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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

The Constituency Isn't Digital: Building and Mobilizing Digital Collections in the 21st
Century

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

by

Marissa Ann Friedman

December 2017

Thesis for Master's Committee:
Dr. Catherine Gudis, Chairperson
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The Thesis of Marissa Ann Friedman is approved:

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Constituency Isn't Digital: Building and Mobilizing Digital Collections in the 21st Century

by

Marissa Ann Friedman

Master of Arts, Graduate Program in History
University of California, Riverside, December 2017
Dr. Catherine Gudis, Chairperson

This thesis seeks to explore shifting paradigms in digital collections work in the twenty-first century. It puts into conversation different models of digital collection projects, with a particular emphasis on the proliferation of grassroots digital engagement projects and the formation of digital spaces in which community stakeholders (i.e. those “publics” not identified as scholarly or professional experts per se) collaboratively build and interpret collections.

U.S. cultural heritage professionals and digital humanists seek to map a future course for digital collections initiatives and to move beyond the techno-optimism that propelled the rapid invention and production of platforms and technical solutions for doing digital cultural heritage work. In the process, we are confronted with “new” issues that are actually not new at all, but rooted in longstanding problems of authority and trust, representation and inclusion.

While making significant strides in opening up cultural heritage institutions and processes to a more diverse set of publics, traditional, mainstream cultural heritage institutions are still struggling to significantly address the ways in which digital spaces and digital collections are implicated in considerations of power and identity. We need to seek out new leaders and new models for exploring the humanistic values and possible functions of digital collections in the present if we are to chart a novel course for digital collections and their functions in the twenty-first century. I suggest that critically-informed, innovative models for digital collections projects at the grassroots level offer cultural heritage practitioners and institutions sustainable and ethical blueprints for the future of digital cultural heritage work. By charting different contemporary models for building and mobilizing digital collections in the public sphere, this thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the shifting functions of collecting and interpreting in the digital age.

This thesis seeks to explore shifting paradigms in digital collections work in the twenty-first century. It puts into conversation different models of digital collection projects, with a particular emphasis on the proliferation of grassroots digital engagement projects and the formation of digital spaces in which community stakeholders (i.e. those “publics” not identified as scholarly or professional experts per se) collaboratively build and interpret collections.

U.S. cultural heritage professionals and digital humanists seek to map a future course for digital collections initiatives and to move beyond the techno-optimism that propelled the rapid invention and production of platforms and technical solutions for doing digital cultural heritage work. In the process, we are confronted with “new” issues that are actually not new at all, but rooted in longstanding problems of authority and trust, representation and inclusion.¹ While making significant strides in opening up cultural heritage institutions and processes to a more diverse set of publics, traditional, mainstream cultural heritage institutions are still struggling to significantly address the ways in which digital spaces and digital collections are implicated in considerations of power and identity. We need to seek out new leaders and new models for exploring the

¹ This too reflects the state of debate in the digital humanities at large, as some practitioners seek to move beyond the “more hack, less yack” sensibilities which have shaped the development of the digital humanities to date. The hack/yack (or doing/theorizing) debate came to represent the larger struggle by digital humanists to define the digital humanities and the relationship of the humanities to the digital humanities in particular. The debate is ongoing, and is charted most thoroughly in Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein, eds., *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). See also Natalia Cicere, “Introduction: Theory and the Virtues of Digital Humanities,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2011), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/introduction-theory-and-the-virtues-of-digital-humanities-by-natalia-cecire/>, accessed September 13, 2017, and Alan Liu.

humanistic values and possible functions of digital collections in the present if we are to chart a novel course for digital collections and their functions in the twenty-first century.

This conundrum is mirrored by the current state of debates over the “meaning” of the digital humanities in the field at large.² In the effort to define the relationship between the digital humanities and the humanities, and to better align the digital humanities with the theory and criticism afforded by humanities scholarship, scholars such as Alan Liu and Moya Bailey sought to reintegrate and reinterpret digital humanities projects into particular sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts.³ This movement within the field raised new and interesting questions about issues of access, inclusion, and authority.

As Bailey argued:

The ways in which identities inform both theory and practice in digital humanities have been largely overlooked. Those already marginalized in society and the academy can also find themselves in the liminal spaces of this field. By centering the lives of women, people of color, and disabled folks, the types of possible conversations in digital humanities shift. The move “from margin to center” offers the opportunity to engage new sets of theoretical questions that expose implicit assumptions about what and who counts in digital humanities as well as exposes

² Alan Liu summarizes the crisis of meaning which marks the field of digital humanities, and the humanities generally, today noting “that humanistic meaning, with its residual yearnings for spirit, humanity, and self—or, as we now say, identity and subjectivity—must compete in the world system with social, economic, science- engineering, workplace, and popular- culture knowledges that do not necessarily value meaning or, even more threatening, value meaning but frame it systemically in ways that alienate or co- opt humanistic meaning. Humanistic knowledge today is thus increasingly assimilated to what humanists themselves call research, evidence, analysis, method, productivity, and ‘impact,’...with no unfilled time and space left for any old ghosts in the machine.” Liu, “The Meaning of the Digital Humanities,” *PMLA* 128, no. 2, (2013), 419.

³ For example, refer to Alan Liu, “Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). The #TransformDH movement perfectly captures the spirit of this paradigm shift. See “#transformD.. This is the Digital Humanities,” <http://transformdh.tumblr.com/>, accessed September 13, 2017; Bailey, Moya, Anne Cong-Huyen, Alexis Lothian, and Amanda Phillips, “Reflections on a Movement: #transformDH, Growing Up,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016*, ed. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

structural limitations that are the inevitable result of an unexamined identity politics of whiteness, masculinity, and ablebodiedness.⁴

If we look beyond the center to the margins of digital cultural heritage work, I'm convinced we will discover compelling models which can transform the way we understand digital collecting in the twenty-first century. Tim Sherratt called for traditional cultural heritage institutions "to watch, understand and support what people are doing with collections in their own spaces — following them as they pursue their passions, rather than thinking of ways to motivate them."⁵ In this vein, this thesis makes the case for increased attention to the work taking place on the periphery of digital cultural heritage rather than at the center, at the grassroots level and in nontraditional institutional configurations alongside that being done within traditional spaces and organizations. We can learn from the questions being asked in these ventures about what it means to build and engage with digital spaces and digital collections for diverse publics in the twenty-first century. I suggest that critically-informed, innovative models for digital collections projects at the grassroots level offer cultural heritage practitioners and institutions sustainable and ethical blueprints for the future of digital cultural heritage work.

My interest in digital collections and engagement stems in part from my internship with Historypin, a nonprofit organization whose work is devoted to cultivating

⁴ Moya Z. Bailey, "All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave," *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2011), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/all-the-digital-humanists-are-white-all-the-nerds-are-men-but-some-of-us-are-brave-by-moya-z-bailey/>, accessed September 13, 2017.

⁵ Tim Sherratt, "It's All About the Stuff: Collections, Interfaces, Power, and People," *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2011), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/its-all-about-the-stuff-by-tim-sherratt/>, accessed September 13, 2017.

social capital through public engagement with digital cultural heritage collections. A subsidiary arm of a larger international nonprofit called Shift (formerly known as We Are What We Do) “which builds social businesses to solve social problems,” Historypin offers a multifaceted array of services for an international audience: it hosts and manages a free Google maps-based digital platform available for anyone to upload and share content, facilitates community engagement projects connected with digital collections, and collaborates with a range of cultural heritage institutions.⁶ Other services also include audience analysis, engagement evaluation and measurement, and training and support to meet technical and community engagement needs. Historypin conceptualizes its role as a cultural heritage engagement facilitator in inherently social and dialogic terms, but shapes many of its projects around an ethos of antiquarianism.⁷ Historypin’s evolving methodological approach towards digital collections reveals some of the fundamental issues at play in terms of negotiating authority and meaning-making in digital cultural

⁶ Historypin, a subsidiary of the United Kingdom-based organization known as Shift, with offices in London, Belgrade, New Orleans, and San Francisco. Historypin describes itself as “a way for people to come together to share and celebrate local history. It consists of a shared [digital] archive, a mutually supportive community and a collaborative approach to engagement with local history.” See “About,” Historypin, accessed May 2, 2017, <https://about.historypin.org/>. Its work has been recognized with numerous awards and supported by prestigious partners and funders from around the world, including the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the National Archives, and the European Commission. “HistoryPin,” accessed November 22, 2016, <https://www.historypin.org/en/>.

⁷ In an interview with Smithsonian Magazine, Shift CEO outlines the company’s vision for Historypin: “Our organization as a whole spends a lot of time thinking and talking about this concept of social capital—the associations, networks and trust that define strong communities. What Robert Putnam has done, and other sociologists like him, is trace the disintegration of this social capital. I think it is a huge trend, and not something that Historypin can solve by any stretch of the imagination. But we think that by boosting the interest in local heritage and by making it exciting and relevant to people, by starting conversations—across garden fences, families, different generations and cultural groups—about heritage, we can play a role” in producing more “bridging...social capital...across different groups.” Megan Gambino, “Q & A with Nick Stanhope, Creator of Historypin | History | Smithsonian,” accessed November 22, 2016, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/q-a-with-nick-stanhope-creator-of-historypin-66516490/>.

heritage work. I thus look to Historypin as one kind of model for digital collecting, while also putting Historypin's approach into conversation with grassroots-level community archival projects and collecting initiatives across the country shaped around an ethos of social justice and social activism. To highlight a compelling example of what the future of critically engaged digital work at a national-level institution might look like, I conclude by pointing to the work of the Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Center. By charting different contemporary models for building and mobilizing digital collections in the public sphere, this thesis aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about the shifting functions of collecting and interpreting in the digital age.

Democratizing History: Power, Politics, Authority

“Long before Wikipedia...museums were wrestling with the benefits and consequences of de-centering expertise.”—Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski⁸

Many of the issues that I raise in this thesis are not new or confined solely to digital cultural heritage work. Museums and other cultural institutions have been grappling for decades with sociopolitical and theoretical shifts that have called upon practitioners to re-examine institutional assertions of power, and that have led to shifting priorities in terms of “shared authority” and democratization of access. The rise of social history and oral history in the 1960s produced new debates over authority and authenticity, public engagement and accessibility. Grassroots cultural heritage groups empowered communities to document and interpret their own histories themselves.

⁸ Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, eds., *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia, PA: Walnut Creek: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 14.

Public and oral historians found themselves on the front lines of the battle between claims of professional scholarly authority on the one hand and community-generated historical interpretation on the other. Leading the charge was Michael Frisch, whose work on “shared authority” in the 1970s and 1980s recast interpretive work in both academic and public settings as a mutually dialogic process between multiple authors.⁹ Frisch argued for

what should be not merely a distribution of knowledge from knowledge from those who have it to those who do not, but a more profound sharing of knowledge, and implicit and sometimes explicit dialogue from very different vantages about shape, meaning, and implications of history. Not only might this dialogue from different bases of authority more regularly inform the process of participation in design and development, but it might more deeply characterize the experience of finished products themselves. If oral historians need to understand that their method involves much more than the extraction of knowledge from human history mines, public historians need to realize that their method can do much more than merely redistribute such knowledge.¹⁰

John Tchen echoed these calls for dialogic, process-based public history work, and presented a powerful model of a “dialogue-driven museum” (as opposed to a collections-driven museum) in his development of New York City’s Chinatown History Museum in the 1980s.¹¹ Dialogic models encouraged more active forms of public engagement in and

⁹ According to Frisch, “we need to recognize the already shared authority in the documents we generate and in the processes of public history engagement—a ‘dialogic dimension,’ however implicit—through which ‘author-ship’ is shared by definition, and hence interpretive ‘author-ity’ as well. We need to act on that recognition.” Michael Frisch, “From *A Shared Authority* to the Digital Kitchen and Back,” in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair et al. (Philadelphia, PA: Walnut Creek: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 128.

¹⁰ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (State University of New York Press: New York, 1990), xxii. This is arguably a challenge that has yet to be resolved, despite the introduction of digital tools, platforms, and the web, and is taken up again in later works.

¹¹ John Kup Wei Tchen, “Creating a Dialogic Museum: The Chinatown History Museum Experiment,” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Levine (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington, 1992), 285-326. Tchen and others credit Paolo Freire for definitively articulating the dialogic as learning process in *The Pedagogy of the*

around museum spaces; public audiences began to be reframed as community partners, even co-creators, rather than passive visitors and consumers. The relationships between museums and communities became central to contemporary commentators' understanding of the processual or "interrogative museum," defined by Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz as one which "strives—through exhibiting, research, and even collections management—to develop a plural sense of answers to the enduring and the changing questions that museums ask." In the spirit of Frisch and Tchen, this framework treated exhibitions "as essentially contested, debatable, and respecting the agency and knowledgeability of audiences when we develop and design exhibits," and encouraged practitioners and institutions to integrate community collaboration into the practices of cultural heritage work.¹² As the work of these practitioners and affiliated groups suggest, the 1970s and 1980s marked a pivotal moment in museum exhibition development, as "museums shifted from enshrining objects towards using them to display social

Oppressed (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). In conversation with Sites of Conscience founder Liz Ševčenko, Tchen offers another definition of a dialogic museum as one "a work process where documentation, meaning, and re-presentation are acknowledged to be co-developed with those whom the history is of, for, and about." John Kuo Tchen and Liz Ševčenko, "The 'Dialogic Museum' Revisited: A Collaborative Reflection," in *Letting Go: Sharing Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski (Philadelphia: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 82.

¹² Ivan Karp and Corrine A. Kratz, "The Interrogative Museum," in *Museum as Process: Translating Local and Global Knowledges*, ed. Raymond A. Silverman (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 281. For other perspectives on museum/community relationships, see Elizabeth M. Crooke, *Museums and Community: Ideas, Issues, and Challenges* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Vivien Golding and Wayne Modest, eds., *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1992).

relations,” opening up space in exhibition practices for a wide range of topics and historical actors previously considered taboo.¹³

The destabilization of conventional museology represented by notions of shared authority and the dialogic museum was also related to larger critiques of object-based display and collection practices rooted in colonial epistemologies.¹⁴ In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars and artists alike devoted a great deal more attention to elucidating long-standing and deeply engrained conceptions about the role of the museum as arbiter of knowledge, authority, and power. They called attention to the ways in which cultural heritage institutions exerted power through the ownership, classification, and arrangement of material culture. Their critiques also worked to undermine contemporary conceptions of such institutions as neutral, apolitical spaces of authority, removed from the dynamic interplay of political forces which shape the collection and presentation of objects.¹⁵ Artists such as Fred Wilson played a critical role in this revolution; for

¹³ Mike Wallace, *Mickey Mouse history and other essays on American memory* (Philadelphia, Pa: Temple University Press, 1996), 116.

¹⁴ Tony Bennett considered the civilizing “exhibitionary complex” at work in museums of the nineteenth century which, “through the provision of object lessons in power—the power to command and arrange things and bodies for public display—they sought to allow the people...*en masse*...to know rather than be known, to become the subjects rather than the objects of knowledge.” Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995), 62-63. Steven Conn suggested that museums derived their authority from an “object-based epistemology” based on a “faith in the power of objects to convey knowledge, meaning, and understanding—if they were properly collected, classified, and arranged.” Steven Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 7.

¹⁵ Ironic perhaps that these ongoing shifts emerged within the context of the “culture wars” of the ‘90s, in which the newfound visibility of marginalized identities and narratives in cultural heritage work provoked cries of historical revisionism and political correctness in conservative circles. In this I am in agreement with Mike Wallace, who argues that “history, and history museums, are inescapably political, and always have been. In the old days, people were a good deal more explicit about it...Usually museums were handmaidens of power, and they set the present in a continuum in such a way as to ratify present arrangements.” I find his observations concerning these contemporary claims for neutrality particularly striking considering the public battles over heritage going on at every level of our society even today: “Only relatively recently did museums and scholars

example, Wilson’s 1992 exhibition at the Maryland Historical Society, “Mining the Museum,” sought to reveal the selective gaps and silences embedded in museum exhibition and collection practices by juxtaposing objects from the collection relating to the area’s African American history, many of which had never been displayed, in new and provocative ways.¹⁶

This is all to suggest that if digital technologies have accelerated changes in how museums, libraries, and archives conceptualize their social role and shape their collections practices accordingly, these changes have been long in the making, predating even the explosion of web and digital technologies in the nineties.¹⁷ The development and proliferation of digital tools and platforms in the digital age cannot be divorced from the developing movement within GLAMs towards expanding institutional missions, functions, and social roles beyond traditional brick-and-mortar spaces.¹⁸ As Heidi Geismar observes, “Accounts of the digital as a new genre of museum practice are largely celebratory, applauding the democratic expansion of a commons of cultural

profess to be ‘objective,’ or apolitical; such preachments seldom governed museological practice.” Wallace, 122.

¹⁶ For more on Fred Wilson’s work and mission, see: Fred Wilson, Jered Sprecher, and Amy J. Elias, “Objects and Identities: An Interview with Fred Wilson,” *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 1 (2017): , doi:10.1353/asa.2017.0001.

¹⁷ Conn suggests that the reworking of the museum’s relationship to material objects in particular is rooted in the evolution over the course of the twentieth century of conceptions of the museum as having “educational, recreational, [and] commercial” roles, which eroded “faith in the ability of objects to communicate meaning easily and transparently” and encouraged the removal of these objects from museum spaces. Museums are now arbiters of experiences. Conn, 25-26.

¹⁸ For a more detailed retelling of the intersections and convergences between digital technologies and cultural heritage work, see: Ross Parry, ed., *Museums in a Digital Age* (London: Routledge, 2010); Bill Adair, Benjamin Filene, and Laura Koloski, eds., *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World* (Philadelphia, PA: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011); Herminia Din and Phyllis Hecht, eds., *The Digital Museum: A Think Guide* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2007).

information and objects to greater numbers of people. The discursive tropes of access and accountability are also hallmarks of a continually emergent ‘New Museology’ that has documented a shift of interest in museums away from objects and toward people, society, and experience.”¹⁹ The perceived emancipatory potential of the web and continuously evolving digital technologies are linked with institutional efforts to increase public access to and engagement with collections taking place across the cultural heritage sector, not least of all in museums.²⁰

Besides providing varying levels of access to digital collections, digital technologies have enabled the public to contribute to the process of building and interpreting collections through tagging and crowdsourcing projects. Yet as Tim Sherratt noted, “most of these activities still happen within spaces created and curated by the institutions themselves. Our cathedrals of culture might be opening their doors and inviting the public to participate in their ceremonies, but that doesn’t make them bazaars. The architecture still speaks of authority.”²¹ Beyond these traditional architectures, however, digital tools and platforms have generated tremendous opportunities for

¹⁹ Haidy Geismar, “Museum + Digital = ?,” in *Digital Anthropology*, edited by Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 266.

²⁰ See Caroline Lang, John Reeve, and Vicky Woollard, eds., *The Responsive Museum: Working with Audiences in the Twenty-First Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), for more on the debates and policies concerning access in museums.

²¹ Tim Sherratt, “It’s All About the Stuff: Collections, Interfaces, Power, and People,” *Journal of Digital Humanities* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2011), <http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-1/its-all-about-the-stuff-by-tim-sherratt/>. This also speaks to what Bailey suggests is the problem with the current “add-and-stir” diversity model operating in the digital humanities generally, which fails to address and instigate structural change despite handing over seats at the “already established table” to marginalized identities. She makes a compelling case for why “work that is already aligned with the digital humanities and perhaps even pushing the field in new directions should be celebrated and sought out.” Bailey, “All the Digital Humanists Are White, All the Nerds Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave.”

community groups interested in collecting and interpreting material independently and on their own terms, thus redefining what it means to build and mobilize collections in the digital age.

From the Center towards the Margins: Historypin's Evolving Collections Strategies

Historypin offers a window into what I would categorize as relatively mainstream digital collecting paradigms. It works closer to the center of conventional digital collections practices rather than the periphery, in that it intersects with and is informed by digital collecting work at major institutions from across the country. Its digital platform fits into a larger framework of major digital tools and platforms designed to facilitate greater public access to and engagement with digital collections.²² Historypin serves as a centralized repository for a diverse array of born-digital or digitized collections spanning a number of institutions, projects, and even individual contributions. Included features emphasize its designers' participatory intent, from social tagging options to comment sections. Freely accessible online and requiring only a simple (and free) registration process, Historypin allows anyone to search, explore, and pin new materials to the map, as well as add descriptive tags or other metadata to an item already pinned onto the site's Google maps interface.

Clearly, it operates within a collections model that aligns with many of the key values espoused by digital humanists and cultural heritage practitioners alike: it exhibits a genuinely collaborative orientation and invites broad public participation in interpreting a

²² Such tools range from geo-locational mobile applications like Curatescape and Clio, which map collections to geographic locations, to web-based platforms like Omeka, designed primarily as an online research delivery tool for scholars.

diverse array of cultural heritage materials. Its emphasis on user-design methods and focus on capturing social impact suggest a socially-engaged mindset. The platform's architecture is informed by an ethic of democratization and openness — anyone can participate, remix, share, and reinterpret the existing collections on the platform. And it exhibits a strong commitment to the “hacking” ethos in its iterative development of collection delivery tools.

At its core, Historypin's creators envision the platform as a bridge from the physical to digital world. Through offline community collection events, local communities of all stripes can gather their own collections and share them in an online platform for a broader audience. Simultaneously, Historypin acts as a centralized repository and disseminator of collections across institutions, allowing for potential opportunities to make connections between disparate collections. Its largest and most visible contributors on the platform are prominent libraries, archives, and museums. It positions itself as a hub from which the public can access geographically networked institutional holdings from across the United States and internationally. As such, it partners regularly with a variety of museums, libraries, and archives, in order to expand the reach of their client's brand and to generate increased public engagement with pre-existing institutional collections, digitized and existing elsewhere in other places, such as in institutional databases or on Flickr. This latter function occupies a good deal of the organization's major projects, usually funded by grants from major arts funding organizations. In effect, Historypin interprets pre-existing digital collections and seeks to deliver them to the widest possible audience through the development of more refined

technologies and methodologies, and specifically through its one-size-fits-all digital platform.

For example, the Wartime Films Project, a partnership between Historypin and a host of institutions, including the U.S. National Archives, is dedicated to increasing public engagement with a host of WWI-era historic materials. Historypin provided their digital platform and API (application programming interface) for content delivery and conducted audience analysis and research. The end goal: to help facilitate NARA's efforts to make the WWI materials accessible across multiple platforms (including both Historypin's digital platform and Remembering WWI iPad app) and to increase opportunities for these targeted public audiences to discover and reuse materials from across a range of participating institutions in ways most useful to them. The enormous scale of the collection being digitized and the vast potential audiences for a national-level institution like NARA motivated, in part, the decision to employ a targeted user-design approach to the project which Historypin helped to manage. By postulating on the kinds of behaviors clearly defined groups of users would exhibit with the digital tool, staff hoped to create a product with real value for these users. A Historypin report notes that this allowed staff "to have a better understanding of what...target audiences expect from NARA and the moving image archives and to envision tools, products, and engagement strategies to best address these actual needs."²³ The value is measured in large part

²³ Historypin, "Encouraging Reuse of NARA Wartime Moving Image Archives: Steps Towards Meaningful Engagement, November 2014, accessed April 30, 2017, https://narations.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/historypin_naramovie_archivereuse_public_report.pdf, 3.

instrumentally, and applies mostly to the technological tools being produced: what products can make accessing greater numbers of collections easier, faster, and more efficient? The power lies in the tools.

This techno-optimist spirit manifests itself in Historypin's experiments with crowdsourcing. In 2013, over thirty different institutions and one hundred individual contributors from across the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond joined forces with Historypin and Stanford University to celebrate and diversify the Bay's history.²⁴ Named the "Year of the Bay," this project represented one component of an extended partnership between Stanford's Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis (CESTA) and Historypin. Funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, CESTA's larger initiative, "Crowdsourcing for the Humanities," was to test the feasibility of crowdsourcing as a tool for humanities researchers and to experiment with crowdsourcing techniques "to advance humanistic work with and beyond the walls of the academy."²⁵

The goals of the project were twofold: to "explore the history of that dynamic waterway and the culture and cultural heritage surrounding it," and to "give the public the opportunity to interact with Bay Area history and contribute to challenges that help map historical photos and align old maps with the current map of the Bay, while contributing

²⁴ Jon Christensen, "Researchers seek stories about experiencing bay," accessed April 29, 2017, <https://about.historypin.org/researchers-seek-stories-about-experiencing-bay/>.

²⁵ CESTA defines crowdsourcing as "a mode of research, knowledge gathering, and analysis, whereby a researcher engages a community to provide answers to questions or solutions to problems or analysis of material. There are many different forms of crowdsourcing, but they are all linked by the idea that a large group of people can offer solutions to research questions and data analysis that would be unavailable to the individual or small group."

"Crowdsourcing for the Humanities," Stanford CESTA, accessed April 28, 2017, <http://humanitiescrowdsourcing.stanford.edu/about/>.

to a more complete view of history...[and of] life around the Bay.”²⁶ Like other crowdsourcing efforts employed by major cultural heritage institutions, the underlying goal was to fill in gaps in pre-existing collections. To accomplish this, Historypin developed a unique digital home for the project at <https://www.historypin.org/project/22-yearofthebay/>, which served as the central hub of digital activity and collections management.

The antiquarian ethos which drives many of Historypin’s earlier collection projects shaped who they sought out as public collaborators in the project: local history enthusiasts, those who found pleasure in collecting antiquities and factoids of the past. Historypin staff coordinated different kinds of events to facilitate the collecting process, both digital and non-digital, with the expectation that there would be immediate interest in adding to the platform. They attended popular community events such as the 14th annual Potrero History Night in San Francisco’s Potrero Hill District to talk about the project and about bay history with local history enthusiasts.²⁷ They hosted an evening Hackathon at the California Historical Society on May 23 to identify photographs of businesses along the San Francisco waterfront taken from the collections of the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Photo Archives, the California Historical Society, SF Public Library, and SF Maritime National Park.²⁸ Bay Nature magazine hosted a photo

²⁶ “About the Year of the Bay Project,” accessed April 29, 2017, <https://about.historypin.org/about-the-year-of-the-bay-project/>.

²⁷ “Historypin at the Potrero Hill History Night, Nov. 2nd 2013,” Historypin, accessed April 30, 2017, <https://about.historypin.org/historypin-at-the-potrero-hill-history-night-nov-2nd-2013/>.

²⁸ These kinds of analog events play a significant role in shaping Historypin’s research and evolving approaches towards community engagement practices. As Historypin staff noted in a blog post about the Hackathon: “In addition to looking at the social aspect of collecting information in an event setting, experiments like this hackathon are also serving to inform Historypin user interface

contest in conjunction with the project, incentivized with a cash prize, to encourage the submission of “fun” photographs of people on the bay. In the words of magazine editor Dan Rademacher, “Why? Because we ALL make history, and we want to see a whole range of folks having fun out on San Francisco Bay.”²⁹

This antiquarian ethos informed the ways in which Historypin incentivized public participation in these collection efforts. Their goal was to chart public engagement by collecting historical data: trivia, names, dates, identifying metadata, to enrich collections. Historypin introduced “history mysteries” to help structure the information-sharing component of the project’s digital crowdsourcing efforts—essentially, Historypin selected photographs collected on the project’s webpage which lacked sufficient metadata or other identifying information (i.e. locations, dates, people) and promoted them as “history mysteries” which called for community input.

The project employed crowdsourcing at two disparate levels: one which welcomed general contribution of photographs and other historic materials related to the Bay Area, and the other which specifically called for contributions from those with specialized local knowledge to solve the history mysteries. A Historypin blog post

development online for capturing and discussing historical metadata in fun and meaningful ways. With this hackathon and other Year of the Bay community events, we’re exploring how local historical and heritage institutions can involve their audiences and communities more by inviting collaboration around their historical content. This is a chance for like-minded people to come together and discuss local Bay history, with the extra incentive of being able to contribute information to under-researched photographs from local history collections.” “Our Year of the Bay Hackathon at the California Historical Society,” Historypin, accessed April 30, 2017, <https://about.historypin.org/our-year-of-the-bay-hackathon-at-the-california-historical-society/>.

²⁹ Of course, this incentivized engagement would appeal to people who had a particularly relationship to the Bay based on leisure and recreation, and remain an exclusionary category for others. Dan Rademacher, “Dan Rademacher of Bay Nature Magazine On Our Year of the Bay Photo Contest,” Historypin, accessed April 30, 2017, <https://about.historypin.org/dan-rademacher-of-bay-nature-magazine-on-our-year-of-the-bay-photo-contest/>.

describing an event with the Bernal Heights History group reveals a major shift in the project goals relating to the scope of crowdsourcing: “Since the launch of our Year of the Bay project last year, we have most recently introduced the Mysteries interface to the project so that users from far and wide might help us crowdsource data for pinned content in a fun and engaging way. We are now focusing on mysteries relating to one local history group, Bernal Heights History Project, to see how one enthusiastic community can come together around these tools.”³⁰ This emphasis on fun, casting collecting as a form of entertainment, reiterates the antiquarian impulse of Historypin’s model, and suggests its potential value for what Historypin and CESTA researchers as “knowledge communities: small networks of neighbors or enthusiasts representing a group of people that could be systematically organized to share and participate in research for a common aim.”³¹

³⁰ “Mystery-solving with the Bernal Heights History Group, San Francisco,” Historypin, accessed April 30, 2017, <https://about.historypin.org/mystery-solving-in-with-the-bernal-heights-history-group-san-francisco/>.

³¹ Jon Voss, Gabriel Wolfenstein and Kerri Young, “From crowdsourcing to knowledge communities: Creating meaningful scholarship through digital collaboration,” *MW2015: Museums and the Web 2015*, February 1, 2015, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://mw2015.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/from-crowdsourcing-to-knowledge-communities-creating-meaningful-scholarship-through-digital-collaboration/>. This value is still being negotiated. These knowledge communities, in this case mainly neighborhood-based local history collectives who were sought out as ideal contributors because of their localized historical expertise, initially expressed little interest in “engaging” with Historypin’s digital platform. In part, “digital literacy barriers” and “lack of resources and time” prevented some of these local neighborhood groups, such as the Bernal Heights History group (composed mainly of older local history buffs) from utilizing the digital platform Historypin offered. And yet, Kerri Young, project facilitator for many of these community events, noted that these same communities responded enthusiastically to simpler digital tools (such as projectors) which, in analog settings, “serv[ed] as a catalyst for...discussion, enhancing what this community loved to do on a regular basis. The experience underlined the importance of identifying and understanding the audience to inform the digital tools” (emphasis my own). Small, insular, and close-knit, these communities appreciated digital tools to the extent that they allowed for the sharing and discussion of historical materials among themselves; public-facing platforms held no appeal for these groups with no desire to engage in external outreach or collaboration.

According to Young, ad-hoc collecting and outreach events became the norm, in lieu of sustained collaborative relationships between community groups and project organizers.³² Historypin staff stepped in to translate the knowledge and dialogue produced at offline events and migrate material and information produced in offline sessions onto the digital platform in order to populate the tool with content. As a form of digital collection practices, the process ran the risk of becoming extractive rather than collaborative, a problem of which Historypin staff are very much aware and seeking to remedy.³³

³² Time constraints and project planning complicated this process, pointing to the need for built-in time for iterating throughout the duration of a constantly evolving digital project. Interview with Kerri Young, April 20, 2017. Clearly, determining who priority community collaborators are and what their needs are becomes more nuanced, and more critical, as the nature of the tasks increases in complexity or requires more specialized knowledge. In a white paper presented at Museums and the Web in 2015, Jon Voss and Kerri Young of Historypin and Gabriel Wolfenstein of Stanford University evaluate the lessons learned from their crowdsourcing experimentation. They argue “that there is an important distinction within the realm of crowdsourcing for more complex and collaborative tasks and processes that revolve around knowledge communities... Engaging with these communities often requires longer time frames than simpler task-driven crowdsourcing may allow, and is necessarily much more collaborative than extractive.” Voss, Wolfenstein and Young, "From crowdsourcing to knowledge communities: Creating meaningful scholarship through digital collaboration," <http://mw2015.museumsandtheweb.com/paper/from-crowdsourcing-to-knowledge-communities-creating-meaningful-scholarship-through-digital-collaboration/>.

³³ Prioritizing content accumulation through digital platforms presents runs the risk of transforming public audiences into a free-for-all resource to be mined to enrich an institution's collections, which is neither a sustainable, or frankly, ethical choice for museums to make. This is the difference between understanding your public as “source communities” rather than “partners.” In the art world, experimental projects which seek to critique this extractive model of participation and engagement are growing. Chandra Frank, lead curator of the Re(as)sisting Narratives exhibition which premiered in Amsterdam and Cape Town in 2016, asserts that the “exhibition attempts to reconfigure the basis of defining and assessing inclusion. Rather than seeing partners as so-called ‘source communities’ they are seen as equal participatory partners that shape how memories are framed and repositioned...The question of whose memories are included and for whom, therefore indeed becomes an issue of who is served by the inclusion of those memories...Yet, there is a common assumption that the mere inclusion of systematically silenced communities is sufficient. Alternative knowledges and forms of inclusion seemingly only exist when they are recognised by Western standards of cultural production. Therefore, along an epistemic shift, a terminological intervention is needed when it comes to anthropological influenced concepts of ‘source communities’ and ‘target communities’ within curatorial practice. There are few practices aimed at actively challenging these invisible norms and working towards different models of inclusion.” Chandra Frank, "Towards A

If Historypin illuminates the possibilities and pitfalls of an antiquarian-minded model for digital collections in the twenty-first century, it also illustrates larger issues posed by doing digital humanities in a world shaped by postindustrial economic paradigms. Historypin's work reflects contemporary market imperatives which render digital collecting valuable in terms of scale, efficiency, and instrumental usability, and in terms of the efficiency of the digital tools used to facilitate this collecting, as the Wartime Film Projects demonstrated.³⁴ And, significantly, in a world of open-access and open, transparent data, Historypin stands firmly on the side of achieving unfettered public access to all cultural heritage. All of these values shape Historypin's approach to digital collecting, and can fruitfully be compared with alternative models emerging along the periphery of digital cultural heritage work.

Resisting Market Imperatives: Reimagining Digital Collections Tools

We can find alternative paradigms for conceptualizing digital collections tools and methodologies in the age of open-access and linked-open data. Both Mukurtu and Documenting the Now problematize several of the issues raised by Historypin's work,

Decolonial Curatorial Practice," Chandra Frank, June 3, 2015, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://www.chandrafrank.com/towards-a-decolonial-curatorial-practice/>.

³⁴ Alan Liu, in his plea for increased efforts to integrate cultural criticism into the digital humanities, argued that "It is as if, when the order comes down from the funding agencies, university administrators, and other bodies mediating today's dominant socioeconomic and political beliefs, digital humanists just concentrate on pressing the "execute" button on projects that amass the most data for the greatest number, process that data most efficiently and flexibly (flexible efficiency being the hallmark of postindustrialism), and manage the whole through ever "smarter" standards, protocols, schema, templates, and databases uplifting Frederick Winslow Taylor's original scientific industrialism into ultraflexible postindustrial content management systems camouflaged as digital editions, libraries, and archives—all without pausing to reflect on the relation of the whole digital juggernaut to the new world order." Liu, "Where is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?" It is to these postindustrial paradigms to which I am referring.

and resist the market imperative for producing more and more “stuff” on ever more centralized, cross-institutional, supersized digital archives.

Mukurtu (a “safe keeping place”) allows indigenous communities to share their digital collections online while maintaining traditional cultural protocols regarding access, thus allowing communities to maintain control over the privacy of their collections: “Mukurtu (MOOK-oo-too) is a grassroots project aiming to empower communities to manage, share, preserve, and exchange their digital heritage in culturally relevant and ethically-minded ways. We are committed to maintaining an open, community-driven approach to Mukurtu’s continued development. Our first priority is to help build a platform that fosters relationships of respect and trust.”³⁵ Mukurtu provides a compelling alternative model for collecting and displaying digital collections on the web. A free, open source platform, its creators designed the platform to respond to the particular cultural contexts in which its indigenous collaborators operate. The integration of access protocols reflects a nuanced understanding and sensitivity to the needs of tribal communities operating within different cultural and epistemological contexts (hence, a culturally relevant tool), where certain kinds of knowledge require limited visibility. In the context of a history filled with the reckless plunder of Native American communities by white settlers and the U.S. government, issues of security, control, and provenance of digital collections on the open-access web take on a different meaning. Instead of removing these objects from their cultural context (and out of community hands), Mukurtu allows communities to act as their own gatekeepers and stewards of cultural

³⁵ Mukurtu: A Safe Keeping Place, <http://mukurtu.org/>, accessed September 13, 2017.

collections. Not only does Mukurtu's success demonstrate the powerful role trust-building plays in developing and implementing digital tools, but it also demonstrates a digital collections model which resists attempts to recolonize indigenous collections through extractive or exploitative digital channels which remove these objects from the control of the communities from which these objects originated. By putting choices about the architecture of access to and engagement with materials in the hands of the community, Mukurtu reshapes our understanding of the public digital sphere as an "open" one; not only is this space indelibly shaped by power, so too are decisions about who can digitally access and control digital objects. The legacy and conditions of colonialism hangs heavy over the digital sphere too.

Mukurtu is an impressive display of a community-minded digital space, one which is closely aligned to the localized and diverse cultural practices of its users and reflects the dialogic nature of its construction. It points to the ways in which democratizing digital cultural heritage poses problems for communities operating within different cultural contexts than many of the designers who program and design these spaces. Digital spaces and tools are not neutral, but are embedded within particular epistemologies and systems of values, and thus the value and meaning of collecting in the digital sphere is positional and socially constructed rather than fixed (i.e. not all digital collecting projects need to be about universal access). Projects like Mukurtu challenge

conventional wisdom that the future necessarily lies in linked open data and unlimited, unrestricted digital access to everyone's cultural heritage.³⁶

Documenting the Now, a collaborative project organized by researchers and archivists at the University of Maryland, University of California at Riverside, and Washington University in St. Louis, also challenges assumptions about the accessibility and accountability of digital collections. The project emerged as a response to the unrest in Ferguson and the pressing need archivists like Bergis Jules recognized for developing innovative tools to respond and document the ephemeral and moving records of public sentiment contained on social media platforms like Twitter which served as the main forums for community debate and discussion and news following the shooting of Michael Brown. Museums and other mainstream collecting institutions are notoriously slow in their collections processes, and not prepared or necessarily even interested in collecting this kind of digital record. This project thus can be seen as a way to avoid perpetuating further gaps and erasures of black voices and history in the historical record—symbolic annihilation, in this case colliding squarely with actual annihilation in the case of Michael Brown, undergirds the project from its moment of conception.

The founders of Documenting the Now envision a new kind of digital tool development process which echoes some of the ethical concerns and dilemmas

³⁶ Cecire makes this point about the ethical claims made in the digital humanities as being normative and positional, rather than fixed and concrete, noting that “to espouse collaboration over authorship, one must have an authorial voice to cede; to be ‘nice,’ one must be in a position in which ‘niceness’ does not connote ‘servility.’ Audre Lorde writes that ‘anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification.’ Does that “clarification”—a form of knowledge, to be sure—have a place in an epistemology of doing, with its ethos of niceness?” Cecire, “Introduction: Theory and the Virtues of Digital Humanities.”

articulated in the Mukurtu project and in “A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland” (to be discussed later in this thesis). Their methodologies firmly place “social justice and ethics at the center of web and social media archiving work” and fervently shun the supposed neutrality of archival work, which they view as a way to avoid pressing social issues and to replicate oppressive models of surveillance and “digital data collection and dissemination.”³⁷ Responding to the “failure of care” surrounding the documentation of marginalized communities and the very real impact of black erasure from the historical and contemporary record, Documenting the Now is focused on creating a new kind of community of practice for the long-term preservation and appraisal, rather than mass collection, of social media records. This practice is defined by a humanistic inquiry into the intersection of praxis and identity at the heart of collecting and appraising cultural heritage.³⁸

The goal of such practices is to make sense of hashtags, trends, and broader context through high-quality sampling rather than trying to capture anything and everything aimlessly. The paradigm utilized by its creators posits that technology alone, without reference to humanistic inquiry, cannot determine and prioritize what is valuable

³⁷ Bergis, Jules. "DocNow As Community – Documenting DocNow," July 11, 2016, accessed May 28, 2017, <https://news.docnow.io/docnow-as-community-2aa13fca860f>.

³⁸ Bergis Jules argues that “so far in my experience in this profession, feel good slogans and professionalism, are easier than deep cultural and social engagement with the communities we’ve abandoned through our traditional archives practices, at the foundation of which, is a myth of neutrality that mandates an #AllLivesMatter approach to collection building. I’m against that idea. In our line of work neutrality [archives] is a dangerous idea that prioritizes dominant culture, white male culture. So I want to push back and say that I’m interested in a #BlackLivesMatter care ethic for building our collections in the future, or better yet, a #BlackTransLivesMatter care ethic.” Jules, “Confronting Our Failure of Care Around the Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives,” November 11, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-of-marginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>, accessed September 14, 2017.

enough to collect and how to collect it. To do that requires making an effort to build social relationships with the living, breathing human beings behind a Tweet, recognizing the ownership and authority of each individual Twitter user in an effort to contextualize the tweet.³⁹ This marks a significant difference in orientation from other tools which scrape the web for content (a high-tech, non-voluntary model of crowdsourcing, in a sense), forgoing efforts to capture the context or meaning of these tweets as a collective and respect the ownership and privacy of the original content producers. In this way, DocNow seeks to create a tool which works responsibly and is governed by considerations of the social and ethical implications of building collections in marginalized communities.

In other words, DocNow is concerned with evaluating the humanistic and social value of building collections from social media. The project's genesis began with, not inconsequentially, the question of meaning: "what does it mean to build a collection from that space [social media]?" Documenting the Now reminds us that we need to start with these questions at the center of our inquiry, rather than on the periphery.

Lessons from the Periphery: Critical Digital Praxis and Community Archives

*I think what we are hoping to do is build a tool that doesn't just do things because it's possible, but has some values built into it. -Ed Summers, Technical Lead of the Documenting the Now project*⁴⁰

Don't start the [IMLS National Digital Platform conversation by talking about technology ... Start by talking about who has traditionally been left out of the historical record, who documents these people, and how a national digital platform can address their needs.

³⁹ Interview with Bergis Jules, May 2, 2017.

⁴⁰ Bergis Jules, "DocNow as Community," July 11, 2016, accessed May 2, 2017, <https://news.docnow.io/docnow-as-community-2aa13fca860f>.

– *Bergis Jules, on Twitter*⁴¹

In October of 2016, I attended the first of four forums organized by the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University, in partnership with Mukurtu, Shorefront Legacy, South Asian American Digital Project, and the Inland Memories Project of the University of California at Riverside, as part of their “Diversifying the Digital Historical Record: Integrating Community Archives in National Strategies for Access to Digital Cultural Heritage” grant-funded program. This all-day session at the University of California, Los Angeles, sought to define community archives and represent their diversity in mission, structure, and practices, with the goal of laying “the groundwork for developing effective, collaborative, and sustainable networks that can support their needs and growth” on a larger scale.⁴² The programs were organized in part to respond to the directives of the Institute of Museum and Library Service’s (IMLS) *National Digital Platform for Libraries, Archives and Museums*, which aimed “to advance a vision of easy, seamless and reliable access for all Americans to the digital content and services that will enrich and improve their lives.”⁴³ This vision reflects an increasing concern with centralizing

⁴¹ “The National Digital Platform for Libraries, Archives, and Museums,” Institute of Museum and Library Services, (April 28, 2015), accessed May 2, 2017, <https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2015imlsfocusndpreport.pdf>, 7.

⁴² “Definition, Commonalities and Divergences: What are community archives?,” *Diversifying the Digital*, accessed May 3, 2017, <http://diversifyingthedigital.org/forum-one.html>.

⁴³ “The National Digital Platform for Libraries, Archives, and Museums,” Institute for Museum and Library Services (April 2015), accessed May 10, 2017, <https://www.ims.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2015imlsfocusndpreport.pdf>

4. It is worth noting that out of the 17-page report detailing the major findings of the National Digital Platform workshops, its authors dedicate all of three lines to addressing “diversity and inclusion,” a topic acknowledged to be “both a challenge and a priority area” (“The National Digital Platform for Libraries, Archives, and Museums,” 7). We still don’t know how to really talk about race and diversity when it comes to building digital collections, a fissure which becomes readily apparent in the work being done by community archives around the country.

digital platform practices and development across a wide range of local, regional, and national institutions. Representatives from community archives at the UCLA meeting expressed some skepticism about the national platform and its utility for community-based, grassroots organizations. Imagining a national digital platform for community archives served as the central theme of the last of the three “Diversifying the Digital” meetings. Jules, archivist at the University of California, Riverside, provided more insight into where this skepticism might come from, pointing to the ways in which compiling shared repositories renders small-scale organizations essentially “invisible.” According to Jules, the visibility provided for your collections by putting them on the platform in the first place benefits the institution whose name is on the repository rather than benefitting the contributing organization.⁴⁴ Centralization denotes shifting power dynamics which might threaten the autonomy and responsibility those on the periphery feel towards the communities their digital collecting projects serve.

⁴⁴ Interview with Bergis Jules, May 2, 2017. It should be noted that Historypin’s online platform exhibits some of the same patterns of erasure—many of its most popular collections, determined by number of views, are from major mainstream repositories (i.e., in government and cultural heritage), so that searching by the category of “most popular” reveals a strong bias towards the materials uploaded by these mainstream organizations, creating a feedback loop which privileges already visible organizations at the expense of small grassroots collectives. This dynamic also resonates in the case of the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA). DPLA presents one model which reveals the interplay between institutional, and representational, visibility and invisibility in a centralized digital space. DPLA acts as a “metadata aggregator,” essentially pulling all the metadata that participating institutions put in for their collections. When a collection is found on DPLA, no one remembers where it came from, thus contributing to a subtle erasure of small-scale, local, or grass-roots organizations in the digital realm. Branding is a key part of maintaining authority. Considering that its genesis began on the Harvard University campus, for some community archivists the DPLA epitomizes the problems of representation and authority incurred when a top-down approach meets bottom-up initiatives. Bergis Jules, interview May 2, 2017.

The patterns of erasure and silencing in the historical record guide and motivate many of these community-based projects. The intersection of scholars, scholarship, and even traditionally conservative institutions (like a few university libraries engaging with these bottom-up community efforts) points towards a promising future of socially engaged, digitally-enabled social justice projects. To better understand the ways in which digital spaces and collections can be used as touchstones for the recovery of agency and identity as well as a standard for embodied action and new forms of critical digital praxis, we must recognize the social justice-oriented work being done in community archives across the country. Not only do these projects by their very existence create spaces in which marginalized identities enact critiques of current museum, library, and archival practices related to the digital (and non-digital), their work represents a significant critical intervention in digital cultural heritage practices. These organizations remind us that the digital world is not immune to the politics of doing cultural heritage work, and that contemporary digital praxis guarantees neither a fundamental restructuring of authority or operations nor meaningful opportunities for an embodied engagement and representation within institutional spaces. Critical digital praxis in this context means that practitioners explicitly position or interpret the value and function of their digital collecting in identity-based terms. Digital collections are not simply freed from the nexus of power relations and material contexts from which these collections may come, or about which they might represent, by existing in a freely accessible digital archive. To divorce these tools and projects from their offline roots—to consider them in isolation from the people who design, contribute to, and use them—is to distort our understanding of the relationship

between the digital and the analog. In other words, history and context matter. These kinds of projects illustrate different ways in which digitally-enabled collecting can be leveraged to provide meaningful opportunities for people to exhibit agency—whether by claiming the authority to speak and to possess expertise, to represent themselves on their own terms, to own their own histories, or to construct and express meaning in the world around them. And in the process, they provide valuable guideposts for future collecting models in the twenty-first century.

In large part a product of the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, community archives (in non-digital form) emerged to challenge constructed notions of archival objectivity and expertise and to make visible histories that had long been hidden or pushed to the periphery. It is only within the last two or three years that community archives became a major source of study in the academy and a focus of major funding streams.⁴⁵ A rich discourse has recently emerged around these community-based recovery projects, producing new models for critical digital praxis focused on issues of authority, ownership, agency, and representation in both digital and analog spheres. Ann Gillibrand and Andrew Flinn have suggested that “community-based archives (and other community-based heritage activities) are diverse, real world interventions into the field of local, regional, national and even international archival and heritage narratives, often critical interventions, politically charged with notions of social justice and civil rights.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵ For example, the IMLS awarded a 2016 Museum Grant for African American History and Culture to the Chicago-based nonprofit Shorefront to support its Building Capacity in Community Archiving project. “MH-00-16-0024-16,” IMLS, accessed May 23, 2017, <https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/mh-00-16-0024-16>.

⁴⁶ Anne Gilliland and Andrew Flinn, “Community Archives: what are we really talking about?” (2013), CIRN Prato Community Informatics Conference, 3.

Such heritage projects reflect a keen awareness of the power of representation and the politics of authority at play in mainstream institutions. They self-consciously engage in humanistic inquiry to mobilize digital collections in the present moment.

By their very existence as independent (or semi-independent) organizations, these projects challenge the structures of authority and objectivity embedded within “legitimizing” institutions, including the academy, government institutions, and university libraries.⁴⁷ They claim authority to collect and represent themselves beyond the reach of these legitimizing organizations on their own terms. As such, their very existence acts as a political statement and a critique of the failures of mainstream cultural heritage representations to include or accurately represent them in their collections, programming, or other functions.⁴⁸ Their activities and structures provide critical commentary on the ongoing struggle over authority and representation in the digital age. According to Gillibrand and Flinn, “while we may view community archives as entities certainly to be encouraged and celebrated, they are not just about a comfortable or authentic expression of heritage and identity... They are also an indictment of our failure to recognize and address those communities and their interests and perspectives in our

⁴⁷ These are the kinds of institutions traditionally endowed with the power to legitimize history through their ability to choose which materials to collect (or which materials are counted as part of the historical record) how to collect them, and how these materials would be presented or made available to the public—in other words, history is produced through these kinds of scholarly and civic institutions. I am indebted to Bergis Jules for his insight into this and other matters taken up in this section. Interview with Bergis Jules, May 12, 2017.

⁴⁸ Michelle Caswell, “Community-centered collecting: finding out what communities want from community archives,” *Proceedings of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 51, no. 1 (2014): 3.

theorizing, holdings and our practices.”⁴⁹ I draw upon Michelle Caswell’s formulation of community archives as countering or resisting “symbolic annihilation” in society to argue that these kinds of projects utilize digital platforms to facilitate projects for the recovery of agency, representation, and identity in extraordinary ways.⁵⁰ Such embodied digital spaces provide a fuller representation of complex identities, communities, and histories formerly erased from the archival record and respond to the political dimensions of cultural heritage practices in both the analog and digital world—these collections literally help to flesh out bodies formerly representationally (and often physically) diminished within existing socioeconomic and political structures. The scale and complexity of this representation is undoubtedly enabled in large part due to modern digital communications technologies. The stakes of “engagement” here are incredibly high. As Bergis Jules has elsewhere argued: “That erasure from records, cultural spaces, and mass media [symbolic annihilation] are partly what allow people to accept absurd justifications for killing us... This is the legacy of symbolic annihilation in the archives... A legacy that says before actual annihilation, you don’t exist, and after actual annihilation, it didn’t

⁴⁹ They also note that “many of the types of community archives that we are increasingly encountering have grown up, not just because technology now facilitates such organizing, documenting, and re/presentation of communities, but as augmenting, oppositional or counter-archives that are striving to secure a place and a voice in contemporary society and a future where what they wish to remember is remembered, and what they wish to change is changed... Read in this light, the term “community archives” then becomes at best a patronizing device and at worst, an overt othering.” Gillibrand and Flinn, 15. The desire to define and segregate community archives in the archival literature may be read as a power play, one which seeks to place in conflict the authority of traditional mainstream archives and the amateur, unprofessional, grassroots ones.

⁵⁰ Symbolic annihilation refers to “a concept first developed by feminist media scholars in the 1970s [which] describes what happens to members of marginalized groups when they are absent, grossly under-represented, maligned, or trivialized by mainstream television programming, news outlets, and magazine coverage.” Michelle Caswell, “Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives in the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation,” *The Public Historian* (2016), 27.

happen.”⁵¹ Communities engage with these activist digital archival projects because it matters, and because these projects offer them a way to assert their existence, their voices, and their agency in the face of violence, oppression, and marginalization. Such acts have incredible social, political, and personal meaning for those who are engaged in them, and oftentimes this engagement carries over well beyond the digital sphere. These projects represent democracy in action, online and off. I believe that this sense of purpose provides useful corrections and guideposts for negotiating the messiness, power, and meaning at the heart of twenty-first century cultural heritage work. Two community archival projects which best exemplify this are A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland and the Southeast Asian American Digital Archive.

Community Archives in Action: A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland and the Southeast Asian American Digital Archive

A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland reflects not only a commitment to grappling with the ethical dimensions of digital cultural heritage and challenging normative collection and display practices, and reiterates the point that the digital realm (and digital technologies themselves) are just as ethically fraught as the

⁵¹ Bergis Jules, "Confronting Our Failure of Care Around the Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives," Medium, November 11, 2016, accessed May 27, 2017, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-of-marginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>.

analog world.⁵² Organizers clearly articulate the social and political role its collections play in providing evidence of police overreach and institutionalized racism to the public at large, and maintain particular care not just for the collections but for the people who put their bodies on the line to provide this evidence.

Although the genesis of A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland began with the outpouring of news and grief among black activists on Twitter following the acquittal of Cleveland police officer Michael Brelo (on trial for his role in the killings of Malissa Williams and Timothy Russell in 2012), it was born from a much larger movement, succinctly summarized in the #ArchivesforBlackLives hashtag. According to founding archivist Jarrett Drake, "#ArchivesForBlackLives is at once a call to 1) question traditional archival authority, 2) disrupt the status quo of memory, and 3) decolonize conventional and mainstream approaches to information, knowledge, records and archives." By this, Drake suggests that the movement "recognizes that much in the same way that anti-blackness was and is central to Western capitalism and colonialism, anti-blackness is equally vital to archive-making and memory-making processes in the West."⁵³ By calling attention to the ways in which a predominantly white archival profession creates archival spaces which reproduce historical silences which then resonate in the present erasure of black people, Drake's critiques reflect similar

⁵² I have already touched on Mukurtu, which sought to create "a social tool" to ameliorate the violence perpetrated against Native communities by digitizing their cultural materials without their consent, and articulated a vision of digitization which prioritized relationship-building and culturally-sensitive processes over the production of massive quantities of materials. Kim Christen, presentation (Diversifying the Digital Conference 2016, Los Angeles, CA, October 21, 2016).

⁵³ "First Days Project," First Days Project, accessed May 28, 2017, <http://www.firstdaysproject.org/>.

epistemological attacks on the museum and archive as neutral arbiters of knowledge and memory employed by artists in the 1990s such as Fred Wilson.

Drake framed the purpose of A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland through the lens of an observation made while searching for #ArchivesForBlackLives on Twitter: both a basic and advanced search produced only a small fraction of the content circulated, mainly by black activists, on Twitter with this hashtag.⁵⁴ By linking state-sponsored violence perpetrated against black Cleveland residents to the ways in which social media search engines may subvert efforts to recover black commentary on the event, Drake's analysis suggests an awareness of digital spaces and digital collecting practices as potentially fraught with racialized dimensions and power struggles—in other words, a colonized space in need of decolonizing efforts. The digital erasure (intentional or otherwise) of black voices and perspectives should be understood as representative of, and inextricably entwined with, the larger patterns of violence and oppression which shape black lives offline.

Drake recognizes that archivists are complicit in a system which threatens black lives but also uniquely empowered to address the social responsibility archivists and cultural heritage professionals face. The ethical dimensions of collecting within the context of the communities in Cleveland with which he sought to work rose to the foreground as the project took shape, first over the internet through social media technologies, then physically in Cleveland during the annual Society of American Archivists conference. The project's design reflects this commitment to honoring and

⁵⁴ Ibid.

protecting those whom it sought to collaborate and represent, as it recognizes that digital spaces are neither neutral nor safe for all bodies or types of evidence.

The archive's language on its contributions page is informed by the threat of racialized digital surveillance; it stresses the critical importance of reading the short summary of the Contribution Terms of Service provided, as the information will help project contributors to "protect themselves." The summary notes: "Don't include any personal or identifying information about yourself or others, such as addresses or phone numbers...Information you provide about the content must be true. False statements that could harm a person's reputation are libelous; accusing someone of something that is not true is slander, which might get you in legal trouble. It is best not to use actual names unless there is a public record of events you are describing. *Even specifying a particular police department puts you at risk*" (emphasis my own).⁵⁵ Thus many personal narratives and oral histories in the archive's collection remain nameless, their anonymity a poignant reminder of the very real risks associated with record-keeping and record-making within certain contexts for marginalized populations. The digital space is not immune to these realities; rather, online visibility within the open digital realm only amplifies these dangers.

A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland situates itself as an "online space for healing, accountability, and justice," whose existence is mandated by the excessive and "epidemic levels" of police violence in the U.S. (a violence directed

⁵⁵ "Contribute," A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://archivingpoliceviolence.org/contribution>.

disproportionately towards people of color) and the failure of mainstream institutions to ensure justice and accountability for the officers involved. It also critiques the privileging of certain kinds of evidence over other kinds of visual and forensic evidence which conflict with police-generated narratives.⁵⁶ The archive presents visitors with a diverse array of items reflecting strong themes of social activism, including written and oral testimony from community activists, family members of people killed by police, and others who might have been impacted by this violence, as well as newspapers, articles, documentation from community tribunals, and records related to the activities of the activist group Stop Mass Incarceration Network. Archivists attending the 2015 Society of American Archivists conference participated in the archive's "Righting the Record Oral History Project," a powerful collection of public testimony relating to citizens' various experiences with police force in their lives and communities, all of which remain online, the anonymity of the records only heightening the emotional impact of these materials on the viewer. The archive documents action in the face of oppression, and encourages people to mobilize these collections for the pursuit of justice, equity, and peace—collecting becomes an act of courage and resistance in this formulation.

Collecting as resistance takes a slightly different form in the Southeast Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). SAADA is committed to providing an outlet which legitimizes and values the active direction of community members in shaping the direction and content of the archive itself, recognizing that this action is embedded within

⁵⁶ "Purpose," A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, accessed May 19, 2017, <http://archivingpoliceviolence.org/purpose>. ALSO MENTION HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES ARCHIVAL?

a particular history of exclusion and marginalization of Southeast Asian identities to the periphery of American history. Michelle Caswell, a co-founder of SAADA and an assistant professor of archival studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, argues that “representational belonging” best describes “the ways in which community archives empower people who have been marginalized by mainstream media outlets and memory institutions to have the autonomy and authority to establish, enact, and reflect on their presence in ways that are complex, meaningful, substantive, and positive to them in a variety of symbolic contexts.”⁵⁷ Caswell’s emphasis on evaluating the affective and ontological, epistemological, and social impact of this digitally-enabled project is extremely valuable and worth closer study by other cultural heritage organizations, particularly in shifting our frame of analysis when evaluating the kinds of social and political impacts this digital collecting project has for its contributors, impacts which extend far beyond the digital repository itself.⁵⁸

Founded in 2008, SAADA clearly articulates a mission based on the social impact of documenting cultural heritage: to create “a more inclusive society by giving voice to South Asian Americans through documenting, preserving, and sharing stories that represent their unique and diverse experiences.”⁵⁹ Emphasizing the diversity within the community under consideration through its collection policy materials helps tamp down on the celebratory, uncritical, and often homogenizing narrative which some community-

⁵⁷ Michelle Caswell, “Building the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA),” presentation.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA),” South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), accessed May 28, 2017, <https://www.saada.org/>.

based projects can fall into. SAADA's well-defined statement of values celebrates the ordinary experiences and voices of ordinary people, defines engagement in history-making processes as active and empowering, and connects archives with community sustenance as "dynamic spaces for dialogue and debate. There is no dust in SAADA!"⁶⁰ This is quite literally exemplified by one of their ongoing projects. SAADA obtained funding from the PEW Center for Arts & Heritage to bring artists into the archive from the community for their year-long project, "Where We Belong: Artists in the Archive." The goal: to stimulate creative and active mobilization of its collections, through the work of artists, activists, and interested community members, and to encourage people to interpret and produce new work based on the archival materials.⁶¹ Caswell also stresses the ways that these archival materials are being utilized and circulated in activist projects and community-building activities in the analog sphere. SAADA treats their collections as complex and multidimensional interpretive touchstones embedded with diverse social and political functions.

SAADA offers a platform in which community members can contribute or engage in vocal, demonstrative, and meaningful ways. SAADA runs an online magazine called *Tides*, which shares stories based on materials in the archives written by a wide range of authors. They also collect photographic, written, printed, moving image, and born-digital materials, with an emphasis on political activism and social and political

⁶⁰ "About." South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). May 02, 2013. Accessed May 28, 2017. <https://www.saada.org/about>.

⁶¹ "Where We Belong: Artists in the Archive," South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), April 02, 2017, accessed May 28, 2017, <https://www.saada.org/wherewebelong>.

organizing; offer lesson plans related to Southeast Asian American histories; and run a microhistory project called “First Days,” which explores through the experiences of immigrants during their first day in the United States.⁶² In a time of increasingly polarity over social issues such as immigration, these kinds of projects challenge visitors to the site to engage with the voices and experiences of others, while also empowering and recognizing immigrant voices and legitimizing their experiences in the archival record.

Like many other grassroots organizations, SAADA adopted a post-custodial model for its materials, meaning that any materials that are accepted into the archive are only temporarily on loan to the institution. After digitization, the materials are promptly returned to their donors, whether they be individuals, community organizations, or government repositories. This collections model, available thanks to digital reproduction technologies, allows for a more equitable relationship between donor communities and SAADA.

The overall project’s adherence to a pronounced set of values provides structure and context for the collections themselves, which take seriously the emotional, physical, and political impact of the work for those involved. Project founders explicitly articulate the archive’s value in terms of human identity and activity. As a member of SAADA’s academic council explained, “So, for me personally, the value of the archive is profound. And I think that that may be true for a lot of people who suddenly are able to discover

⁶² Jarrett M. Drake, "#ArchivesForBlackLives: Building a Community Archives of Police Violence in Cleveland," *Medium*, April 22, 2016, accessed May 28, 2017, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/archivesforblacklives-building-a-community-archives-of-police-violence-in-cleveland-93615d777289>.

themselves, existing, being documented.”⁶³ The fact that those most intimately involved in its creation are also those from the communities being documented contributes to the project’s crystal-clear vision and purpose.⁶⁴ Projects like SAADA offer us valuable models based on the creation of value not centered on the accumulation of content per se but on the lives, agency, and voices of the people involved in producing this digital content—I would argue this is a shared feature uniting the work of many of the community archival projects surveyed here, and perhaps its most central and valuable lesson for other institutions to follow. Value is articulated through the expression of humanistic concerns, from the expression of identity to the recuperation of histories and bodies over time

I’m excited about the possibility these kinds of cultural heritage ventures present for leveraging digital tools into larger political and social projects which bridge the gap between the analog and digital world. By self-consciously positioning themselves as alternative venues for communal knowledge production and self-representation, these projects actively engage digital space and technologies as political, shaped by structures of knowledge and the inequitable distribution and exercise of power. They remind us of the ethical dimensions of cultural heritage work, online and off. This should call us to account for the ways in which we approach digital projects with a naïve faith in the power of the digital to magically transform our institutions, practices, and relationships

⁶³ Michelle Caswell, “Building the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA),” presentation.

⁶⁴ It is interesting to me that these sorts of bottom-up projects are labeled as “community archives” even when archivists and academics are involved, which suggests a sort of suspicion on the part of mainstream archives that these kinds of projects won’t reflect a “neutral” stance. I think this is a coded way of articulating racial difference in the archival profession; after all, haven’t archivists been documenting white peoples and Euro-centric history in the United States for centuries?

with our constituents. Such projects refute the myth of neutrality or impartiality, embraced by staff and visitors of these institutions alike, which even today animates discussions about the role of mainstream cultural heritage institutions in our contemporary moment.⁶⁵ And they offer up new possibilities and spaces upon which communities can stand up, speak out, and claim the authority to own their histories, experiences, and knowledge and to interpret their own collections accordingly. These models integrate humanistic thinking into their methodologies and operational paradigms in ways which, at the very least, should provoke discussion and reflection among digital humanists and cultural heritage professionals.

As we can see, digital spaces reflect the same concerns over access, authority, representation, and power, which shaped and continue to mold analog spaces. The most articulate and pressing responses to these issues may lie on the periphery rather than at the center of traditional authority structures: the museum, the university archive. The proliferation of grassroots digital collections with a critical social focus recasts the meaning of collecting in the digital age, and points to real opportunities for “grassroots leadership...to take cultural institutions into unexpected realms.” As Sherratt noted, people “can build their own interfaces, ask their own questions, determine their own needs — they can point the way instead of simply waiting to be served.”⁶⁶ This is not to

⁶⁵ Consider, for example, the way in which some particularly prestigious museums chose to respond to the current political climate in the United States, including Trump’s executive orders concerning the “Muslim Ban” and the subsequent uproar which ensued over whether these actions should be considered appropriate. See Graham Bowley, “Museums Chart a Response to Political Upheaval,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 2017, accessed May 28, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/arts/design/museums-politics-protest-j20-art-strike.html?_r=0, for a summary of this.

⁶⁶ Sherratt, “It’s All About the Stuff: Collections, Interfaces, Power, and People.”

say that more traditional institutions with more traditional collecting models should be disregarded; surely there is room for all of us in this digital frontier. The shifting questions, conundrums, and values at stake in the collecting projects of the twenty-first century provide the most articulate guidebook for the future directions of cultural heritage work in the digital age. Most importantly, as our focus shifts from center to periphery, we can begin to imagine new opportunities for ordinary citizens to become producers and managers of cultural heritage collections, to recognize a sense of authorship and authority grounded in their lived experiences. In stimulating critical resistance and embodied action/activism through publicly collecting and interpreting these materials, these embodied digital collection projects represent democracy at work and point to new models and methodologies which maximize collections (and collecting) for positive social impact online and off.⁶⁷ Collecting becomes a social, political, empathetic, and even therapeutic act of resistance, empowerment, and collective solidarity.

(Re)Thinking the Digital: The Smithsonian Asian Pacific America Center

Technology is no longer a feature of life, it is a vibrant way of life. The blurring lines between digital and physical experiences have created exciting possibilities for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center to be an innovation leader in the arts, culture and museum communities...More than a virtual collection of objects, our Culture Labs are ongoing experiments in storytelling. -Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center⁶⁸

⁶⁷ More and more scholarship is being devoted to the intersection of cultural heritage institutions and social justice movements, pointing towards a bright future of socially-engaged work. See *Inspiring Action: Museums and Social Change* (Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc, 2009); Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2010); Richard Sandell and Eithne Nightingale, eds., *Museums, Equality and Social Justice* (London: Routledge, 2012) for more examples from both mainstream and community-based organizations.

⁶⁸ "Blueprint: Strategic Plan FY2016-FY2018," Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center (2015), accessed May 11, 2017, http://smithsonianapa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/blueprint_web_APAC.pdf, 21.

As the preceding section demonstrates, new paradigms for collecting in the digital age are negotiated and crystalized at the periphery of cultural heritage work. These projects contextualize digital spaces which house collections within a larger set of clearly articulated values, a defined sense of mission in the analog world, or a finely attuned attention to the social and political implications of their work. Presenting themselves as critical interventions in cultural heritage practices, these projects encourage an embodied engagement from the public which bridges the gap between digital and analog space, and they are utilizing digital technologies to experiment with new ways of mobilizing collections in the digital and non-digital spheres. In this sense, what these new paradigms might offer is a sense of embodiment—in other words, they convey the impression that these collections live lives beyond their flattened digital representations, and are connected with living, breathing communities facing all-too-real challenges. These collections are meant to do work in the present. Digital, or digitally-enabled, collecting as an embodied practice becomes rooted in the recovery of knowledge, agency, and representation in the present, online and off.

The Smithsonian's Asian Pacific American Center (APAC) seeks to map a new course for humanistic digital collection modeling at the national state. Adriel Luis, Curator of Digital & Emerging Media at APAC, insisted that museums “don't understand digital.” He pointed towards the grants and funding processes in the museum world to illustrate his point, wryly observing that “what everybody wants is a picture of a kid in

front of a touchscreen.”⁶⁹ By treating the digital as a matter of pixels, gadgets, platforms, touchscreens, and websites, he argues that such institutions are entirely “missing the point about what the [digital] means for storytelling and for human beings.” Luis understands his work as “a crusade to complicate” our understanding of the digital, to “show the potential” of digital cultural heritage work “in terms of communication and the kinds of discussions that can happen.”⁷⁰ The work of the Asian Pacific American Center reflects this interest in pushing the boundaries of a collections practice focused on the power of collecting as storytelling.

The Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center (APAC) presents an exciting, progressive model for digital collection and curation. In many ways, it reflects Luis’ belief that the digital should inform every aspect of institutional planning, organization, and activity. Rather than segmenting digital operations as some distinct entity or add-on project “beyond or outside of other museum” functions, APAC illustrates the creative possibilities of thinking expansively, critically, and *digitally*, online and off.⁷¹ Created in 1997, APAC defines itself as “a migratory museum that brings Asian Pacific American history, art and culture to you through innovative museum experiences online and

⁶⁹ Interview with Adriel Luis, Curator of Digital & Emerging Media, May 2, 2017. To demonstrate, he did a Google image search for technology and museums and the first image that came up was none other than a picture of a boy looking at an iPad in a gallery.

⁷⁰ The desire to move beyond myopic considerations of platform is reflected in the staff’s decision to intentionally adopt the simplest, most efficient, and uniform template for nearly all of the organization’s public-facing projects: Wordpress, favored by APAC because of its ease of use across multiple mobile platforms, how easy it is to create and maintain, and its attractive aesthetics. As Luis noted, we “try not to get too caught up in platform.” According to Luis, the avant-garde options for platforms have not proved appealing, as these newer platforms proved more expensive and were more complicated to maintain. Interview with Adriel Luis, Curator of Digital & Emerging Media at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, May 2, 2017.

⁷¹ Ibid.

throughout the United States.”⁷² Without a dedicated brick-and-mortar site in which to operate, APAC challenges traditional conceptions of museums and cultural heritage institutions as physical spaces concerned with the collection and display of analog objects. While APAC exists under the assumption that it will evolve into a museum someday, the Center has embraced its freedom to explore alternative museum practices, not bound by the perceived constraints posed by physical spaces and objects in brick-and-mortar institutions.⁷³ And it is significant to note that APAC staff do consider physical objects as potential obstacles for engaging in innovative digital collections experimentation. Its programming straddles the boundary between analog and digital worlds, from pop-up events, cultural festivals, and traveling exhibits, to born-digital projects and exhibitions, some of which are crowdsourced. While APAC’s lack of physical space requires a commitment to alternative modes of engaging the public and collecting and displaying cultural heritage, both online and off, it is branded by the Smithsonian and backed by the prestige and resources marshalled by the nation’s premiere cultural heritage organization. Thus, APAC can be understood as occupying a unique space in the world of digital cultural heritage, situated between larger, bureaucracy-laden brick-and-mortar institutions and smaller-scale cultural heritage organizations, such as community archives.

APAC’s approach to its digital collection practices is specifically rooted in the conditions of Asian and Pacific Islander communities in America and beyond. According

⁷² Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://smithsonianapa.org/>.

⁷³ Interview with Adriel Luis, May 2, 2017.

to Luis, these are communities which do not have long histories of collecting or producing ephemera which might end up in a museum setting. This erasure from cultural heritage displays is compounded by ongoing erasure in the media according to Luis, as Asian Americans are still fighting for increased visibility in music, Hollywood, and other circles of mainstream cultural production. Luis sees his work with APAC as taking place in a “particular moment in time in which this [erasure] is crumbling” as these communities expand their presence “outside [of] normal or expected modes and sites of storytelling.” He pointed to, for instance, the long-standing participation of Asian Americans on democratizing digital platforms such as Youtube; their presence on such platforms grew out of necessity, since these were the only accessible venues for self-representation and cultural production. This context largely shapes how Luis envisions APAC’s role as both incubator of content and ephemera meant for a future museum collection and amplifier of “existing media, art, or cultural production.”⁷⁴

The Center’s work adds a significant qualification to our understanding of digital projects as it engages in both digital and digitally-enabled humanistic projects; the latter may not result in a strictly digital or digitized product, but is enabled by the communications technologies of the contemporary moment. The Center’s innovative, “digitally informed” Culture Labs, a blend of related digital and analog programming organized around specific themes (this current cycle featured “Imagined Futures,” “Intersectionality,” and the upcoming lab on “Convergence” in Hawaii in July 2017),

⁷⁴ I am much indebted to Adriel Luis of the Smithsonian for taking the time to share these insights about APAC with me. Interview with Adriel Luis, May 2, 2017.

represent a remarkable kind of hybrid model, both digital and non-digital in scope, employed by APAC to critically engage and collaborate with the public. They also employ crowdsourcing to collect inspiration and digital content for exhibitions, transforming their digital platform into a medium onto which community members may project and communicate their own resistance to the erasure of their bodies, lives, and minds from the historical record. I will focus on one of their most successful projects to further explore the ways in which APAC challenges previous models of engagement in the digital sphere by returning to crowdsourcing as a digital methodology.⁷⁵

“A Day in the Life of Pacific America,” a crowdsourced photography project, represented one of the Smithsonian and APAC’s earliest efforts to “think digitally,” in the words of APAC curator Adriel Luis.⁷⁶ APAC launched “A Day in the Life of Asian Pacific America” on May 10, 2014, intentionally coinciding with the 145th anniversary of the completion of the Transcontinental Railway. Two photo workshops led by professional photographers were held prior to May 10 at the Chinese Historical Society of America Learning Center in San Francisco, and APAC released an open call for

⁷⁵ Another fascinating crowdsourced project APAC took on is “Folk Hero: Remembering Yuri Kochiyama Through Grassroots Art,” which sought to rectify the scarcity of historical records of this civil rights leader both in society at large and in the Smithsonian’s own collections. The project description reads: “for an Asian Pacific American community whose experience remains at margins in the national collections, even our titans are considered niche. “It is up to us to fashion our history. Tomorrow’s canon is stored in our drawers, hard drives, and minds. This tribute contains just a few artifacts from a range of artists and organizers who have been impacted by Yuri Kochiyama. It is an exhibition of the people. It is a museum of us.” Offering a range of personalized artistic reflections on Yuri’s impact and links to more information about individual contributing artists, “Folk Hero” fills important gaps in the nation’s premiere collections with rich and meaningful representations of her manifold legacy and celebrates the creative impulses of Asian Pacific American artists. Folk Hero: Remembering Yuri Kochiyama Through Grassroots Art,” Asian Pacific American Center, accessed May 27, 2017, <http://smithsonianapa.org/yuri/>.

⁷⁶ Interview with Adriel Luis, May 2, 2017.

submissions which made the rounds on Asian, South Asian, and Pacific Islander media outlets, personal websites, and the websites of related cultural heritage organizations. APAC staff treated the workshops as measures to increase the project's accessibility by showing participants that you did not need to be a professional artist to meaningfully and creatively contribute to the project.⁷⁷ Luis sought to capitalize on the democratic potential of digital spaces for storytelling, noting that "with digital space there's less segregation between...storytellers who are very established in certain scenes and circles versus folks who are learning."⁷⁸ The exhibition's collaborators, a mix of amateur and professional creatives (i.e. New York Times photographers), indicated APAC's success in realizing the democratizing potential for fluid exchange across professional and social boundaries.

Described by APAC as an innovative "crowdsourced experiment" in "cultural democracy," APAC cast the project as a direct response to the visual exclusion of Asians from photographic documentation of the celebratory Golden Spike ceremony at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869. This project stands in stark contrast to the antiquarian-minded crowdsourcing ethos employed in "A Year in the Bay." As APAC observes on the project Flickr page, "Once erased from historical consciousness, Asian Pacific Americans are now visible in profound ways...Let's document Asian Pacific American life."⁷⁹ Over the course of a day, APAC collected more than 2,000 photographs and videos from over 500 individuals, ranging from amateur photographers to

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ "Group Description," Smithsonian APAC: A Day in the Life, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://www.flickr.com/groups/life2014/>.

professional photojournalists, artists, and documentarians; more than 5,000 people in total participated in the project. APAC declared that an exhibit would be produced from this material by May 26, 2014, highlighting the speed in which born-digital projects like this can proceed (much unlike exhibitions in brick-and-mortar spaces).⁸⁰ The collection is showcased in a curated digital exhibition of select contributions (selected by a team of curators) on the Asian Pacific America Center's website and is accessible in its entirety on the APAC Flickr group page; the materials can also be viewed on Instagram and Flickr, filed under the tag #LifeAPA.⁸¹

The project is remarkable in its simplicity (both in web design and layout) and its compelling storytelling. In its entirety, the collection reveals a complex and stunning tapestry of space, place, culture, social relationships, and identity, among a diverse mix of contemporary Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders living in the United States and abroad. The digital exhibit on APAC's website organizes contributors along the lines of

⁸⁰ "A Day in the Life of Asian Pacific America: Photo Workshop with Leon Sun, Laura Ming Wong & Leland Wong," Chinese Historical Society of America, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://chsa.org/event/a-day-in-the-life-of-asian-america-photo-workshop-1/>.

⁸¹ "A Day in the Life of Asian Pacific America," Smithsonian, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://smithsonianapa.org/life2014/>. Practical considerations drove the choice of platforms for the exhibit. APAC's partnership with Flickr proved mutually beneficial. Recognizing that older generations of photographers remained devoted to Flickr (which has arguably gone out of style), and determined to draw into the project people who normally who were not active on cutting-edge social media platforms, APAC went with the simpler, more familiar option for these communities. As Luis put it, it was a matter of "recovering your password rather than signing up for something new." Sometimes we don't have to reinvent the wheel after all, it seems. He also noted the logistical considerations that went into the decision to partner with Flickr, particularly emphasizing the benefit of time stamps. Instagram proved more problematic. Not only were photographs not time stamped, which impeded APAC's commitment to collect submissions as accurately as possible; in addition, the hashtag generated for the event stimulated confused and irrelevant contributions to the project, as people would stumble upon the hashtag, not understand what it meant, and coopt it for their own uses. This state of affairs complicated staff efforts to collect submissions. In addition, Flickr offered options for high-res contributions, unlike Instagram. In return, Flickr embraced the partnership with such a high-profile institution and did their own outreach within their existing committed audience. Interview with Adriel Luis, May 2, 2017.

eight different themes, each of which are introduced with a line or two of text. Beyond that, the only text in the exhibition comes from contributors themselves, if they choose to narrate their pieces, and the identifying name and title for each individual submission. Beginning with “The Arena,” contributors explore the meaning of movement and migration, place and belonging, pushing viewers to imagine a diffuse community not defined by borders, digital or otherwise—APAC’s brief introductory note states: “Asian Pacific America is without borders. It exists after your flight has left the gate, when you are in unfamiliar land, and *beyond the digital grid*” (emphasis my own). The next section, “The Moment,” turns inward, exploring the complex relationship between heritage, identity, and everyday activities of life (and death)—sports with friends, patterns of socializing, eating, participating in festivals, sleeping, playing games on a cell phone, witnessing the last day in a family member’s life. Then the exhibition turns to “The Image,” a stunning composite of portraits meant to shatter preconceived notions of the Asian American Pacific aesthetic. “The Love” shifts towards reflections on community, friendship, family, relationships, and generational ties. “The Grind” attempts to visualize the diverse expressions of passion and sacrifice and labor among the Asian Pacific American community, representing service workers, baristas, taxi drivers and restaurant owners, artists of all stripes, performers, teachers, and even a poignant black and white shot of a mother hard at work in the kitchen. “The Ritual” explores the relationship between tradition, community, and identity through the lens of artistic expressions (such

as dance), the costumes and pageantry of cultural festivals, martial arts, a rowing team.⁸² Most remarkable is the project's efficacy as a mode of storytelling—rich with details and complexity yet tremendous in scope, APAC accomplishes so much with so little text. Rather than being overwhelmed by APAC's institutional voice or mediation, the interpretive voices of the public contributors shine through, creating a sense of dialogue within and between the different submissions. The geographic scope and range of submissions presented, from home-made videos (complete with wobbly focus) and grainy photographs to highly polished and skillfully edited or manipulated submissions attest to APAC's visualizing of the digital space as one of dialogue and exchange between diverse individuals.

Ultimately, "A Day in the Life of Asian Pacific America" provides a robust model of digital collections practices of which museums and other cultural heritage organizations should take note. APAC's use of crowdsourcing does important work here in several ways. APAC purposely reached out to artists and videographers ahead of time to ensure that there would be interest in and activity around the project across the globe. Staff based the project around the institution's mission and long-term goals for expanding the public frame of reference for representing Asian Pacific Americas, both online and off. It specifically filled gaps in the center's collections, but did so on the voluntary terms of community members whose public submissions shaped the content and direction of the exhibition itself. The relationship between APAC and its publics took on a mutually

⁸² There are also a collection of films and moving imagery, as well as a selection of "Spotlight Photographers" who put together photo essays for the purposes of the project at APAC's invitation, expanding upon themes represented in the exhibition.

beneficial and collaborative nature, and I would argue this has much to do with APAC's approach, illustrated particularly by their classification of the project as a form of "cultural democracy." This speaks directly to their institutional mission, which is to "enrich the appreciation of America's Asian Pacific heritage and *empower* Asian Pacific American communities in their sense of inclusion within the national culture" (emphasis my own).⁸³ Using the language of empowerment allows APAC to self-consciously embrace the humanistic value of cultural heritage activity in the face of material conditions off-line—citizens and artists, amateurs and professionals alike, are spurred to create something new, to interpret their own lives for themselves, and contribute to a larger collective project of recovery and discovery. Here the digital becomes merely a tool embedded within a larger process of self-reclamation to project and display diverse expressions of place, identity, and existence, and to stimulate creative action in the analog world—all facilitated by cultivating and capitalizing on a global digital network of artists and creative amateurs. Thus, clarity in institutional mission, and the alignment between the goals of the digitally-enabled crowdsourcing effort and this mission, produced a remarkable scale of participation and a wide range of rich content reflecting these values.

Reflecting upon the project, journalist Helen Zia notes that, "In this new millennium, AAPIs are seizing the lens of history, in stark contrast to the days when the railroad workers were barred from the camera view, to be erased from the proud tracks

⁸³ "About," Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, accessed May 9, 2017, <http://smithsonianapa.org/about/>.

they had carved through the sheer granite of the Rockies.”⁸⁴ Collaborators are offered the chance to become part of the center’s activities, even from thousands of miles away, and to assert themselves into the center’s collections and collecting processes. APAC offers them a mission in which they share a common stake, to recover the Asian Pacific American experience in public culture, and offers them a platform through which they can represent themselves. The use of crowdsourcing in this context provides an alternative means for creative cultural production and self-representation among a diverse global community. The scale of production is enabled by the digital tools, but focus is not on one the platforms or the quantitative amount of production. There is a clearly articulated set of humanistic values undergirding the entire process to mitigate the historical erasure of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders by repopulating the visual landscape of the contemporary moment. This allows the project to move beyond the simplistic framework of crowdsourcing simply to extract data—there is much more at stake than a desired quota of historical tidbits, likes, tweets, or comments. Collecting becomes a form of resistance—as the blanks APAC attempts to fill represent the lives and identities of those who have been flattened or erased from the historical record. In this sense, APAC serves as a platform for these communities to reassert themselves into the narrative in an act of embodied engagement. The global scale of submissions presents an embodied archive, one which materializes a larger, complex body and asserts a strong statement of active and ongoing existence on the part of those who collaborated. Social

⁸⁴ “A message from Helen Zia,” Smithsonian, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://smithsonianapa.org/life2014/>.

justice meets artistic co-production meets the digital on a global scale. APAC's work makes a strong case for digital collections models which recognize the social, political, and personal implications of participation and collection, are grounded in the material conditions at hand, and which celebrate the interpretive agency of ordinary people. Enabled by contemporary digital communications technologies and the cultural capital and financial resources of the Smithsonian Institutions at large, APAC presents a compelling vision for the future of collecting in the digital age: digital collecting, informed by serious humanistic inquiry and reflection, as a form of activism and advocacy in the public sphere. And it is incredibly encouraging to note that though this vision is taking place within the most prestigious of humanities organizations in the United States, the Smithsonian Institutions, APAC's work resonates powerfully with the work being done at the periphery of cultural heritage work in grassroots social-justice based projects.

Conclusion

“Technology can certainly help us rewrite the social contract with the communities we serve. It can offer us channels and tools to make good on the promise of a more egalitarian and unbounded approach. But it cannot in itself transform our organizations. That bit is up to us.”

-Nicholas Poole, CEO of Collections Trust⁸⁵

The challenge of recognizing, finding, imagining, and enacting a 21st-century shared authority is...a more complex and demanding challenge than designing the next app.

—Michael Frish⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Nick Poole, “Change,” accessed April 21, 2017, <https://medium.com/code-words-technology-and-theory-in-the-museum/change-cc3b714ba2a4>.

⁸⁶ Frisch, “From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back,” 134.

We occupy an exciting moment in which the digital humanities and digital cultural heritage are grappling, and producing, models which seek to more closely integrate humanistic concerns into the ways we articulate value for digital collections. This means complicating and interrogating how we build and mobilize digital collections in the twenty-first century. Whether shaped by an antiquarian or social justice ethic, these models seek to create models for digital collecting in the 21st century. The stakes are high; we cannot afford to not have these conversations. These conversations are also neither new nor confined to the examples presented here. While I see tremendous promise in the work being developed on the periphery of cultural heritage work, our next challenge will be to put these projects in more direct conversation with the work being done at mainstream repositories around the country and internationally—we can all learn best from each other.

If the digital humanities were “oblivious” to cultural criticism, there is evidence that paradigm shifts are in the works, at least among those with activist sensibilities.⁸⁷ This research suggests that there exists at this moment significant momentum within the digital humanities to bring critical theory and humanistic methods of inquiry to bear on the praxis of digital humanities, in this case the way we construct and mobilize digital cultural heritage collections. This work is reshaping the way we understand collecting in the digital age, as a very human (as opposed to strictly technical) endeavor operating in complex material, cultural, political, and social contexts.

⁸⁷ Liu, "Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?"

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