library and information science.

Statement of National Need

Recognizing that most CBAs lack the methods to systematically track the impacts of their memory work on the communities they serve and represent, the Community Archives Lab developed tools for CBAs to collect, analyze, and leverage information about the affective impact of their work. Focused on assessing how members of minoritized communities use archival records, the Lab collected and analyzed empirical data about how community members respond to full and complex representation of themselves and their communities in collections of pre-existing records, yielding the valuable concepts of “symbolic annihilation” (feelings of being under- or misrepresented, or absent in archives) and “representational belonging” (feelings of seeing yourself in archives) to assess affective impact. While this initial project was successful, it also demonstrated the need for further research on the affective impact of *record creation*:

- **RQ1:** What is the affective impact for members of minoritized communities to share their stories or create records for inclusion in archives?
- **RQ2:** What is the affective impact of the quick adaptation to new digital technologies (due to the COVID-19 crisis) on record creators? Does it feel different to participate in online memory projects?

¹ <https://communityarchiveslab.ucla.edu/research/publications/>

- **RQ3:** Building on the findings of RQ1 and RQ2, how can archives, including community archives, develop new tools and methods that best meet their communities' needs as memory projects increasingly go digital-only?

Addressing these research questions will have a significant national impact. Over the three year grant period, project partners will 1) Create a follow-up toolkit to both assess impact on records creators and to leverage that impact for the long-term sustainability of community archives; 2) Publish guidelines for best practices on the UCLA Community Archives Lab website; 3) Publish at least five peer-reviewed open access articles that report findings and influence archival theory and practice; 4) Create free online trainings for archivists, CBA practitioners, and others working in libraries and museums on designing and implementing participatory memory projects; 5) Create additional educational materials to maximize the reach of research and findings, including coordinated social media content, infographics, and interactive e-learning content.² The research findings, tools, and training materials developed will be disseminated widely through a national outreach effort, including through the growing Community Archives Collaborative, an initiative led by TAVP and SAADA for CBAs to learn from and support each other, as well as through professional organizations like the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and the American Library Association (ALA).

Project Design

The project employs community-led participatory action research (PAR), an iterative process by which communities play leading roles in every aspect of research design and implementation; in this case, in equal partnership with an academic research team. The two test sites for this project are TAVP's Oral History and Archives Program and SAADA's Community Archives Fellowship Program. Using PAR, in year one, the UCLA Community Archives Lab research team will employ data collection methods of interviews and focus groups with TAVP and SAADA community members who have had their oral histories recorded in-person or via digital technologies like Zoom, and/or have participated in micro-history projects in which they created and uploaded their digital records for inclusion in archives. The research team will conduct 10 focus groups (five per site) and 40 one-on-one interviews (20 per site). Focus group and interview transcripts will be coded for recurring themes using co-axial coding through NVIVO software. In year two, using this data, TAVP and SAADA will initiate new digital memory projects that integrate evaluative research questions and findings into the design from the beginning (rather than retrospectively). SAADA will support nine community-based oral historians to collect at least 90 new interviews for inclusion in its digital archive and launch at least three new participatory micro-history projects documenting the lived experiences of South Asian Americans. TAVP will adapt its trauma-informed protocols and practices for violence-related memory work accordingly, and support a team of oral historians and archivists to carry out new digital memory projects that directly connect findings regarding affective impacts of participation with addressing widespread concerns about harm reduction for participants of violence- or trauma-related memory work, as well as those who engage with these materials. In year three, project partners will widely and strategically disseminate findings and other project-related trainings and materials to archives, museums, and LIS practitioners across the US (listed in the national impact section).

Budget Summary

The total anticipated cost of the three-year project (08/01/21-07/31/24) is \$749,971. \$232,900 allocated for TAVP; \$240,324 for SAADA; \$245,957 for UCLA; \$20,790 10% indirect rate. Overall, \$293,265 allocated for staffing across the three partners over the three-year period; \$201,624 for part-time Archival Fellows at TAVP and SAADA; \$114,000 for UCLA Graduate Student Researchers; \$22,000 for participant interviews and focus groups; \$88,292 for UCLA Facilities and Administrative rate (56%); \$10,000 for travel expenses.

² The use of e-learning materials and platforms to disseminate findings and best practices from this research project will build on the findings of TAVP and SAADA's 2020-21 collaborative project, "Democratizing online learning: sustainable e-learning for community-based archives" (IMLS# LG-246415-OLS-20).