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Community Archives Empower through Access and Inclusion

AUGUST 2019 - A UCLA program is helping communities reclaim their histories and determine what has value for the present and the future.



Intern Alexis Recto processing archival collections at the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA. Photo courtesy of UCLA.

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For information studies graduate student Henry Apodaca, a recent internship at the Skid Row History Museum and Archive in downtown Los Angeles was more than just an opportunity to gain hands-on, community-based archiving experience. While digitizing and cataloguing more than a hundred hours of oral history recordings of

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the largest homeless community in the US, Apodaca came to understand that by helping to preserve the lived experiences of his marginalized population, he was advocating on its behalf.

“To make people seen—that’s a form of activism,” says Apodaca.

“We take for granted our ability to document ourselves and maintain memories of who we were. But on Skid Row, because existence is transient and precarious, my work is about making sure the stories aren’t lost, that these voices remain active.”

The History Museum and Archive where Apodaca interned is part of the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD), a performance group started in 1985 by artist-activist John Malpede. Primarily a creative organization, over time it has become a point of connection for social service professionals and advocates for the homeless.

In 2015, Malpede opened the museum and archive as a “space for Angelenos to meet and...explore civic issues together,” underpinned by a simple ethos of inclusion: by collecting, preserving, and making accessible the stories of the marginalized, grassroots organizations fill in the historical gaps and missing voices in mainstream archives. Community archives, motivated by social change, are documenting, shaping, and providing access to histories that might otherwise be lost and stories that might go untold, ultimately reclaiming the power to construct their own narratives and determine what has value for the present—and the future.

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Community Archives Internship Project

University of California at Los Angeles
Los Angeles, United States

Awarded \$331,000 in May 2018 to support a pilot program of internships in community-based archives

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Intern Yuri Shimoda giving a public talk on her work with Visual Communications, an Asian American community archives organization. Photo courtesy of UCLA.

Michelle Caswell, an associate professor of information studies at the University of California, Los Angeles and the principal investigator of the Community Archives Lab there, says that community archiving is more important than ever. “Communities have always kept their own records,” she says. “But with marginalized people, the relationship to power, or the lack of it, is what distinguishes their archival activities.

Organizations and communities affected by racism and homophobia have been left out of dominant institutions, or when they have been included, they have been extracted from, without equity, reciprocity or autonomy. Community archives challenge exploitative and extractive collecting models by placing the power to make archival decisions in the hand of marginalized communities.”

Caswell knows firsthand the challenges of launching such grassroots organizations. In 2008, she and archivist Samip Mallick co-founded the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), an organization that documents and makes available the history of immigrants to the US from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Rather than accept physical custody of materials, SAADA is a post-custodial archive, borrowing materials from families, organizations, and institutions, digitizing them for online access, and then returning them to their source communities. “When we first started SAADA, we had three strikes against us,” says Caswell. “Many professional archivists and funders questioned whether a digital-only repository could take preservation issues seriously.” She also explains that

some questioned whether an independent community-based organization could sustainably steward materials, while others claimed the project would not be of interest to a wider audience. But more than a decade on, the field has shifted. “Along with an increased awareness of the labor, expertise, and infrastructure needed to sustain and preserve digital materials, there is respect for the work of community archives, and a greater appreciation of the value of the histories of communities of color in the US,” says Caswell.

At the UCLA Community Archives Lab, Caswell puts theory into practice. With the help of a \$331,000 Mellon Foundation grant, the Lab launched a three-year program that matches independent, community-run organizations in the Los Angeles area with paid interns from UCLA’s department of information studies. The program, which completed its first year in June, is what brought Henry Apodaca to the Skid Row archive, and his fellow UCLA grad students to SAADA, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights, La Historia Historical Society Museum, and other Los Angeles-area non-profits.

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HENRY APODACA, INFORMATION STUDIES GRADUATE STUDENT

Empowering both the archives and the students makes it “a win-win for everyone involved,” Caswell says of the program. Along with raising awareness of the existence of valuable historical records, the UCLA program aims to increase the capacity and long-term sustainability of these often under-resourced non-profits that rely heavily on a small, volunteer workforce to do the work of many.

One organization to benefit from the additional human capital

because of the program is the June L. Mazer Archives in West Hollywood. Founded in Oakland in 1981 and caring for more than 80 different collections, it is the only repository on the West Coast dedicated to preserving lesbian history and culture—and it has just one full-time employee.

“There’s a lot of work to do and always has been,” explains Angela Brinskele, the Archives’ only full-time employee who serves in countless roles – the head of communications, social media manager, board member, and more. It’s one reason why having UCLA intern Julie Botnick was “extraordinarily helpful and resourceful” in providing assistance with digitization of the Mazer’s subject files.

That work had been an unfinished priority, says Brinskele, “because so much of our important material is newsprint, and newsprint deteriorates.”

The Mazer’s physical space was also given an upgrade in 2017.

Since 1989 the Mazer has been located in the Werle Building, an Art Deco gem built in 1940 and now owned by the city of West Hollywood, which funded the building’s recent \$3 million renovation and also donates the space rent free to the Mazer and two other non-profits. The restoration brought much-needed structural improvements to the site. There is now a working elevator and a humidity and temperature sensitive air system that’s more suited to maintaining the holdings. The highly publicized renovation also brought increased visibility and inquiries to the Mazer. “More people now know about us than ever before,” explains Brinskele. “We now have a working elevator, which we didn’t have, and that makes us more accessible.”



Primary Investigator Michelle Caswell at the South Asian American Digital Archive.

Indeed, as collections expand, so does the need to implement best practices and invest in infrastructure like climate-controlled storage and research facilities that can accommodate access by a growing number of users.

But community organizations often can't predict their future needs, and emerging groups tend to dedicate time and resources to refining their core mission or political advocacy. Such were the concerns of the Asian American student activists who founded Visual Communications (VC) in 1970. Over the decades, VC has collected representations of American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) in various media with a special focus on preserving the cinematic contributions of AAPI-identified filmmakers. With those core assets protected, VC has been able to devote resources to organizing and making accessible its collection of thousands of still photographs, slides, and negatives.

That was the job of UCLA intern Yuri Shimoda, who spent many months in VC's Downtown LA headquarters combing through binders. Labeled with general titles such as "Asian American History," the binders in fact contained a wide range of detailed visuals:

Filipino folk dancing, family picnics with spreads of Korean food, and the annual summer festival in Little Tokyo. Shimoda recalls that her aunt would take her to the festival, where they would practice traditional dances and afterwards, she would have lunch at a ramen

café with her grandmother. She says she feels fortunate that her

work was “intensely personal,” but also tied to the larger community.

“For anyone who grew up in LA like I did, these images would feel familiar.”



Located just a few blocks from Little Tokyo, the Skid Row History Museum and Archive, where graduate student Henry Apodaca interned, captures the displacement, gentrification, and resistance within a largely autonomous district of approximately 10,000 people, between 2,000 and 2,500 of whom are currently living unsheltered according to the LA Chamber of Commerce.

Access to official urban plans, court proceedings, and other documents is especially useful to this

community, which is fighting for its existence in the middle of a war between the competing interests of advocates, politicians, and developers about the future of the neighborhood.

“Skid Row is very aware of the policies that control their fate. Los Angeles Poverty Department keeps documents, like zoning maps, that most people would find boring and incorporates them not just into the archive, but into their art exhibitions and theatrical performances,” says Gale Holland, a reporter who, in covering homelessness and poverty for the *Los Angeles Times*, has relied on the Skid Row archive and the insights of its founder, John Malpede, in her reporting.

“The Skid Row community is interested in its own history beyond most communities,” explains Holland, “and that matters, because it’s

an important part of the history of LA, which has a high and uniquely persistent Skid Row population.”

By documenting themselves, community members give future generations a picture of the past that can help inform future events.

The archive provides an anchor and a sense of permanence and legitimacy among a population that faces constant uncertainty.

“It’s incredibly significant for a marginalized group to have evidence that their community has been around a long time,” says Michelle Caswell. “The emotional impact of seeing yourself existing across space and time is profound.”

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