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“It Was as Much for Me As for Anybody Else”: The Creation of Self-Validating Records

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“It Was as Much for Me As for Anybody Else”: The Creation of Self-Validating Records

Cover Page Footnote

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“IT WAS AS MUCH FOR ME AS FOR ANYBODY ELSE”: THE CREATION OF SELF-VALIDATING RECORDS

Introduction

How does it feel to create a record? What motivates people to create records documenting their own lives for inclusion in community archives? What personal impact does it have to represent yourself in a record after others have misrepresented you in records they created? For survivors of incarceration, state violence, and human rights abuse, in particular, what is the emotional effect of documenting these experiences? This article answers these questions through empirical data collected from people who told and recorded their stories as part of participatory projects led by community archives.¹

A decade of research on independent, minoritized identity-based community archives has shown their substantial impact on users. From “suddenly discovering yourself existing” to “being able to imagine otherwise,” the literature details the ontological, epistemological, and social aspects of robust and complex representation after experiences of symbolic annihilation in archives.² This research, focused on users of archives, has led to new conceptions of and methods for assessing archival impact, particularly emotional impact, through qualitative interviews and focus groups with researchers of all types, from curious community members to activists, organizers, genealogists, artists, students, and academics.³

Yet the people that coalesce around community archives do not have the same clearly defined roles that are solidified in academic or government archives. In community archives, users are also often creators and donors of records, while creators and donors of records are also often volunteers and board members, and volunteers and board members are also often users. If we focus our attention solely on assessing the impact of archival *use*, we are missing out on a holistic view that takes into account the reality of the multilayered roles many people play in community archives, including record creator, donor of records, donor of money, board member, volunteer, advisor, archivist, activist, advocate, and user.⁴ While initial research on the affective impact of archival *use* has been very successful, it also demonstrates the need for further research on the affective impact of *record creation*. Archivists and archival studies scholars have yet to fully understand *what it feels like* for

¹ This project was made possible in part by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, grant LG-250102-OLS-2. The views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this presentation do not necessarily represent those of the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The authors would like to thank Gabriel Daniel Solís, Jane Field, Murphy Carter, and Samip Mallick, as well as all of the fellows and participants from both the Texas After Violence Project and the South Asian American Digital Archive. Working in partnership with them has been a massive joy.

² Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing’: Uncovering the Affective Impact of Community Archives,” *American Archivist* 79 (Spring–Summer 2016): 56–81; Michelle Caswell et al., “‘To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise’: Community Archives and the Importance of Representation,” *Archives and Records* 38, no. 1 (2016): 1–20.

³ Michelle Caswell et al., “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>.

⁴ For more on this web of relationships, see Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23–43.

community members to create records, *why* they create records to be included in community archives, and what the affective impact is of having one's records be stewarded by community archives. Similarly, research in oral history has demonstrated the impact of hearing stories on interviewers and listeners, with few studies focused on the impact of the act of *telling on narrators*.⁵

Having identified the need for more holistic studies of impact in community archives, Gabriel Solís, the executive director of the Texas After Violence Project (TAVP), a public memory archive that fosters deeper understanding of the impacts of state violence, approached the research team at the UCLA Community Archives Lab several years ago to request more research on the emotional impact of record creation on creators, specifically on record creators directly impacted by state violence, including police violence, mass incarceration, and the death penalty. Solís wanted us to find out: How does it feel for formerly incarcerated people to share and record their stories for inclusion in TAVP's archives? What is the emotional impact of record creation for formerly incarcerated people and others subject to human rights abuse and state violence? And with the answers to these research questions in mind, how can community archives like TAVP develop new tools and methods of recording and preserving stories that best meet their communities' needs?

Solís and staff from TAVP had conversations with Samip Mallick, the executive director of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), who shared similar oral history practices and also had questions about their impact on record creators. TAVP, for example, works with community members to create and steward oral histories related to violence, trauma, and healing, while SAADA has a variety of participatory projects through which community members document their own experiences by creating written, video, or audio records, such as its First Days Project (sharing stories from immigrants and refugees about their arrival in the United States), Road Trips Project (sharing stories of travel to reframe an American tradition), and Letters from 6 Feet Away (documenting South Asian American experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic). Working together, a team from TAVP, SAADA, and the UCLA Community Archives Lab developed a project to both answer research questions about the impact of this work and implement emotionally responsive oral history projects based on the findings. The three-year community-led participatory action research project, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, is called "Virtual Belonging: Assessing the Affective Impact of Digital Records Creation in Community Archives." This article is the first of several to emerge from this project, reporting on initial data on the emotional impact of record creation on those who share their stories with TAVP or SAADA, with goals of more holistically assessing the impact of community archives and of providing appropriate care and support for minoritized people who narrate and record oral histories for inclusion in archives.

Literature Review

Community archives.

Over the past fifteen years, the field of archival studies has seen a rapid expansion of interest in community archives. The first attempts to describe the community archives phenomenon in the field emerge from the United Kingdom. Writing in 2009, Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd noted, "A community is any group of people who come together and present

⁵ Anjali Joshi Brekke, "Listening across Difference: Mapping StoryCorps' Affective Archives" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2020).

themselves as such and a ‘community archive’ is the product of their attempts to document the history of their commonality.” Moreover, they defined community archives as “collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose community members exercise some level of control. . . . The defining characteristic of community archives is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible their history of their particular group and/or locality *on their own* terms.”⁶ Michelle Caswell has added further specificity to this definition, distinguishing “independent, minoritized identity-based community archives” from both university-based, community-engaged projects and some historical societies that represent dominant groups and can uphold systems of oppression.⁷ Some archival thinkers, like Jarrett Drake, question the utility of the label “community archives,” pressing instead for a distinction between liberatory and oppressive archives, regardless of type of institution or repository at which collections reside.⁸

Archival studies scholars frame community archives as grassroots alternatives to mainstream repositories through which communities can make autonomous collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them, shape collective memory of their own pasts, and control the means through which stories about their past are constructed. Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd identified political activism, community empowerment, and social change as prime motivating factors for those who volunteer at these organizations.⁹ Caswell identified several factors that distinguish community archives from other kinds of repositories, namely participation, shared stewardship, multiplicity, archival activism, and reflexivity.¹⁰ Community archives advocates like Bergis Jules have stressed the connection between fiscal sustainability and archival autonomy, calling for funders to shift priorities and redistribute financial resources toward community archives.¹¹

Archival studies, steeped in dominant Western bureaucratic recordkeeping traditions, has only recently begun to address and accommodate community-based theories and practices. Terry Cook declared that a then-emerging emphasis on community constitutes a paradigm shift in dominant archival theory, akin to previous conceptual guideposts like evidence and memory.¹² In the realm of practice, the rise of interest in community archives from within dominant archival discourse has meant reframing the functions of appraisal, description, and access to align with community-specific priorities, reflect contingent cultural values, and allow for greater participation in archival decision-making.¹³ These shifts have begun to influence university-based practices as well, with

⁶ Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9 (2009): 75, 73.

⁷ Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

⁸ Jarrett Drake, “Seismic Shifts: On Archival Facts and Fictions,” *Architecting Sustainable Futures*, August 20, 2018, <https://medium.com/community-archives/seismic-shifts-on-archival-fact-and-fictions-6db4d5c655ae>.

⁹ Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives?”

¹⁰ Michelle Caswell, “Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach to Human Rights Archives: Lessons from Community-Based Archives,” *Archival Science* 14, nos. 3–4 (2014): 307–22.

¹¹ Bergis Jules, “Architecting Sustainable Futures,” <https://architectingsustainablefutures.org/>.

¹² Terry Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms,” *Archives and Museum Informatics* 13, nos. 2–3 (2012): 95–120.

¹³ Jimmy Zavala et al., “A Process Where We’re All at the Table: Community Archives Challenging Dominant Modes of Archival Practice,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 45, no. 3 (2017): 1–14.

increased emphasis on “community-driven practices,” as Nancy Liliana Godoy describes them, even within mainstream institutions.¹⁴

Emotions in archival studies and oral history.

Within archival studies, research on emotion has only recently taken center stage. In 2016, Marika Cifor introduced archival studies to affect theory, taken from the “affective turn” in the humanities. Cifor insisted that archivists take the emotions of record creators and users seriously.¹⁵ Subsequently, in a special issue of *Archival Science* themed “Affect and the Archive, Archives and Their Affects,” editors Cifor and Anne Gilliland describe the ways both that emotions are documented in records and that records provoke emotions in their users.¹⁶ In that same issue, Jamie Lee brings the body to the fore, insisting that emotions are felt through bodily processes, and drawing on literature from queer and/or transgender thinkers to address how archives make bodies *feel*.¹⁷ Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez traces the flow of grief through archives, from record creator to donor of record to processing archivist, catalyzing what she calls “an affective web of mutual loss.”¹⁸ Substantially adding to this holistic approach to evaluating webs of relationships in records, particularly grief, Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas’s work examines both how recordkeeping can be “an act of love” for those experiencing grief and how such emotionally charged work impacts the archivists tasked with stewarding such records.¹⁹

Researchers at UCLA’s Community Archives Lab have published significant research on the affective or emotional impact of community archives on the communities they serve and represent. Recognizing that most community archives lack the means to systematically track the impacts of their memory work on the communities they serve and represent, the Community Archives Lab developed tools for community archives 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 representations of themselves and their communities in collections of preexisting 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 represented robustly and accurately in archives) to assess affective impact.²⁰

¹⁴ Nancy Liliana Godoy, “Community-Driven Archives: Conocimiento, Healing, and Justice,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3 (2021): 1–24, <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/136>.

¹⁵ Marika Cifor, “Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Studies to Archival Discourse,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7–31.

¹⁶ Marika Cifor and Anne Gilliland, “Affect and the Archive, Archives and Their Affects: An Introduction to the Special Issue,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 1–6.

¹⁷ Jamie Lee, “Be/Longing in the Archival Body: Eros and the ‘Endearing’ Value of Material Lives,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 33–51.

¹⁸ Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, “Radical Empathy in the Context of Suspended Grief,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 2 (2021): 1–15, <http://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/134>.

¹⁹ Jennifer Douglas and Alexandra Alisauskas, “‘It Feels Like a Life’s Work’: Recordkeeping as an Act of Love,” *Archivaria* 91 (Spring–Summer 2021): 6–37; Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas, and Devon Mordell, “‘Treat Them with the Reverence of Archivists’: Records Work, Grief Work and Relationship Work in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019): 84–120.

²⁰ Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing’”; Caswell et al., “‘To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise.’”

In the past few years, complex issues related to understanding and mitigating potential harms for oral history narrators have become more visible in library and archival services, especially as repositories increasingly recognize the importance of building collections related to historical and contemporary events of violence, trauma, and marginalization. Exploring the effects of storytelling on narrators who have experienced racial trauma, communications scholar Anjali Joshi Brekke writes that narrators “emphasized how the act of crafting and recording their narratives allowed them to reclaim power by reworking a past traumatic moment.” Importantly, she continues, “As listeners and storytellers of racial trauma, we acknowledged that these scars exist, but they are not us; rather we speak about our pain and tell our stories in order to create new ways of being and relating in the world, even if we have no guarantees of social change.” In this way, Brekke is claiming an ontological shift within narrators; the act of storytelling creates a “a new way of being and relating in the world,” regardless of the story’s impact on listeners.²¹ This ontological shift is such an important motivator that narrators will risk the vulnerability and re-traumatization that accompany sharing difficult experiences, as well as the potential for appropriation of their stories once recorded.

Oral historians have dealt with trauma in their work for as long as, and even before, the formal recognition of trauma as a mental health condition existed. Diagnoses and treatments for trauma emerged after World War II in response to the experiences of Holocaust survivors. Almost immediately, projects to document the stories of the survivors took form.²² Since then, oral historians have worked with survivors of war, genocide, and other atrocities. And many other oral history narrators have experienced trauma as a result of more personal violence. Oral historians are increasingly aware of trauma’s myriad causes and effects, and the fact that trauma may show up even when traumatic events are not explicitly the subject of the interview, what oral historian Emma L. Vickers calls “unexpected trauma.”²³

In providing guidance for interviewers on how to prepare for unexpected trauma, Vickers offers advice that is echoed by almost every writer on the topic of trauma and oral history: oral history is not therapy.²⁴ The difficult line those oral historians who encounter trauma in their work must walk is in incorporating psychotherapy’s understanding of trauma’s effects into their practice without taking on psychotherapy’s goal of healing the narrator. Rather than healing, Sean Field says that oral history can offer survivors of trauma “agency and regeneration.”²⁵ While most of the literature on oral history and trauma focuses on strategies for dealing with the effects of the narrator’s trauma, there is a growing awareness of the need for interviewers to prepare for and seek help

²¹ Brekke, “Listening across Difference,” 141, 143.

²² Lynn Abrams cites Yad Vashem as one of the first organizations to collect Holocaust survivor’s testimonials, beginning in 1953. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016), 176.

²³ Vickers defines unexpected trauma as “moments in which interviewees relate experiences that often have a tangential relationship to the stated purpose of the interview, whereas expected trauma is that which occurs in a postcrisis context or that which arises because the research explicitly asks respondents to focus on that aspect of their experiences.” Emma L. Vickers, “Unexpected Trauma in Oral Interviewing,” *Oral History Review* 46, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 136, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohy099>.

²⁴ See, for example, Vickers, “Unexpected Trauma in Oral Interviewing,” 139; Sean Field, “Beyond ‘Healing’: Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration,” *Oral History* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40179842>; and Carla Pascoe Leahy, “The Afterlife of Interviews: Explicit Ethics and Subtle Ethics in Sensitive or Distressing Qualitative Research,” *Qualitative Research* 22, no. 5 (May 5, 2021): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941211012924>.

²⁵ Field, “Beyond ‘Healing,’” 39.

in dealing with vicarious trauma. Gabriel Solís recently wrote about his own experience of vicarious trauma when he began doing oral history interviews with people sentenced by the state to die and their relatives. Going into this work, he had not prepared for the possibility of vicarious trauma, and it was only through counseling that he came to understand its effects.²⁶

This experience is shared by many oral historians and memory workers who work with difficult materials. A 2019 article by Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Jennifer Douglas reported on a survey they conducted of Canadian archivists regarding their experiences with secondary trauma.²⁷ The survey found that almost half of archivists surveyed had experienced secondary trauma on the job. Archivists are beginning to look to a trauma-informed approach as a way of handling the effects of trauma on both the person who experienced the event and those who witness it in their memory work. In their seminal article on trauma-informed archival practice, archivists Kirsten Wright and Nicola Laurent adapt this approach from mental healthcare, offering concrete ways for archivists to implement practices that promote safety, trust, transparency, choice, collaboration, and empowerment.²⁸ TAVP has spearheaded the adoption of these approaches within archives, having led trainings and published a zine on trauma-informed oral history practice.²⁹ While there is a growing body of literature on trauma and its effects on oral history donors and archivists working with traumatic material, there has not been as much attention paid to other affective impacts of record creation. Indeed, not much attention has been paid to record creation at all.

The creation and accumulation of records: Building archival theory.

Writing in 2018, Jennifer Douglas called record creation “under-theorized and oversimplified” in archival studies, positing that “despite being centered on the concept of creation, the archival discipline has only begun to scratch the surface of the possibilities contained in it.” As Douglas notes, while record creation is central to theory and practice, very little work asks or answers the important question, “What does it mean to create a record?”³⁰ In the dominant Western archival tradition, record creatorship formed the basis of the principle of provenance, which attributed creatorship solely and narrowly to the person or organization that wrote the text, snapped the camera, or drew the image, and not the subject of the record, nor the society that compelled its creation, nor the chain of custodians who steward it. Jeannette Bastian’s notion of a “community of records” expands this narrow conceptualization, exploding the myth of sole authorship by revealing how communities create and keep records in a mutually supportive process.³¹ Influenced by Eric Ketelaar’s argument that records accrue layers of meaning through interventions by archivists and users, Jennifer Douglas outlines five types of creatorship in authors’ collections: by the author, by

²⁶ Gabriel Solís, “Bearing Witness to the Traumas of the Death Penalty in Texas,” *Texas Observer* (Austin), December 8, 2021, <https://www.texasobserver.org/fragile-evidence/>.

²⁷ Katie Sloan, Jennifer Vanderfluit, and Jennifer Douglas, “Not ‘Just My Problem to Handle’: Emerging Themes on Secondary Trauma and Archivists,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 6 (2019): 25.

²⁸ Kirsten Wright and Nicola Laurent, “Safety, Collaboration, and Empowerment: Trauma-Informed Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 91 (Spring–Summer 2021): 38–73, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1078465ar>.

²⁹ “Trauma Informed Interviewing Resource List,” Texas After Violence Project, <https://texasafterviolence.org/trauma-informed-interviewing-resource-list/>.

³⁰ Jennifer Douglas, “A Call to Rethink Archival Creation: Exploring Types of Creation in Personal Archives,” *Archival Science* 18 (2018): 29.

³¹ Jeannette Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).

their community, by custodians, by archivists, and by activators.³² More recently, Jessica Lapp has introduced the concept of “provenancial fabulation” to address the multilayered, ever-fluctuating processes by which records of feminist activism get created, while Gracen Brilmyer has introduced “crip provenance” to denote the “people, systems, materials and spaces” that created absent or dispersed records documenting people with disabilities.³³

Expanding the conceptualization of creatorship and provenance also opens up a critique of dominant Western definitions of records and archives more broadly. For Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the godfather of this strain of archival theory, records were, by definition, “impartial,” that is, “a means for carrying out activities they document,” rather than created explicitly for posterity by a memory organization.³⁴ Accordingly, records, as supposedly neutral byproducts of activities, should be created and compiled “naturally,” as an “accumulation of documents [formed] as a residue of their creator or functions.”³⁵ Furthermore, in dominant Western thought, there is a distinction between “records” as “information or data created or received by an organization in the course of its activities” and “papers” as “the personal emissions and accumulations of an individual or family.”³⁶ In these very limited conceptualizations, both oral history projects and what Michelle Caswell and Samip Mallick call “participatory digital microhistory projects” are deemed “artificial,” and as such fundamentally “unarchival” because they compel the creation of records rather than acquiring already-existing records that accumulate “naturally” over time.³⁷

Yet archival theory is not and has never been one single discourse. Since at least the 1970s, archivists concerned about the lack of preexisting records documenting the lives of women, BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and/or working-class communities have advocated for oral history and photo documentation as archival methods.³⁸ Writing in 1975, F. Gerald Ham urged archivists to become “historical reporter[s]” through broad documentation and acquisition efforts, including oral history.³⁹ In 2002, Ciaran Trace wrote that positivist theories that position records as neutral byproducts of activity have become, simply, “untenable” in the face of social and paradigmatic shifts.⁴⁰ Recent scholarship has detailed the ways that dominant Western archival theory has been a tool for and reflection of systemic oppression, and has engaged a myriad of diverse epistemic lineages in its

³² Douglas, “A Call to Rethink Archival Creation,” 29–49.

³³ Jessica Lapp, “‘The Only Way We Knew How’: Provenancial Fabulation in Archives of Feminist Materials,” *Archival Science* 21 (2021): 117–36; Gracen Brilmyer, “Toward a Crip Provenance: Centering Disability in Archives Through Its Absence,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 9 (2022), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1160&context=jcas>.

³⁴ Society of American Archivists, “Archival Nature,” *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archival-nature.html>. See also Terry Cook, “Jenkinson’s Writing on Some Enduring Archival Themes,” *American Archivist* 67 (2004): 31–44; Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration: Including the Problem of War Archives and Archive Making* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

³⁵ Society of American Archivists, “Naturalness,” *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/naturalness.html>.

³⁶ Society of American Archivists, “Record,” *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/record.html>.

³⁷ Michelle Caswell and Samip Mallick, “Collecting the Easily Missed Stories: Digital Participatory Microhistory and the South Asian American Digital Archive,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 42, no. 1 (2014): 73–86.

³⁸ Jessica Wagner Webster, “‘Filling in the Gaps’: Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in the *American Archivist*, 1938–2011,” *American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 254–82.

³⁹ F. Gerald Ham, “The Archival Edge,” *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 8.

⁴⁰ Ciaran Trace, “What Is Recorded Is Never Simply What Happened: Record Keeping in Modern Organizational Culture,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 137–59.

stead.⁴¹ As a new generation of archival scholars insist, if archival theory is to remain relevant, it must engage the many theoretical traditions reflected around the world, including in community archives.⁴² The oral history and digital participatory microhistory projects described in this paper build on centuries of memory-keeping traditions from within nondominant communities, and should be legitimized as such by archival studies scholarship. If we are to create an expansive, accurate, and pertinent archival theory that reflects the theoretical traditions made manifest in community archives, we must expand this narrow notion of who gets to create a record, in what context, and why. Here, we borrow some language from the field of oral history to delineate that the records being examined in this article are not found fully formed but are “co-created” in a “dialogical exchange” between narrator and interviewer, storyteller and community archivist.⁴³ They are records nevertheless.

The records of concern in this article are at the intersection of personal and community records. While their creation is compelled by community-driven initiatives, the narrators have agency in whether or how to tell and preserve their own personal stories. Just as they have turned to community archives, archival studies scholars have begun to theorize personal records and documentation practices. Writing in the mid-1990s, Sue McKemmish drew attention to “personal recordkeeping cultures,” emphasizing that records created and accumulated by individuals as “evidence of me” are created in mutually constitutive relationships, collectively accumulating as “evidence of us.” McKemmish quotes sociologist Anthony Giddens in describing personal records as “narrative[s] of the self” that “bear witness to the cultural moment” and therefore warrant greater theorization from archivists.⁴⁴ More than twenty-five years later, archival studies is just now taking on this charge, as shown by the recent special issue of *Archivaria* on “person-centred archival theory and practice.”⁴⁵ The findings presented in this paper contribute to this theorization.

Methodology

This project employs community-led participatory action research, an iterative process by which communities play leading roles in every aspect of research design and implementation, from formulating research questions to analyzing data.⁴⁶ Community-led participatory action research has been used within archival studies by several teams of researchers who simultaneously designed

⁴¹ Hannah Ishmael, “Reclaiming History: Arthur Schomburg,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 46, no. 3 (2018): 269–88; Riley Linebaugh, “Race, Capital and Empire: Placing Hilary Jenkinson into History,” talk delivered via Zoom for “Antiracism and Decolonization in Archival Studies: Open Classroom Series,” Department of History, University of Manitoba, October 26, 2022.

⁴² Shannon Faulkhead, “Connecting through Records: Narratives of Koorie Victoria,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 37, no. 2 (2010): 60–88; Tonia Sutherland, “Where There’s a Will: On Heir Property, African American Land Stories, and the Value of Oral Records in American Archives,” in *Defining a Discipline: Archival Research and Practice in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Jeannette Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2020), 238–55; Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group, “Educating for the Archival Multiverse,” *American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (2011): 69–101.

⁴³ Alessandro Portelli, “A Dialogical Relationship: An Approach to Oral History,” 1985.

⁴⁴ Sue McKemmish, “Evidence of Me,” *Australian Library Journal* 45, no. 3 (1996): 181, 176.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Douglas, Mya Ballin, and Jessica Lapp, “Introduction,” in *Archivaria 94: Special Issue—Toward Person-Centred Archival Theory and Practice*, ed. Jennifer Douglas et al. (Fall 2022): 5–21.

⁴⁶ J. M. Chevalier and D. Buckles, *Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry* (Abingdon-on-Thames, U.K.: Routledge, 2013).

research inquiries and created or maintained archival projects alongside community members.⁴⁷ Working within the context of Indigenous communities in Australia, Shannon Faulkhead uses the term “negotiated methodologies” to describe formulating a research design that meets the needs of marginalized communities and fully reflects their own autonomous epistemologies and research methodologies.⁴⁸

In this case, the research questions, project design, and implementation emerged from equal partnerships among the UCLA Community Archives Lab, TAVP, SAADA, and community members that have participated in TAVP and SAADA programs. Our overarching research questions, interview protocol, and method of data collection were collaboratively designed, and our findings have been reported back to staff and stakeholders at each organization via both private and public presentations at meetings and community events, both in-person and virtually. The design of this research strives to meet the nine principles for building mutually beneficial relationships between academic researchers and community archivists outlined by the Reciprocity in Researching Records Collaborative: relational consent, mutual benefit, investment, humility, accountability, transparency, equity, reparation, and amplification.⁴⁹

Participants in this research were recruited by TAVP and SAADA staff after they told their stories to fellows in TAVP’s Visions after Violence Community Fellowship Program (for people who were formerly incarcerated or otherwise directly impacted by state violence) or SAADA’s Archival Creators’ Fellowship Projects (for South Asian Americans from minoritized communities). TAVP’s community participants are majority BIPOC people who are directly impacted by violence and the criminal legal system. SAADA’s participants include community members who are working-class, undocumented, LGBTQ+, Dalit, Indo-Caribbean, and from other groups that have been traditionally marginalized and excluded from dominant narratives of the South Asian American community.

This research used both in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews and focus groups as specific methods of data collection. (See appendix A for the semi-structured interview protocol.) We followed the seven stages of the interview process recommended by Alison Jane Pickard: thematizing, designing, interviewing, recording, transcribing, analyzing, and verifying.⁵⁰ Between April and June 2022, the second author of this paper conducted in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews over Zoom with twenty-one people who had previously participated in oral history projects at TAVP or SAADA. In June 2022, she conducted two focus groups (one for each organization) with an additional eight participants, for a total of twenty-nine research subjects. Each participant received a one-hundred-dollar stipend for their participation.

⁴⁷ Gregory Rolan et al., “Voice, Agency, and Equity: Deep Community Collaboration in Record-Keeping Research,” *Information Research* 24, no. 3 (2019): 1–7.

⁴⁸ Shannon Faulkhead, “Negotiated Methodologies: Designing Research Respectful of Academic and Indigenous Traditions,” in *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, ed. Anne J. Gilliland, Sue McKemmish, and Andrew J. Lau (Clayton, Australia: Monash University Press, 2016), 479–515.

⁴⁹ Reciprocity in Research Records Collaborative, “‘Come Correct or Don’t Come at All’: Building More Equitable Relationships between Archival Studies Scholars and Community Archives,” White Paper, December 2021, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7v00k2qz>.

⁵⁰ Alison Jane Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Neal-Schuman ALA, 2013).

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed with the permission of each interview subject. The first author of this paper then coded the transcriptions for reoccurring themes and relationships using NVIVO software following the principles of axial coding emerging from grounded theory.⁵¹ We achieved data saturation with our sample size in that participants did not surface significant new themes by the end of our data coding process. Participants were given the option to be quoted by name or for their names to remain confidential. The researchers have honored these wishes in reporting the results. A draft of this article was sent to all named research subjects and representatives of each community archive site before submission and peer review. This research has been approved by our university's Institutional Review Board.

This research fits squarely within an interpretivist research paradigm that presupposes reality to be socially constructed. In this paradigm, the results of any research depend contextually on the interaction between researcher and subject. This research aims to elucidate specific cases rather than create generalizable results.⁵² Interviews and focus groups allow researchers to gain detailed understandings of the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of subjects from their points of view using their own words. The resulting data are descriptive in nature; the goal of such research is to generate a "thick description" of a particular phenomenon in a single setting.⁵³ We do not claim that our findings are generalizable to all record creators or all community archives.

In an interpretivist research paradigm, it is critical for researchers to acknowledge their positionality, as positionality influences what research questions can be asked, what data are collected, and how that data is interpreted. The first author of this paper is a white woman originally from a working-class background who is in the first generation of her family to graduate from high school. She cofounded SAADA and has been actively engaged in research about SAADA and other community archives sites for the past fifteen years. The second author of this paper is a white woman from a middle-class background who has worked as an archivist, oral historian, and community organizer. While both researchers are in continuous conversation with staff at each site, we are outsiders to both communities represented and served by the organizations as white women who have not been incarcerated. Our positionalities impacted the data we were able to collect and the lens through which we interpret it, posing a significant limitation to this research.

Drawing on conventions in both oral history and archival studies, in this paper we use the terms "narrator," "storyteller," and "records creator" interchangeably to describe people who tell their stories to an interviewer with the explicit purpose of recording them for inclusion in an archives. Although these terms are not synonyms, we believe they accurately describe the same group of participants in this particular study. Similarly, we use the terms "interviewer," "listener," and "fellow" interchangeably, as participants in fellowship programs at each organization served as interviewers for the oral history projects being examined. We acknowledge these interviewers as co-creators of the records produced, but in this article we give primary credit to the narrators who tell their own stories.

A Note about the Organizations

⁵¹ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014).

⁵² Pickard, *Research Methods in Information*.

⁵³ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

Founded in 2007, TAVP is a community-based archive and documentation project that uses oral history, multimedia, and public education to cultivate deeper understandings of the impacts of state violence on individuals, families, and communities. TAVP's mission is to build an archive of stories and other materials that serve as resources to promote restorative and transformative justice. TAVP's growing archival collection includes four-hundred-plus hours of video oral histories, historical records, correspondence, state records, photographs, creative works, and other materials. TAVP's education and training program offers resources on ethical and participatory documentation and archiving to community members, memory workers, activists, advocates, attorneys, mental health professionals, and others. These trainings include "Trauma-Informed Life History Interviewing," "Mitigating Risks of Documenting and Archiving Narratives of Violence," and "Informed and Ongoing Consent." TAVP has also partnered with WITNESS, a global human rights organization, to create resources for responsibly documenting and archiving protest materials.

TAVP's community partners are majority BIPOC people who are directly impacted by violence and the criminal punishment system. Because poor and working-class communities of color are disproportionately impacted by state violence, TAVP ensures that these communities are central decision-makers in TAVP's documentation and archival projects. TAVP has always worked closely with its community and recently launched a community advisory council so community members whose life experiences, perspectives, and worldviews are reflected in TAVP's archive can regularly advise TAVP on its programming, documentation, collection, and dissemination practices. Through a thoughtful ethics of care in TAVP's documentation and archival practices, TAVP opens a space for its community to tell their stories in their own words and on their own terms. The organization's interviewing protocol and multistep process of ongoing consent gives community members full control and autonomy over when and to what extent their stories (and other records) will be added to the archives and made publicly available. Even after community members have donated their materials to the archives, they maintain ownership and copyright over their materials and always have the option of removing their content from the collection.

TAVP's Visions after Violence Community Fellowship program trains people who are directly impacted by state violence to conduct and record interviews with people from their own communities, acknowledging that interviewees with shared lived experience bring unique and necessary insight to the memory work. The program continues the organization's commitment to centering the experiences, perspectives, and visions of people directly impacted by state violence.

Since 2008, SAADA has been at the forefront of pioneering a distributed, post-custodial, community-driven approach to archival collecting. 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 United States who identify as South Asian American. SAADA's collection of more than 4,700 items is the largest publicly accessible South Asian American archive. The materials in SAADA's archive consistently enable academics, artists, journalists, students, and community members to write books, create new content, and shape public understanding about the South Asian American community.

SAADA is deeply rooted in the South Asian American community, and the leadership and support for the organization come primarily from the community itself. SAADA's staff and board of directors are all of South Asian heritage. SAADA's Academic Council consists of nineteen scholars of South Asian American studies based at academic institutions around the country.

SAADA also ensures that the most marginalized groups within the South Asian American community are included in its collections. SAADA's Archival Creators Fellowship supports community members in becoming active participants in proposing, designing, appraising, curating, and creating archival collections that reflect the histories and perspectives of the most marginalized groups within the South Asian American community. The participants include community members who are working-class, undocumented, LGBTQ+, Dalit, Indo-Caribbean, and from other groups that have been traditionally excluded from dominant narratives of the South Asian American community.

Although these are two different organizations serving two different communities, they share a commitment to centering the voices of the most marginalized and vulnerable in archival work. This study highlights commonalities among record creators across both organizations but also attempts not to conflate or collapse important differences between them. We reflect on areas where there is commonality and difference between the two communities in the discussion section.

Findings

Our research surfaced several key themes: the importance of shared identity and experience between interviewer and interviewee, imagined future uses of the now-documented stories for activist aims, the ability of digital technologies like Zoom to engender storytelling across distance, and the internal emotional impact of record creation on narrators. This article is the first of several based on this data and reports solely on the last theme: the emotional impact of creating a record on record creators themselves.

In this section, we provide lengthy quotes from participants in order to let their voices shine through. We highlight a few particularly rich examples here, revealing the depth of our data rather than its breadth. We do not claim that *all* participants felt the same way but rather that the following themes surfaced so often and across so many participants that they revealed a commonality worth further investigation.

Across interview and focus group data with storytellers from both SAADA and TAVP, many participants discussed how they were motivated to tell and record their stories for themselves, as part of their own personal journeys, rather than for their interviewers or future listeners. Participants discussed how sharing their life stories created powerful moments of self-reflection that impacted them personally and emotionally. At SAADA, participants discussed how storytelling enabled them to place their own personal stories within larger community narratives, not only validating the importance of their own stories but revealing the importance of culture, identity, and community in their lives. At TAVP, participants described the process of record creation as a "cleansing" release from the trauma of incarceration.

Theme 1: Across both organizations, storytellers create records for themselves.

Participants across organizations and projects addressed the impact of telling and recording their stories for themselves, for their own internal, emotional benefit, rather than only for some imagined future audience. For example, Roshni Rustomji-Kerns told her life story to Sharmeen Mehri, a SAADA Archival Creators Fellow whose project documents the Zoroastrian/Parsi community in the United States. At eighty-three years old, Rustomji-Kerns is a writer, professor, and community organizer who has herself collected many oral histories. When asked what motivates people to participate in oral history projects, Rustomji-Kerns responded, “because they want to tell their stories, and *it doesn’t matter who listens, or if it’s not even heard.*”⁵⁴ As Rustomji-Kerns asserted, the act of telling one’s story is important to the narrator/record creator, regardless of audience.

Similarly, Minal Ahson, a Muslim physician from Tampa, participated in Archival Creator Fellow Roshni Shah’s project documenting South Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked if she thought about who might listen to her recorded story in the future, Ahson responded: “I was kind of wondering about that and I still don’t know that I have a good answer for who would find this interesting. But I do think it felt . . . really nice and empowering to have my story recorded, to feel like I do carry a unique place in history. . . . It was nice to know that my space was unique enough that somebody felt like my story should be told.”⁵⁵ The (initial) impact was on Ahson herself, on how she processes emotions and views her place in the world, even if no one else ever listens to the recording.

Although most TAVP participants shared different life experiences than SAADA participants, they too expressed similar motivations for telling their stories. Many described the impact of storytelling and record creation on their own emotional wellbeing rather than on future users. For example, James Figueroa, who works in social services and is studying for a bachelor’s degree in social work, told his story of incarceration to TAVP Visions after Violence Fellow Lovinah Igbani-Perkins. When asked how he felt telling his story, he said,

Man . . . I teared up over just reliving my whole story, reliving different parts of my life where I kind of just pushed it down and I don’t really talk about some stuff. . . . That interview brought out a lot of emotion, [so] that I got real understanding of how religion affected me with mental health, and . . . of the different times violence did play a big part of my life and where it stemmed from, so there was a lot of emotion in the interview. You know, [Lovinah] gave me time to kind of just get my thoughts together, *but it was it was as much for me as for anybody else.*⁵⁶

These findings show that the act of creating a record is self-validating for record creators. Many participants, across organizations, are motivated to create records *for themselves*, not solely for some future external audience. The impact of record creation here is internal and emotional, focused on self and the present, rather than on an external audience of imagined future users.

Theme 2: At SAADA, record creation enabled storytellers to place personal stories into the larger contexts of culture, identity, and community.

⁵⁴ Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, interview, April 18, 2022, via Zoom; emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Minal Ahson, interview, April 15, 2022, via Zoom.

⁵⁶ James Figueroa, interview, April 22, 2002, via Zoom.

For participants who shared their stories with SAADA, record creation provided an opportunity to reflect on their own lives in the context of their culture and community. For example, when asked if she imagined who might listen to her recorded oral history in the future, Rustomji-Kerns replied,

I don't think my story is going to inspire anyone. . . . It's a regular story. . . . It's not that important, as far as the audience is concerned, but it seems to be [important] *for me*, at this age of being eighty-three, and seeing I don't have that many more years. It's sort of bringing my life together for me. And from doing the history of my life, then it raises questions of—it sounds sort of blasé . . . but—who am I? And who am I because of my journey? . . . Where do I fit in or don't fit in? When I step back and think of my life, that's what I think about. But because of the work I've done with the community, there have been stories that are so incredibly interesting and outrageous. And then . . . my story doesn't seem that different.⁵⁷

For Rustomji-Kerns, participation in a SAADA oral history project provided a powerful moment of self-reflection, an opportunity to take stock of her own personal journey and then relate that individual narrative to the larger picture of community history. The interview catalyzed a process of self-reflection, which enabled her to move from thinking her story was not important to being able to place her own story alongside other important community members' stories. The creation of the record catalyzed a modulation from personal, individual experiences to collective and community experiences, which in turn shifted the value she places on her own story.

Other SAADA participants similarly expressed that telling their stories gave them time to pause and reflect on how their own experiences related to their identities and a larger community story. Ahson described her experience telling and recording her story as “freeing.” She said,

I think [telling my story] was very revealing because . . . we don't often think of [how] our background or our upbringing, or culture, influence[s] our day to day lives. . . . I guess, for me, as a physician, I don't always think that it impacts how I'm doing what I'm doing. But [now] I think it does. . . . I think it did shade my experience and what I took away from COVID—not necessarily how I care for patients but *why*, my motivation, my drive, and how I process the experience as well. I think the processing part—you know, so much of how we see the world and how we view life and death . . . is impacted by my religion, by my culture. To finally have a space to talk about some of those things was really revealing, it was enlightening. I think it helped me process some of the things that maybe I was subconsciously thinking or inadvertently thinking that I saw [and] I had not expressed before.

She continued,

I think sometimes when we think about culture and cultural baggage, we think about it having negative connotations, or holding people back, binding people to these old-fashioned traditions or views. I think in this sense, I was able to realize that actually

⁵⁷ Roshni Rustomji-Kearns interview.

[my culture] gave me positive coping mechanisms to deal with life and death [issues], to realize that it empowered me. [My culture] gave me some extra social skills . . . an overview of how things should be. . . . It really helped me navigate some of what we experienced in COVID-19. So, I had never thought that these things were in place partially because of my culture and my religion, but actually talking it through helped me realize, “Oh wow, this is actually because of the upbringing that I’ve had, or my religious beliefs,” and it made me appreciate some of that more.⁵⁸

Narrating her story gave Ahson the space to reflect on the ways that South Asian culture and Islam have strengthened her as a doctor and person. This reflection stimulated an increased appreciation of her culture and community. Again, storytelling enables participants to modulate back and forth from self to community and back to self again.

Relatedly, several SAADA participants noted that when initially asked to record their stories, they did not think of their own stories as being important enough to be documented and preserved. It was only through the process of telling and recording their stories that they came to see themselves as part of a larger community-based historical narrative. For example, Surajit Bose contributed his oral history to Archival Creator Fellow Nikhil Patil’s project on South Asian Americans and the early days of the AIDS crisis. During a group focus group, Bose said, “I never thought that my story was worth telling, but when Nikhil reached out and said that the aim is to have an archive of the gay or queer South Asian experience during the AIDS crisis, I thought you know, that’s actually something worth archiving, even though I don’t think that my story was special in any way.”⁵⁹ Fellow focus group participant Abhi Kole, who had participated in Roshni Shah’s project on South Asian American experiences with COVID, responded to Bose:

It’s so funny hearing other people on this call say that they didn’t know what the value was going to be of their own story, because I felt the same way too and, in my eyes, I was like, well South Asians are not underrepresented in medicine, we’re not a minority in that field. So, is my story really unique? And that was sort of my worry about being interviewed, [that] I’m not actually going to say anything interesting or anything novel about the experience or anything even particularly *Indian*. But I just think it’s so interesting that everyone else here also had . . . that thought about “What is my uniqueness? What is my value?” Because I can see how unique you are, that comes through so clearly to me, but maybe to each individual it doesn’t show up that way.⁶⁰

Again, it is only through the process of telling and recording a story for inclusion in an archive that participants began to see their own personal stories as important to a larger community narrative. Storytelling and record creation enabled the participants to shift from self to community and back to self again, from invalidating the importance of their own experiences to placing themselves within the context of other community members, and then finally affirming the importance of their own experiences.

⁵⁸ Minal Ahson interview.

⁵⁹ Surajit Bose, focus group interview, June 15, 2022, via Zoom.

⁶⁰ Abhi Kole, focus group interview, June 15, 2022, via Zoom.

Theme 3: For TAVP participants, record creation cleanses trauma and enables formerly incarcerated people to wrest control of their own narratives.

A notable difference between participants from the two organizations is that many TAVP participants articulated feelings of emotional anguish surrounding their experiences in prison. For these participants, telling and recording a story helped alleviate those feelings of pain, providing a powerful release from the pain associated with incarceration.

Notably, several TAVP participants independently used the word “cleansing” to describe the process of telling and recording their stories for TAVP. For example, James Figueroa said, “Truly, [telling your story] does help you. It cleanses you every time.”⁶¹ For Figueroa, creating a record of his life story brought up painful memories of trauma and violence. And yet the process was cathartic, helping to heal emotional wounds even as it surfaced them. Figueroa articulated a powerful self-awareness of the internal emotional impact of sharing his story; he was motivated by that feeling of “cleansing” brought about by sharing his past.

Similarly, Michael Cevallos, a writer and podcast creator who is formerly incarcerated, also told his story to Lovinah Igbani-Perkins. Cevallos said he agreed to participate because “I do a lot of different things to cleanse myself, and so I decided yeah, yeah, I’d love to do it.” He described the recording process as a kind of “exposure therapy” in which “you kind of let it all out there, and the shock is over with, and . . . everybody can be who they need to be. I really felt I had to [tell my story] because I felt uncomfortable in my own body, I guess. . . . It was like coming out, like if I was gay or something. It’s like, you know, ‘I’m a convict,’ ‘I’m a prisoner.’ It’s just like a cleansing, or . . . a release.”⁶² Cevallos here is describing an internal motivation for creating a record. Documenting his story is an opportunity to help heal past traumas and to feel “cleansed” from the pain they conferred. The impact of record creation here is internal and ontological: telling his story changes his way of being in the world; acknowledging his full range of his experiences makes him more comfortable as himself.

Unlike most SAADA participants, many TAVP participants have shared their experiences repeatedly as part of rehabilitation programs for other formerly incarcerated people, particularly reentry programs run by Christian organizations that place a moral or redemptive value on confession. For some of these participants, there is a danger in feeling coerced, overexposed, and/or exploited by repeated or rehearsed storytelling, rather than “cleansed” or “released,” as several participants mentioned. Here, nuance is needed; not all storytelling is the same. Participants expressed how the process of sharing their stories with TAVP felt different than extractive practices from other organizations because the participants maintained a sense of control and autonomy in the process, and because the act of storytelling was open-ended, without a predefined audience and predetermined impact. Indeed, the initial (if sometimes unexpected) impact of telling their stories was on themselves.

Some TAVP participants explicitly discussed how telling and recording their stories for TAVP enabled them to take control of their own narratives, which had been misconstrued by police and prison records. For example, Rabia Qutab discussed the reactions of some friends and family when

⁶¹ James Figueroa interview.

⁶² Michael Cevallos, interview, April 26, 2022, via Zoom.

she told them that she was recording her story for TAVP. She said, “So I know people are a little bit worried that, ‘Oh, your story is going to be archived so it’s going to be there forever,’ and I’m like, ‘Well so is my past, and so is my life, so I might as well . . . understand that [and] embrace being formerly incarcerated.’”⁶³ For some, creating a new (and permanent) record was a powerful counter to “official” documentation and its lingering impact. By telling and recording their own stories in their own voices, TAVP participants reclaimed narrative power.

Discussion

These findings indicate that telling and recording one’s story for inclusion in an archive catalyzes an ontological shift in the storyteller, changing their way of being in the world and how they see their place within it. The anticipation of this shift motivated some storytellers to participate in oral history projects; for others, the shift came as a surprise. For many storytellers, the process is life-changing. Narrators create records of their life stories for themselves—to feel validated, to see themselves as part of a larger community, to cleanse themselves of past trauma. In this way, record creation is a powerful assertion of existence, a declaration that “I am here,” for those whose communities, perspectives, and experiences have been left out of or mis-portrayed by dominant historical narratives.

For SAADA participants, the process of creating records sparked an ontological shift in relation to self and community. Many participants began in a state of self-minimization, downplaying the importance of their own stories within the context of larger community narratives. They had not seen others like themselves represented in history and could not fully conceptualize the value of their own stories to others. Yet, by telling their stories for inclusion in an archive, they came to understand the importance of their own experiences in relation to their identity and culture, and in turn began to validate the importance of their own experiences within that larger context. To use a term developed to describe the impact of seeing yourself in archives as a user, records creators experienced “representational belonging” through the act of record creation, feeling validated by the experience of representing themselves autonomously, complexly, and in relation to others from their own communities.⁶⁴ In the process of creating a record, they modulated from self to community and back to self again, integrating their own personal stories into South Asian American historical narratives.

For TAVP participants, the process of creating records catalyzed a different kind of ontological shift. Recording their stories enabled formerly incarcerated folks to release themselves from cycles of pain, dissipating the agony associated with incarceration. Record creation becomes a tool to process trauma. Through the process of record creation, TAVP participants also modulated from self to larger society and back to self, from some participants keeping their experiences secret at the outset to shedding light on them during the act of storytelling, to feeling released from pain about them after. While TAVP participants made clear that recording their stories was not a replacement for therapy, and that storytelling can become extractive or exploitative if its aims are overdetermined, many did find the process to be therapeutic, a way in part to release themselves from negative emotional baggage and fear that privately held experiences would be made public. Solís has termed TAVP collections “archives of survival” that serve as “*conduits* for the

⁶³ Rabia Qutab, interview, April 20, 2022, via Zoom.

⁶⁴ Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, “‘To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing.’”

channeling of harm into opportunities for healing.”⁶⁵ This is both an emotional and ontological transformation. The power to tell and record their own stories changed narrators’ ways of being in the world, especially after feeling powerless in incarceration and misrepresented in bureaucratic police and prison records. Through telling and recording their own stories, people who are formerly incarcerated talk back to prison records and wrest control of the narratives of their own lives. This is a profoundly meaningful shift with implications for virtually every aspect of their lives moving forward. In this way, TAVP’s projects foster a sense of *archival autonomy* for formerly incarcerated people, enabling them to reclaim their stories after experiences of symbolic annihilation and narrative dehumanization. Archival autonomy, in turn, can lead to greater autonomy in life, whereby people who are formerly incarcerated can begin to make decisions about their futures away from the imposition of the state. Creating archival autonomy and promoting its relationship to other forms of autonomy are crucial parts of the organization’s impact that should be assessed in more detail through further research.

By putting the experiences of these two different groups of records creators into conversation, we can see commonalities across the marginalized communities that create and contribute records to community archives. Autonomous record creation is a form of personal and community empowerment for vulnerable people and communities represented and served by community archives. Its implications extend beyond the archives, leading to greater empowerment in other aspects of life. Based on our data, we propose a new term, “self-validating record,” to describe records that are created in order to acknowledge and affirm the life experiences of people who have been symbolically annihilated by dominant recordkeeping practices. For the SAADA participants, creating new records countered dominant (and often internalized) white supremacist silences, simplifications, and stereotypes about South Asian American identities and experiences. For the TAVP participants, creating new records countered the false, flattening, dehumanizing, and often white supremacist depictions found in bureaucratic police and prison records. The process of creating self-validating records affirms life by enabling people, particularly marginalized people, to have autonomous control of their own stories. Furthermore, the process of creating self-validating records inspires autonomous control in other areas of life, both material and psychological, from mitigating the harm of one-sided representation in state records to coming to terms with the end of one’s life. Self-validating records catalyze autonomy, replacing despair and a sense of helplessness with agency and empowerment. For those who have been the subject of records rather than their creators (like many TAVP storytellers), and for those who have been left out of archives entirely (like many SAADA storytellers), the right to represent oneself in records has profound material and psychological consequences.

These consequences are not only personal but political. In aggregate, they lead to community-wide and society-wide changes. This leads us to propose the concept of “radical record creation” to describe those documentation efforts that shift power from those in positions of dominance to those in positions of vulnerability, that increase archival autonomy, and that wrest narrative control back into the hands of those from whom it has been taken, extracted, or denied. Creating records can be radical if it shifts power relations, empowering those who have been disempowered to control their

⁶⁵ Gabriel Daniel Solís, “The Pain Belongs to Us,” *Texas Observer*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.texasobserver.org/the-pain-belongs-to-us/>. Solís also uses the phrase “archives of survival” in “Documenting State Violence: (Symbolic) Annihilation and Archives of Survival,” *KULA: Knowledge Creation, Dissemination, and Preservation Studies* 2 (2018), <https://kula.uvic.ca/index.php/kula/article/view/113>.

own narratives. As this research confirmed, the impact of radical record creation starts with the creator, catalyzing an ontological shift in the narrator before (and in some cases, even without) anyone else ever listening, bearing witness to, or using the record that is created.

Furthermore, across both groups, records can be self-validating even if no one else ever listens, uses, or activates them; their first impact is on the creators themselves. Crucially, our research surfaced one overlooked reason why people create records: to validate themselves and their experiences for their own emotional and ontological benefit. The act of creating a record, in turn, creates a world where their stories, and by extension their experiences, are affirmed and valued. As our findings indicate, records and the self are *mutually co-constitutive*. The self creates records; records, in turn, create the self. The processes of subject formation and record creation can be symbiotic if people have autonomy and agency to represent themselves robustly. Community archives, built around the principles of autonomy and agency, are natural homes for projects that create self-validating records in the face of symbolic annihilation.

Conclusion

TAVP and SAADA oral history projects defy dominant Western archival theory's lingering insistence that records are neutral and impartial byproducts of activity, pointing us to new archival theories that affirm rather than undermine the intellectual contributions of marginalized communities. The records created by TAVP and SAADA fellows are not created in the normal course of business without concern for their future use. They are created *for the purpose of* creating a record, validating not only the self who tells a story but the very process of record creation itself. These records show that the process of record creation matters. While records generated by these projects might be deemed "artificial" by adherents to narrow conceptualizations of archival theory, the impact of their creation—emotional and ontological, personal and communal—was made quite clear in our interviews and focus groups. For us, this underscores the urgent need to forge a more expansive archival studies that can explain and support community-based archival theories and practices rather than invalidate or delegitimize them.

Our findings also suggest that archivists, scholars, and funders have been missing out on an important way to think about and assess the impact of community archives. Instead of focusing solely on the impact of archives on users, we must also turn our attention to the impact of archives on records creators. Indeed, if we return to Caswell and Cifor's typology of the web of relationships catalyzed by archives, we must rethink how we assess impact more holistically, across the spectrum of creation, donation, archivization, and use of records.⁶⁶ Our research calls for conceptualizing the impact of archives not just on users but on creators as well as compilers, donors, and archivists. Our data show that participatory oral history projects are impactful on those who share their stories *regardless of future use*. The act of record creation has a tremendous ontological impact on creators even if no one ever activates the records being created. When we assess the impact of archives, we must include the emotional impact of autonomously creating a record as an important initial outcome, even if fewer people are reached through creation than by use.

In closing, we return to the questions that we asked at the start of this article, and in turn ask the larger question of critical archival studies: How does power circulate through records? Our

⁶⁶ Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics."

research suggests we would do well to pay attention to records creation and creators in answering that question and subsequently design theories and practices that empower vulnerable communities to tell their own stories on their own terms for their own benefit first and foremost.

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Please introduce yourself. How did you get involved in telling your story to TAVP/SAADA?
2. Have you listened to other stories in TAVP/SAADA? If so, whose stories did you listen to? How did these stories make you feel?
3. Had you ever shared your story in a similar way before?
4. Can you tell us about the process of telling your story?
 - How did you meet your interviewer?
 - Were you given the questions in advance?
 - How was the consent process?
 - Did you tell your story over Zoom or in person?
 - How did you prepare yourself for telling your story?
 - How long did it take you to tell your story?
5. How did it feel to tell your story? What emotions did it bring out? How did you feel after the interview was done?
6. Did you feel supported in dealing with these emotions during and after the interview? What resources were offered to you to help you with these emotions?
7. What was the relationship like with your interviewer? Can you describe the rapport during the interview?
8. If your story was told via Zoom, what impact do you think that mode of interaction had? Do you think it mattered if your story was told via Zoom or in person?
9. Was your story recorded? Is it included in archives? If so, who do you think might listen to your story in the future? Who would you want to listen to your story? Does it matter to you that your interview is accessible freely online? What might you want listeners to think or do after listening to your story?
10. Did telling your story change you in any way? If so, how?
11. Why did you want to tell your story? What motivated you to participate? Did you have any reservations or concerns about telling your story?
12. What kinds of programs would you like TAVP/SAADA to run to enable people to tell their stories online?
13. Is there anything we haven't asked you that you would like to share with us?