ABSTRACT: Using data gleaned from semistructured interviews with seventeen community archives founders, volunteers, and staff at twelve sites, this paper examines the relations and roles of community archives and archivists in social justice activism. Our research uncovered four findings on the politics of community archives. First, community-based archivists identify as activists, advocates, or community organizers, and this identification shapes their understandings of community archives work and the missions of community archives. Second, community-based archives offer substantial critiques of neutrality in their ethical orientations and thus present new ethical foundations for practice. Third, by activating their collections, community archives play significant roles within contemporary social movements including struggles for racial justice and against gentrification. Finally, community archives are at the forefront of the profession in their engagements with activists. Community archives have much to contribute to practice and scholarship on activism, outreach, and public engagement with the past.

KEY WORDS: activism, advocacy, archives, community archives, social justice

Introduction

Community archives are an important venue for public history-making processes. Understanding the ecosystem of community archives from the perspectives of founders, volunteers, and staff stands to make a significant contribution to public historians’ meaningful engagements with those who create, acquire, arrange, describe, preserve, and make accessible the histories of diverse communities for a broad public. The work of community archives practitioners in the fields of both public history and archival studies has often been conceptualized by scholars as a form of activist labor aimed at promoting community empowerment and broader social change. Activism describes the manifold practices used to challenge injustice, discrimination, and oppression in order to create and sustain a more just environment for all.¹ This paper examines and complicates understandings of activism and the closely

associated practices of advocacy and community organizing. Drawing on empirical research conducted with community-based archivists, it addresses these practitioners’ complicated and nuanced political perspectives on their own archival practices and the motivations for working in community archives contexts. This article emerges from a multifaceted research project that investigated community-based archives in Southern California to discover their impact on communities. The project sought to uncover the ways that community archives represent community members in archival collecting and the affective impact of such collections on minoritized individuals and communities. This paper analyzes the meanings of archival work in community archives contexts for a public history audience by addressing the work of community archivists on their own terms. The paper takes as a starting assumption that community-based archival work is public history, that is, community archives are created to document and interpret the past for community members in the present.

Drawing on prior scholarship on community archives and our work as community archives practitioners, we anticipated in designing the study that activism would be a significant aspect of community archives practitioners’ work and identities. Through data gleaned from semistructured interviews with seventeen community archives founders, volunteers, and staff at twelve sites in Southern California, we sought to answer the following questions: Do community archivists consider themselves activists? What roles do community archives play in social movements for change? Are community archives usefully serving activist communities? In this article, we first define archival activism and trace the intertwined literatures in public history and archival studies addressing community archives, activism, and neutrality as a means of considering its implications for archives and public history. Next we discuss our methodology for the project. We then detail our four findings on the relationships of community archives and activism. Lastly, we discuss the implications of our findings regarding activism and archives for public historians and archivists, as well as scholars of cultural heritage across these fields.

Community Archives

For the purposes of this project, we follow archival scholars Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd in defining a “community” as “any manner of people who come together and present themselves as such.” In turn we understand a “community archive” as the product of community efforts to actively document the history and ongoing experiences of members of the source community in order to make their history accessible on “their own terms.” As public

historians David Beel, Claire Wallace, Gemma Webster, and Hai Nguyen argue, the relationship between community archives and history-making is a fundamentally reciprocal one. In other words, community archives both provide support for history-making activities and are themselves a product of history-making processes. Public history production is thus intimately wrapped up in the practice of creating and sustaining community archives. Independent community-based archives in the United States, including the ones studied here, have been formed around communities centered on or around ethnic, racial, religious, political, socioeconomic, sexuality, gender, and regional identities.

Community archives movements developed in large part as a response to the social and political movements that came to the fore in 1960s and 1970s, including the civil rights, gay liberation, and women’s movements. Within each of these movements activists and community groups recognized the significance of writing persons and communities whose histories and lives had long been marginalized, erased, or misrepresented into the historical record. These collections, then as now, were “live and meaningful in the present” and were understood by participants as “tools for making change as well as reconstructing the past.” Literature on community-based archives and archival practices focuses significantly on the link between the emergence of community archives and various movements for social change and justice.

There is a growing literature on community archives that speaks, as well, to the project of framing, examining, and reckoning with community archives and the societal implications of their work. Much of this scholarship has been done through case studies.

5 Ibid.
histories, published interviews, and written reflections of, with, and by those involved with individual community-based archives. The growing literature on community archives is also generated by cultural heritage scholars’ broader turn toward deeper engagement with more diverse archival forms, needs, and constituencies. There is a small, but significant, set of empirical studies done on a multi-organizational scale. However, further research is needed to adequately address the issues and implications found across a range of community archives approaches, structures, and labors. The larger project of which this article is a part addresses this gap in large-scale studies of community archives. Additionally, there is a significant void in the extant research on perspectives of community archives practitioners on their work and on their motivations for becoming and sustaining their engagement in community archives. By bringing to the fore the voices of community archivists this article illuminates the complex ecosystem of community archives for a public history audience.

Cultural Heritage Organizations and Activism

The origins and development of public history and community archives are closely connected. However, professionally trained historians and archivists as well as cultural heritage scholars are still at the early stages of recognizing and contending with the influence and roles of community archives in their fields. Much of the scholarship on community archives has framed community archives practitioners as engaged in a form of activism focused both on broadening the make-up of the historical record and shifting the histories it is used to tell. Public historians frequently assert that history can be “a tool for social justice.” Similarly, archival scholars have called attention to the power and potential of archives for doing such.


social justice work. Public history has been framed by some as a form of “public activism.” This activism can range widely from the telling of unpopular historical narratives to contending with the ethical, emotional, and intellectual challenges of documenting tragedies as they unfold. In the archival field, the related concept of “activist archiving” has gained traction in both scholarship and practice in recent years. Archival scholars Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander define “activist archiving” as when archivists “campaign on issues such as access rights or participatory rights within records’ control systems or act to deploy their archival collections to support activist groups and social justice aims.” Activist archiving emerges from the shift in the profession toward an “archival practice which, rejecting professional advocacy of neutrality and passivity, acknowledges the role of the recordkeeper in ‘actively’ participating in the creation, management and pluralization of archives and seeks to understand and guide the impact of that active role.” Both the concepts of public activism and activist archiving assert that practices and processes of these fields can themselves be a form of activism in support of political, human rights, and other social change movements.

In a US context public activism and activist archiving, much like community-based archives, have their origins in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1970s many historians newly embraced social history as the subject of their work, and some in turn eagerly became involved in public-oriented projects as a way of utilizing their scholarship in social change efforts. Socially engaged historians often consider public history to be a means “to help people write, create, and understand their own history.” In 1970 radical historian Howard Zinn called upon archivists to “humanize” their practice through the rejection of false neutrality enacted through professionalism and by refusing to serve as “instruments of social control in an essentially undemocratic society” and instead to “play some small part in the creation of a real democracy.” Zinn’s appeal for an archival “rebellion” inspired archivists to make their own calls for recognition of the political significance of archives.

18 Ibid., 331.
19 Ibid.
of archiving and to develop new critical and creative approaches to archival practice. As Philip Mason, president of the Society of American Archivists from 1970 to 1971, states: “As a result of the social movements of the sixties many younger archivists have adopted values and priorities differing markedly from those of archivists who entered the profession earlier. Traditional attitudes toward work itself have changed and institutional or employer loyalty has been replaced by loyalty to one’s profession.” Archie Motley, a self-identified “archival activist,” builds on this point in his article on the progress of a short-lived group called Archivists for Action. He writes:

Archival activists have contributed much to the democratization and improvement of our professional organizations and have helped us to recognize the relationships between our work and the world around us. Activist archivists are those archivists who persistently seek to address major social concerns of the archival profession and the public it serves and to improve their own work places, their professional organizations, and the archival profession in general. . . . [T]hey believe that progress comes more frequently through direct responsible action than through passively waiting for change.

Much of the early archival activism inspired by Zinn and others was aimed specifically at efforts to document previously underrepresented communities. That documentation work was crucial to the work of public historians, enabling them to work with and to empower diverse communities by helping them to tell their own stories.

Widespread recognition of an activist role in public history and archives scholarship has also been fueled by the archival and historical fields’ greater engagement with critical and postmodern theories. Beginning in the late 1980s, public historians began contending with their positionality and role in history-making. The understanding of archives as manifestations and tools of power that emerged in the archival field in the late 1990s exposed the power imbalances inherent in traditional archival practices and demonstrated that the seemingly objective and neutral approaches created an archival record heavily biased toward those in power. The scholarship that emerged from critiques of objectivity, neutrality, and

passivity in archival practice and that explored the political and cultural functions of archives in society articulated the need for and possibilities offered by archivists acting as proactive agents in record creation, management, and dissemination. It pointed to the positive implications of activist archivists for social justice. As Verne Harris succinctly suggests, those in the archival field are “memory activist[s] either for or against the oppression system.” 28 There is now widespread acknowledgment in the archival field that archives can and should play a role in self-determination and work toward social justice. 29

Archival activism is closely tied to discourse on community archives. In the words of Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, conventional record creating and archival practices mean that “some can afford to create and maintain records and some cannot; that certain voices thus will be heard loudly and some not at all; that certain views and ideas about society will in turn be privileged and others marginalized.” 30 Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd argue that community archives can redress or shift those patterns of privileging and marginalizing. 31 Michelle Caswell identifies “archival activism” as a “key principle” to be drawn from community archives discourse for the larger archival field. 32 Caswell argues that the acts of collecting and preserving records affirm the existence of communities that have historically “been silenced, erased, or marginalized is a political act.” 33 A number of studies of community archives practitioners have found that they see their archival engagements as activist labors as well as a means of promoting community empowerment and social change. 34

Our study is not the first empirical study on “activism” bridging public history and archival studies. Drawing on their online survey of 195 participants who responded to postings on professional listservs, Sonia Yaco and Beatriz Betancourt Hardy assess how the activism of historians and archivists affects their work and how in turn their professional work impacts their activism. 35 Yaco and Hardy found that the vast majority of respondents’ activism reflected their professional expertise and interests, with most of them working to collect and preserve the records of activist groups either as group members or as interested outside parties.

Their findings also indicate that the benefits of historians and archivists engaging in activist work for their employers, including universities, governments, and corporations, are numerous, including generating good publicity, advancing institutional missions, and creating new connections. They found these benefits outweighed any potential negative costs. Other researchers working on oral history in archives such as Ellen Swain and Janet Wells Greene have made similar assertions, finding that archival activism is an effective means to increase donors’ trust and improve the ability to conduct archival functions.66 In her dissertation on perceptions of archival activism among practicing archivists, Joy R. Novak establishes five core components of archival activism: “neutrality/transparency, diversity/inclusivity, community engagement, accountability and open government.”67 Novak examines concepts of neutrality and transparency in order to discuss her participants’ perspectives on whether their own biases and positionalities impact their work. Most of the archivists in her study did not believe professional neutrality was possible. Responding to these findings, Novak endorses the concept of transparency about positionality as an ethical alternative to neutrality.68

The critical discourse on activist archiving together with archivists’ proactive changes to their practices have significantly altered archival scholarship, practice, and professionalism. Activist archiving has had a significant impact on public engagement and outreach strategies. Outreach has become an increasingly prominent function in many archives as a crucial component of building holistic relationships with a wide spectrum of individuals and communities.69 Although acceptance of activism in cultural heritage professions has grown and its aims have moved beyond the mere diversification of the archival record, there is still growth to be achieved.

While there are long-standing efforts to document political, social movement, and other activist groups and campaigns in archives, activists are only just beginning to be viewed as archival stakeholders by practicing archivists. Relations between activist movements and the institutions archiving their materials are complex. As Alycia Sellie, Jesse Goldstein, Molly Fair, and Jennifer Hoyer suggest, collections of activist material “do not always develop from an affinity between the institution and an activist group,” and the process of archiving these materials “does not automatically signify that this collecting establishes a relationship between the archive and the community that it draws materials from.”40

68 Ibid., 106.
problematic, these relationships can troublingly invoke or maintain the legacies of oppression, colonization, and displacement.\textsuperscript{41} However, archivists, particularly those in community archives settings, are working to build mutually beneficial relationships with activists. A fundamental component of these efforts is a deeper consideration of activists as archival users.

Professional Neutrality

Community archives practitioners are actively locating themselves in an important and political position in relation to both archiving and history-making processes. In the intertwined fields of history, public history, and archives there are longstanding debates in both theory and practice over the possibility or desirability of neutrality and objectivity.\textsuperscript{42} These debates continue to shape community archives practitioners’ understandings of their work. Concerns with objectivity and neutrality stem from the modernist construction of the historical and archival disciplines as sciences. Science in the positivist understanding is predicated on principles of universal validity and objectivity in which the scientist is a disembodied subject capable of practicing and producing knowledge with detachment in a world that is entirely knowable. This type of knowledge production denies the biases and partialities of the knower, eliminates subjectivities,\textsuperscript{43} and dismisses the power relations inherent to all forms of knowledge production.\textsuperscript{44} Neutrality and objectivity have been enmeshed in traditions of professional credibility, authority, and ethics. Proponents of neutrality in archival contexts such as archival scholar Luciana Duranti argue that records within the archives can remain “stable and immutable entities” forever, living in the time of their creation, untouched by changes in contexts, politics, or society.\textsuperscript{45}

Beginning in the 1980s historians, including public historians, have engaged in heated debates over “the objectivity question.”\textsuperscript{46} Public historians have close associations with advocacy and activism and have played a significant role in critiques of “universalist norms of disinterested objectivity.”\textsuperscript{47} They have raised critical concerns about how versions of the past are created, institutionalized, and


\textsuperscript{43} Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977 (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

\textsuperscript{44} Luciana Duranti, “Archives as Place,” Archives and Social Studies 1 (2007): 445–66.


\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
communicated and what this past evokes and provokes. Greater engagement with critical and postmodern theories that broadly assert that “all aspects of culture, including scholarship, are created and informed by social relationships and cultural symbols” and that therefore “any claim that knowledge can be ‘disinterested’ (that is, objective or neutral) is suspect” have been a significant influence for neutrality critiques in both fields. The upheavals in the historical field and increased engagement with new theoretical traditions led many archival thinkers by the late 1990s to rightly challenge constructions of neutrality as a professional illusion that denies the archives’ power and to question the very ethics of this approach. As archivist Maurice Wheeler argues, neutrality “can be a very dangerous and irresponsible position for archivists to take.” Likewise, archivist Amanda Strauss illustrates how in the context of violations of human and civil rights in Chile archival “inaction causes harm” and neutrality becomes an “untenable position.” Similarly, public historians have argued that neutrality and objectivity can continue problematic traditions of “unequal access to historical knowledge and services in society.” While archivists and public historians widely accept the dangers of neutrality and objectivity, the discourse on the desirability and possibility of neutrality stretches into the present. For example, in the archival field this is illustrated by the hotly contested debate between Mark Greene, Michelle Caswell, Randall Jimerson, and Mario H. Ramirez about whether social justice is an archival imperative. The community-based archival practices studied here operate from an understanding that both archivists and archives are neither objective nor neutral, nor should they be.

48 Ibid., 16.
50 Ibid.
Methodology

This article reports on data collected through qualitative interviews with seventeen community archives founders, volunteers, and staff at twelve sites in Southern California. The researchers assert that “power is central to this conversation” and that many self-identified community archives have coalesced around marginalized identities. When selecting sites, the research team considered the intersections of power, politics, and identities at play. Therefore, we selected sites with collections of materials of marginalized groups that are formed and stewarded by those groups themselves. The parameters set by the team for marginalized identities were those that dealt with political, ethnic, racial, geographic, gender, or sexual identities. We also acknowledged intersectionality of identity, which may contribute to further marginalization of communities through essentialism. Essentialism of communities by broader society may affect the politics and activist efforts of the community at large, and by extension, its archives, an element of our research we would be remiss not to discuss.

We limited sites for inclusion to Southern California, spanning the area between San Diego and Los Angeles. Rather than limit potential sites to fully established archives, we chose to include community archives in their initial stages of development as well as digital-only projects. Drawing on a long history of collaboration between formally trained “experts,” including academic historians, archivists, and curators with community members, we recognize that various models for community archives administration exist. Therefore, we chose to include community archives housed at academic institutions if they defined themselves as such and retained close ties to their target community. We recruited participants through conversations at the 2015 Archives Bazaar, an annual daylong event at the University of Southern California hosted by L.A. as Subject, an alliance of libraries, museums, archives, and cultural organizations. Team members also used their personal and professional networks and knowledge of community archives in Southern California to recruit additional participants. Of the sites initially contacted, three declined to participate in the research. We obtained UCLA Institutional Review Board approval prior to collecting data.

From October 2015 to January 2016, three members of the research team interviewed participants using a semistructured interview protocol (Appendix 1). Researchers recorded the interviews, which were then transcribed by a third-party transcription service. Transcripts underwent three rounds of coding within


the team. First, researchers did a preliminary round of coding on transcripts of the interviews they conducted to identify and develop overarching themes and subcategories. These themes were then narrowed, expanded, and/or verified by the research team using a consensus-based decision making process to ensure that the codes were exhaustive and mutually exclusive. The project’s final codebook includes five overarching themes: “activism,” “symbolic annihilation, identity, representation,” “affect,” “archival strategies, practices and models,” and “social death.” Members of the team then performed a second round of analysis on their own transcripts using the revised codebook. Finally, Marika Cifor (who did not conduct any of the interviews) analyzed and coded the full transcript set in order to ensure the accuracy, consistency, and quality of the coding.

Rather than attempt to create generalizations of community archives through a representative sample, the researchers’ aim was to examine information-rich cases that would provide a “thick description” of the impact of community archives on the communities they serve, a phenomenon that has not yet adequately been explored. We maintain that, contrary to the dominant conventions of social science research, it is important to attribute quotations to participants by name (with their consent) as a way of giving intellectual credit to those involved in community archives endeavors and to affirm that knowledge is mutually and collaboratively constructed. We have thus purposefully left the excerpts from the interviews long, some their full length, so that the voices of the participants can be heard and remain within context. Sixteen of the seventeen participants agreed to be identified by name, and we have chosen to use a pseudonym, “Luz,” for one other participant who identified as an undocumented immigrant, so as not to jeopardize her well-being. Participants identified by name gave final approval for their quotations to be attributed. As this research has been carried out within the interpretivist paradigm, our aim is not to generalize our findings to larger populations, but rather, to produce a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon being observed.

We feel it is necessary to acknowledge our own positionality in relation to the communities examined, given the interpretivist paradigm in which this research was conducted. We do this to ensure transparency of possible factors that may affect researcher/participant relations and inherent power structures of the interview format. Marika Cifor identifies as a white queer woman with a middle-class background. She has worked as an archivist and has done research independent of this project at several of the community archives represented in this article. She also has a history of involvement with queer and reproductive rights activism. Michelle Caswell identifies as a white, straight, cisgender woman who grew up working class and is in the first generation of her family to graduate from high school. She believes her experience as the cofounder of a well-known community archive (not

58 The results generated from the four latter themes have been or will be reported in different articles.
one profiled in this article) positively impacted the depth of the data she collected, as interview subjects could relate to her as a community archives insider despite her outsider status in terms of other identity markers. Alda Allina Migoni identifies as a Latina woman with a working-class background. She is a first-generation college student, with a transnational family, and identifies as being closely tied to the Mexican-US borderlands. Noah Geraci is a white queer man from a middle-class background in Southern California, who first became involved in community organizing in his early teens. He has been a community archives volunteer (though not at an archive represented in this paper) and is currently working as an archivist in this region.

The researchers anticipated that activism and the associated concept of advocacy would be significant to this project and its participants. The interview protocol includes initial questions on employment or volunteer position within the archive, community connections and collaborations, and specific questions targeted toward activism as an identity and role of the participant and activism within archival work as a field. These questions led the discussion to specifically address the role of activism and advocacy both in archival models of practice and in relation to identities of the participants themselves. As the final part of the interview, the research team asked participants if they consider their individual work activist work, and if they believe all archival work is inherently activist work. Coding confirmed the significance of activism as an overarching theme throughout all interviews. Within this theme, the team also identified a series of subcategories, such as “archivist as activist,” “ethical responsibility,” “critique of neutrality,” and “political identity.” These subcategories provided context for analysis, illuminating the ways in which ethics, politics, and identity intersect in a community archive and for the people who work within them. It is a challenge to address these issues of marginalization and archival representation of communities without negating the historical, social, and political differences within the communities. Limitations of our work stem both from the nature of empirical research as well as from the basic complexities of analyzing and defining identity. Communities and their boundaries remain in flux, yet social science research works to record and define identities as they stand in a moment in time. Our aim is instead to ethically contextualize and describe community-based archivists’ understandings of their work in archives concerning identity without then further marginalizing communities.

Findings

The interviews uncovered four findings. First, community-based archivists hold complicated relations to the concept of “activism” as applied to their self-identifications and to their community archives work. Rather than simply agreeing with the framing of the question and identifying themselves in an unqualified way as activists, some participants saw themselves, in addition to or instead of activists, as advocates or community organizers. Second, community-based archives offer
a crucial and substantial critique of neutrality and objectivity in their ethical orientations. Third, community archives are playing significant, yet underacknowledged, roles within contemporary social movements. Finally, community archivists are actively considering, responding to, and serving the needs of activists as archival users.

Identity and Community Archives Work

We solicited responses from community-based archivists as to whether they identified as activists and if they viewed archiving as an activist and advocacy practice. All participants described the community archives work they are doing as a means of enacting positive social change and justice for their communities and wider society. However, we found that participants had mixed reactions to the concept of “activism” as applied to self-identifications and to their archival work. On the one hand, we found that several participants strongly identified as “activists” and saw their archival work as a form of “activism.” As Thuy Vo Dang of the Southeast Asian American Archives at University of California, Irvine put it, “being an activist aligns well with being an archivist.” On the other hand, we also uncovered significant and nuanced distinctions in participants’ identifications with the terms “activist” and “activism.” Several participants identified as “advocates” either instead of or in addition to as “activists.” There was one participant who self-identified instead as a “community organizer.” Even among those who did feel comfortable describing themselves as activists, most offered a series of critical qualifications to the term before adopting it to describe themselves or their labors in community archives contexts. The distinctions and complexities of identifications are significant for understanding how community archivists conceptualize themselves, as well as the community archives ecosystem they work within and their roles in history-making processes and society.

We did not provide participants with a definition of activism. Those who identified as activists in response to questions raised by interviewers frequently qualified in their responses what being an activist means to them. They also framed their responses within their specific community archives context. Bergis Jules, coprincipal investigator and community lead for the Documenting the Now project, which archives social media content such as #BlackLivesMatter tweets, said, “If you would say an activist is someone who consistently tries to not bound these traditional barriers to things, how things are done, then yeah, I would consider myself an activist in that way.” Jules detailed what this self-definition brings to his community archives work: “If you look at any projects I’m involved in, they’re all about doing things away from the traditional.” Similarly, Cooper Moll, an intern at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California, explained how being an activist shapes her archival work. For Moll being an activist means “learning, trying to, continuing to question… your belief systems and also being able to have some fluidity… I’m constantly questioning what...
[social justice] means to me, what that looks like and knowing that . . . it can look like a different thing over time.” An activist identity for Jules and Moll is a mindset and a practice that informs the way that they challenge traditional modes of practice in archives. Being activists as they define it opened them to developing novel and innovative archival practices in community archives spaces.

Some of our participants framed community archives work as a form of “advocacy.” We did not provide participants with a definition of advocacy.60 For example, Rosa Peña, a volunteer archivist at the La Historia Society in El Monte, discussed a recent visit to the archives from a former city resident. This researcher’s mother had migrated from Mexico at a young age using a false name on her visa, and the researcher had learned later in life that his or her biological father was not the father he or she had grown up with. These immigration and family complexities meant that there were lots of different names on different documents. These discrepancies presented the researcher with difficulties in applying for social security benefits, which required verifying his or her identity. Peña, as part of her archival work, became an advocate for this researcher by making phone calls to find community members who had known this person as a child to aid in the verification process.

For some participants, the concepts of advocacy and activism are closely intertwined. Annie Tang, an archivist who is a former board member and volunteer at the Chinese American Historical Society, who did identify as an activist, argued that for her, activism is about “advocacy.” For Tang, engaging in “advocacy” with and on behalf of people of color and other underrepresented groups is an activist practice. Charles Brown, a board member of the Compton 125 Historical Society, also described a key function of his archival work as being “an advocate” in dealing with government officials. He went on to describe how he regularly puts on his “advocacy hat to just share the importance of history to our city government.” Tony Hicks also described his work with the Compton 125 Historical Society as “advocacy,” while acknowledging that there is a “gray line” between the concepts of activism and advocacy. Sometimes, he said, “being an activist a lot of time you look like an advocate.” For Hicks the difference between advocacy and activism is difficult to mark. He continued, “what we do crosses over to activism, because when you’re in the process of educat[ing] folks sometimes you have to be assertive. . . . Some people from the outside may look at you as being pushy or an activist. And as long it’s done in the right way, I think there’s nothing wrong with that.” Hicks’s comments mark activism as a distinct practice from advocacy. Simultaneously, he asserted that they are closely related means of promoting social change. Hicks’s response also gestures to the complex and, for some participants, uncomfortable associations of activism as an aggressive and oppositional tactic for working toward social change and justice.

60 In keeping with the responses, here we define advocacy as the public support for or recommendation of a particular person, cause, or policy.
Community organizer emerged from our interviews as another potentially significant identification for participants. We did not provide participants with any questions that used this language, marking its emergence as particularly significant.61 Kelly Besser, the cofounder of the fledgling Transgender Living Archives, did not identify as an activist because of Besser’s associations with that concept as involving only particular kinds of action, such as strikes or other demonstrations. Instead, in the context of community-based archival work, Besser sees archival labor as a form of “community organizing” and identifies as a “community organizer.” Further research is needed to identify whether community organizing is a concept with broader appeal to community archives practitioners.

Our interviews uncovered that regardless of their complex identifications with the concepts of “activism,” “advocacy,” or “community organizing,” community-based archivists are clearly conceptualizing themselves as active agents in, and their community archives as means of, promoting social change and justice to benefit their communities and wider society through history-making activities. Kenneth Klein said of his founding and development of the Korean American Digital Archive at the University of Southern California, it “makes me feel like I’m making a contribution, that it’s something that had I not done,” it might not have “been done otherwise.” Promoting such change is central to the motivations and rewards of doing community archives work. Tang framed her efforts as a larger community effort, saying “its been nice [to] see that the status quo has been getting pushed and pushed and pushed.” This work unites her with other Chinese American activists, advocates, and organizers in a shared struggle, promoting feelings of belonging and community.

Archival Neutrality, Objectivity, and Ethical Obligations

Our interviews uncovered that community-based archivists subscribe to the perspective that there is no neutrality or objectivity in the archives. Furthermore, our participants saw it as ethical imperative to be active agents in their work and framed that work as directly shaped by their own identities and experiences. Jen LaBarbera, of the LAMDA Archives, has a community organizing background that influenced her desire to work at a community-based archive where activism and archival work can be openly combined. In describing her current work and former position with Smith College’s Sofia Smith Collection, LaBarbera proudly proclaimed that there “is no façade of being neutral in these places.” These archives do not espouse neutrality. Their core “purpose isn’t to neutrally and objectively collect history, it’s to collect the history of some movements. So at [the] Sophia Smith Collection it’s women’s history and the feminist movements, and here [at

61 Community organizing is defined here as a distinct practice of “building power” that is marked by community members defining the bounds of their own communities, defining the problems that they believe need to be addressed, and proposing and pursuing their own methods and solutions to address them. David Beckwith, and Christina Lopez, “Community Organizing: People Power from the Grassroots,” COMM-ORG Papers 3 (1997), http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers97/beckwith.htm.
LAMDA] it’s the LGBT community in San Diego.” Many of our participants were
drawn to their organizations because of the explicitly political stance with which
they operate. For LaBarbera, this means not having to be, or rather to pretend to be,
neutral or objective. As she stated, “It’s a relief not to have to try to do that” in the
context of an archival profession that still regularly demands such a professional
stance in more traditional archival contexts.

Power came to the fore in our participants’ responses regarding concerns of
archival neutrality and objectivity. We did not ask them any direct questions aimed
at eliciting responses about power, neutrality, or objectivity. They brought these
concerns up in descriptions of the significance of their organization’s work and in
recounting their motivations for becoming or continuing to be involved with the
archives. Some participants have formal education and training in archives and are
likely familiar with discourses about professional neutrality and objectivity in pub-
lic history and the archival field. Dang highlighted how there are “power dynamics
embedded in everything we do” as archivists. She credited her ethnic studies
training as raising her own awareness that archives are not “neutral” or “value
free.” She cited the example of processing as a core archival function that has
frequently been described in rather neutral terms as following professional prin-
ciples and standards. But community archivists like Dang see the power relations
inherent in every archival act; she said, “even in that work of processing there’s . . .
a lot of decision making at work.” Processing along with other core archival func-
tions is essential to the ways in which historical and present “narrative[s] gets
constructed.” Carol A. Wells, founder and executive director of the Center for
Political Graphics (CSPG), said archives “can change people’s understanding, opin-
ions and actions, and therefore can change somebody’s life.” For Wells, such an
acknowledgement of the power of archives extends to what materials she shows to
the classes that come in. She always “shows them the My Lai Massacre poster
because this is a part of US history that very few people remember and if you’re
under 50 or 60, you’re not going to know it.” She believes it “absolutely critical to
know . . . this history” and to make students aware that “this is a suppressed part of
our history, a history that is hidden, that is not talked about.” According to Wells,
raising awareness “that this type of event has happened, ensures that it is not
forgotten, and hopefully this knowledge will prevent it from happening again.”
Having an awareness that archives reflect and produce power turns them into sites
that, as Dang said, “can be extremely transformative for social justice reasons.”

We found that many participants saw rejecting archival neutrality and objectivity
as an ethical imperative and that being situated in community archives is what
allows them to practice in politically engaged ways. For the archivists at the CSPG,
which has a mission “to educate and to inspire people to action,” it matters that
archives are “not afraid to be overtly political.” Their activist mission ensures that
their archival work is always political and meant to have material consequences
for “social movements, social justice and human rights.” Being independent organi-
zations afford community archives the ability to quickly respond to contemporary
political concerns. Luz believes that working in a community archive allows her to follow through on an ethical, educational, and activist imperative. Developing public programming on subjects such as racism and police brutality matters because people have to “think twice” when looking at her archives’ materials. She continued, “When you see this picture next to us, a young boy with his Beats headphones on and this is different than the photos you see on the news of his body in the middle of the street, or the photos that they choose to make him look bad or something… it’s humanizing the issue.” We found that community archivists are taking powerful political stances and, in the process, are developing means of ethical archival practice, including outreach and public programming.

**The Role of Community Archives in Activist Movements**

Our interviews revealed that community-based archivists are putting history to work by using their archives and collections to “ignite action and practice” in a range of contemporary struggles for social change and justice. For some archives, such as the CSPG, an engagement at an organizational level with archival activism is nothing new. As Wells said, “What we’re doing now is what we’ve been doing for 26 years, we’ve produced over three dozen traveling poster exhibitions, and every exhibition has a different theme but every single exhibition is about… anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, anti-imperialism… immigrant rights. Every exhibition supports human rights and peace with justice.” The CSPG continues to create theme-based exhibitions to educate and inspire people to action. Wells noted, “the exhibition we’re doing in [the] 2016 year is on the environment. We produced an ecology exhibition in 2003, but now it’s much more critical, much more dangerous… So, we’re updating the exhibition with new posters and a greater sense of urgency.” Wells’s comments highlight the importance of exhibitions as a form of outreach that can be a highly effective means of public education and serve as an inspiration for activism. The CSPG is by no means alone in its efforts to effect social change through community archives. Our sites were engaged in a wide range of causes and were taking up a wide variety of means. In this article, we highlight the roles of community archives in contending with gentrification and in struggles for racial justice.

Our interviews found that community archives in Southern California are on the front lines of fighting, navigating, and ameliorating the manifold changes wrought by gentrification. “Gentrification” was coined by sociologist Ruth Glass to describe the economic dimensions of shifts in the class make-up of urban neighborhoods. Glass writes, “Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupants are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed.”

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62 All quotations in this section are from interviews conducted by the authors, in their possession.

dramatically shifts the population, commerce, and physical attributes of an area. It is often represented as a natural, inevitable, and random process resulting from an uncontrollable economy. However, as geographer Neil Smith demonstrates, gentrification is a calculated process that intentionally and meaningfully benefits developers, real estate companies, speculators, and investors. Gentrification is more than economic processes; it is multifaceted and has deep social implications and impacts that are tied to race, class, gender, and sexuality.64

Gentrification is a major concern for the community archives founders, staff, and volunteers we interviewed. A number of our research sites are contending with gentrification in Los Angeles’ rapidly shifting neighborhoods. Gentrification has already resulted in the mass displacement of communities, particularly lower-income people and communities of color, across the city. For community archives, particularly those formed around geographic regions, these physical movements and changing demographics are an important consideration in their collecting practices and support of community autonomy and values. Bill Watanabe, founder of the Little Tokyo Historical Society, described in detail the gentrification taking place in Downtown Los Angeles and its impact on the society:

Little Tokyo has been here for about 135 years. . . . There’s a lot of gentrification, a lot of change going on in Downtown, so part of the work of the Historical Society is to try to preserve this neighborhood and the history of it so that it doesn’t get lost. Part of the motivation is that there used to be a Little Italy here . . . but most people, even people who have lived here a long time, they don’t know that it was ever here because it’s gone. And there’s hardly any vestige of it at all. So, we don’t want that to happen to Little Tokyo. . . . We want people to know that the Asian-American community has been here. We didn’t all just get off the boat, not that that’s a bad thing. But we’ve contributed to this society. . . . The Historical Society . . . plays a role to try to keep that, the buildings, the stories, the culture alive.

The exclusion and removal of people of color in favor of white people is central to gentrification efforts in Little Tokyo and elsewhere. Gentrification is intimately tied to the preservation of whiteness and its supremacy. As Latino studies scholar and historian Nancy Raquel Mirabal argues, whiteness is rarely named explicitly in “revitalization” strategies, rather it is “embedded within a language of space” and the tacit acknowledgement that “the displacement of populations of color will eventually lead to the redefinition of communities and neighborhoods on the basis of whiteness.” Gentrification builds spaces for “white bodies and desires and, most importantly, consumption, [to] dominate and shape” the urban neighborhood.65

65 Ibid.
Community archives, like the Little Tokyo Historical Society, are at the forefront of critical responses to rampant gentrification in Los Angeles. Data from our interviews suggests a number of ways that records from community archives are being mobilized to produce histories that resist, contest, and counter problematic narratives that marginalize, erase, or otherwise misrepresent persons and neighborhoods. Our interviewees discussed how community archives are vital to sustaining diverse communities and histories. Watanabe sees the archives as working to keep Little Tokyo as a “functioning neighborhood, [and an] ethnic neighborhood.” Community archivists are turning the challenges gentrification presents into fruitful spaces for community building. Watanabe describes the dramatic shifts in the ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds of Little Tokyo’s new residents and how those factors and persons are changing the very “personality” of neighborhood. He is not averse to such changes. Rather, he hopes that the Historical Society can show these newcomers that Little Tokyo is “not like any other place,” making sure they “can appreciate the history of the place and get involved. . . . And they don’t have to be ethnic to do that.” Through outreach to new residents Watanabe seeks to maintain the neighborhood’s character and history “despite all of the possible changes taking place.”

Community archives’ engagement in struggles for racial equality and self-representation of their communities emerged as a key theme in our interviews. Tang spoke of her activist archival work as a forum through which she “push[es] against the status quo for the better.” Citing the example of the recent increase in media portrayals of Asian Americans by Asian Americans that portray the community in complex and diverse ways, Tang argues that this was the “result of people fighting for Asian faces in white places.” She uses this example to contextualize her own efforts at the Chinese American Historical Society and in the archival profession more broadly, saying “I see myself as an activist because I’m trying to put Asian faces or different faces in white archival places.” Tang actively worked through the archives within her local and professional communities to achieve measures of racial equity in representations of Chinese Americans.

At the Compton 125 Historical Society, long-term demographic changes have led to a sense of community, one that is bound by race as well as geographic location. Compton has been subject to rampant misrepresentation in popular media through racialized stereotypes about poverty and violence. As board member Pauline Brown described it the Historical Society’s mission is to:

break it all down, lift all of those layers, remove those curtains that’s hiding the beauty of the city; the agriculture, the fruit that’s here, the people, the sweetness of the land, and let people know that Compton was not founded in the 1970s; it was founded in 1888, and so there’s history from there until now that needs to be told, which a lot of our people, and children, is growing up not knowing that first part of our history, for the first 125 years, but they know a lot about the 1960s later on, or 1970s, ’80s, ’90s.
Knowing their history, Brown believes, is “imperative” so “that the generations that’s coming up start to realize that there’s more to their city and more to the story of where they come from, thus giving them a more greater appreciation for where they come from, where they live.” Another board member, Tony Hicks, said:

We are fighting for a cause, and it’s to educate people. It’s to bring the truth alive, to bring it to the forefront . . . you change the whole demographics or the mindset of how people see you . . . there’s a crossover between activism and archivism, and we are fighting for a great cause, which is to not only just tell the truth, but to peel back layers of lies, deception, unforeseen circumstances that might have altered the mindset of people, and then allowing our children to grow up in an atmosphere where they don’t know what the truth of the matter is, and your children grow up and they share that, and it’s passed on and it’s passed on.

The Compton 125 Historical Society contests the “truth” of damaging and racist narratives about its community by offering new counter-narratives that aspire to showcase the community’s complex and multifaceted history in order to empower community members with that knowledge.

**Activists as Archival Users**

We found that community-based archivists are seeking out and working to serve the needs of activists as archival users in their community archives. In mainstream archival practice and scholarship, discourse is just beginning to emerge on activists as current or potential archival users.66 Our interviewees are at the forefront of thinking about not only how they engage in activism, advocacy, or community organizing through their archival work, but also how they can meet the needs and desires of other activists, advocates, or organizers in their communities. Luz argued that archival work is activist work through the example of how the records in her collection can be deployed through public programming to inform, prove points, and open perspectives regardless of “whether you like it or you agree with it or not.” For her the act of connecting people with resources “is activism . . . [n]ot as loud as somebody actually standing in City Hall and screaming.” But, she continued, if that person is holding materials that “you have in your archive that says a lot about it . . . it’s activism to the fullest.”

Watanabe argued the archival work he is doing at Little Tokyo Historical Society is activist work in and of itself. He then went on to explain the society is also doing activist work through its efforts to “support other activists and their work.” Watanabe elaborated, explaining, “We have a lot of people now trying to preserve Little Tokyo [from commercial development]. . . . I think there’s a very strong activist

mentality and they’ve asked the Historical Society to provide information that would help them...if we can find out, ‘Oh yeah, on this property, this building has some historical value because of this and this and this,’ then [it] may help them to be able to preserve a building or preserve a site.”

Community archives are playing an important role in providing activists with access to archival materials that can be activated, as inspiration, as evidence, or for strategy, to fight gentrification and to preserve the neighborhood’s history and culture. Getting relevant materials into activists’ hands is also what motivates Wells’s work at the CSPG. Wells described how she first understood the importance of political posters and how they work, after watching a young Nicaraguan boy trying to figure out a political poster:

You’re going about your daily life, and all of a sudden, a poster attracts your attention by its placement, its color, its slogan, its graphic, and it pulls you into what’s written, and it makes you think about it. And in this case, and in most cases, it makes you ask a question, “What is this about? What are they trying to say? How can they think that?” Whatever the question is, any time you ask a question, you’re not the same person that you were before you asked the question.

Wells calls moments like these “life-changing.” In order to actually work for social change Wells believes community archives need to do more than just collect materials. When her collection of posters grew too large to store at home, she began looking around for institutions that would use the posters, especially those from Central America, to do the activist, political, and educational outreach work she was already conducting with them. In this process, she realized that there were “a lot of places that would’ve taken care of them... but none that would have used them in an activist way, to help organize around the life and death issues depicted in the posters.” The CSPG was thus founded as a space to connect activists with needed tools, a mission to which it remains committed.

Community archives can and do serve as vital “tools” for activists. Wells conceptualizes the CSPG as “a resource for the activist movement.” Many activists she has encountered need the archives because they

often don’t know the history of the activist movement. Not only is this history usually suppressed, but the documents about it are rarely accessible. For example, in 2011, when the Occupy movement promoted a Move Your Money Day, they didn’t realize that there had been a movement to Move Your Money out of the Bank of America during the Vietnam War. There was organizing to Move Your Money out of Wells Fargo Bank because they were giving loans to the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile in the ’70s. And in the ’80s there was a highly effective effort to Move Your Money out of all the banks that were doing business with South Africa. The Move Your Money concept probably has a much older history, but the posters document 40 or 50 years
of this type of organizing. And a lot of the Occupy activists had no idea, most thought that this was the first time.

Knowing the histories and legacies of activist movements enables current activists to “know that they’re part of a larger movement. It is empowering to learn that you are part of a larger and ongoing struggle for justice.” Similarly, Jen LaBarbera of the LAMDA Archives articulated how it is one of her primary long-term goals to create a better, more give-and-take relationship with the activist community in San Diego. “I want our archives to be a place where they can come and get inspiration for what they want to do in their next big campaign. Or be able to say, ‘Oh well, I know that I see here in 1989 there was this thing that happened with this big raid on public sex and so what can I learn from that to then take that forward and use it for whatever fight is coming? Like this big bathroom bill that’s coming.’” For LaBarbera, adequately meeting the needs of activists is not something the archives can do right now, but getting the archives to that point motivates her work. She said, “Do we have materials here that can help activists and campaign strategists create different messages? Probably. So, I want to be that resource and get us to the point where we can be that resource for activists.” Connecting activists with their histories provides tactics, ideas, and images; as Wells said, it is “a way of recycling good ideas and good design.”

It is clear from our interviews that working with activists has become a significant component of many community archives’ missions, service, and outreach efforts. In discussing the long-term sustainability of the CSPG, Wells considered carefully the activist mission of the archives. If they were to become part of a larger institution, she believes their “activist role ends.” As part of a larger institution their materials would be available for academic research, but they “really won’t be a tool” for activists any longer. She and the board hope to maintain the CSPG’s independence, but understand the temptation of merging with a larger institution in order to have long-term sustainability. Wells’s concerns point to the need for further discussions of community archives’ sustainability and the need to reconceptualize archival users to include activists, advocates, and community organizers in many different types of archives. Community archives are demonstrably working to fulfill a significant and unmet need for local activist communities.67

Discussion

There is an urgent need for public historians, archivists, and cultural heritage scholars to better understand the community archives ecosystems with which they are engaged or may become engaged. Examining the perspectives of those working in community archives illuminates the ways in which history-making is

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67 Further research from this project using semistructured interviews and focus groups at a set of community archives in Southern California addresses the needs of archival users, including activists, advocates, and community organizers.
understood and taking place in these spaces. Our research revealed that community-based archives founders, volunteers, and staff are deeply invested in and are actively working to achieve social change and justice in their communities and in the wider society by putting “history to work in the world.”  

These community archives are and can be mobilized as a tool to make histories that are useful to present conditions. Community archives clearly share with public history a deep commitment to putting history to work in service of communities and urgent social and political concerns.

Whether they understand their work as activism, advocacy, or community organizing, community-based archivists are conceptualizing these archives as a means to challenge injustice, discrimination, and oppression to enable the creation and sustainability of stronger communities and a more just environment for all. Research on community archives has been quick to label all such efforts as activist practices. However, our interviewees demonstrate that these identifications, practices, and their politics are immensely complex. Activism, advocacy, and community organizing are distinct and at times intertwined practices. Both activism and community organizing posit that action is needed to make social change and that there is a need to push against authority to accomplish it. One participant found community organizing a more accurate descriptor for their community archives labor as the focus in community organizing remains always strongly on the community itself. In contrast, in activist movements the community can become secondary to movement itself. A firm conviction that they are doing powerful and important work with real social and material impact is a key reward for community archivists. Such rewards are important particularly to those whose work is frequently undervalued socially and often has little or no financial compensation.

Many of our research sites place a strong emphasis on outreach and educational efforts intended to serve, inspire, and empower those in their own communities and beyond. The various activism, advocacy, and organizing activities that community archivists practice, as motivated by their own experiences and identities, provide these practitioners with a keen awareness of the needs of activists. Their own experiences also likely offer these archivists an source of connection with these communities and contributes to the unique attention we found to considerations of activists as archival users in community archives spaces. Further research is required to address the very real stakes of calling archival work activism within community archives that are faced with precarious funding, resources, and political climates.

70 Wakimoto, Bruce, and Partridge, “Archivist as Activist,” 295.
Like public historians and archival scholars, the community-based archivists we interviewed are invested in questions of neutrality, objectivity, and power in their work. Community archivists are deeply concerned with practicing in an ethical manner. However, we found that community archivists do not see professional credibility, authority, and ethics as tied to the concepts of neutrality or objectivity. Many of our participants rejected the idea of archival neutrality or objectivity altogether as a performance and an impossibility. Participants argued that neutrality can be a dangerous concept, arguing that we need to acknowledge biases and subjectivities rather than gloss over them. Many in community archives see ethical imperatives to doing archival and public history work that is overtly politically engaged. It is this imperative that drew many of them to community archives in the first place and why many of them continue to do this work. Engagement with community archives, therefore, can vitally contribute to archival and historical discourses about production and reproduction of power and its imbalances in the archives and in history-making processes, moving them beyond the limited framework of neutrality and objectivity.

The community archivists we interviewed are finding innovative ways to contribute to pressing contemporary struggles over community representation, racial justice, and gentrification, among other issues, through the deepening of public engagement with the past. They are using their collections to inform, inspire, and empower members of their communities. They are doing so both by working to preserve and promote the long histories of their communities and to build bridges to new residents and community members so that those histories are not lost as their communities grow and change. Community archives are also working actively to uncover lost, marginalized, and misrepresented histories that empower community members to take on new roles and identities as they develop new understandings of themselves and their communities. These sites offer important lessons to other cultural heritage institutions and to those public historians, archivists, and scholars working within and seeking to serve key stakeholders.

Mainstream archival practice and scholarship on archival use frequently focuses on only the most traditional academic users, including historians and other scholars as well as postsecondary students. The community archives we studied are actively working to meet the needs and desires of a much more diverse public. The work being done in community archives to respond to needs of activists is particularly significant. Professional archivists and public historians have not often or substantively considered activists as a cultural heritage constituency. It is not only through their own personal activism, advocacy, or organizing efforts within the archives itself that community archivists are having a meaningful impact. Community archives recognize activists as having particular and significant archival needs and access concerns. As this research has demonstrated, archives can be an important and unique connection for activists to their histories and a source of effective ideas and tactics.
Conclusion

This research furthers the possibilities for more substantial engagement with activism in public history, archival studies, and cultural heritage studies. Community archives have much to contribute to practice and scholarship on activism, outreach, and public engagement with the past. Our research presents a snapshot of community archives and archivists in a single geographic region, Southern California. To this point we have studied only the founders, staff, and volunteers of twelve community archives; much more work needs to be done to understand the users of the materials stewarded by such organizations, particularly by nontraditional users such as community members, artists, and activists. Indeed, the research reported here is just one finding in an ambitious multiyear research project to examine the social, political, and affective impact of community archives in Southern California. We encourage others to undertake similar research to examine if the phenomena we have described are unique to community archives in the United States and/or Southern California, or if they apply more broadly. This examination of activist identities and their influence on archival actors, political engagement and ethical practice, the role of archives in movements for social change and justice, and how to serve activists as archival users marks a starting point in what we hope will become a larger conversation.

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Appendix 1: SemiStructured Interview Protocol

1. What is your title? In what capacity do you work for your organization? What do you hope to accomplish in this role?
2. How long have you worked/volunteered for a community archives? How did you come to be involved in this organization? Why did you think it was important to get involved in this organization?
3. Would you describe yourself as a member of the community whose history your organization documents?
4. Prior to working with your organization, had you looked for members of your community in archives or museums? What did you find? Can you describe this experience? How did you feel? Did you feel these materials were representative of the community you were interested in or a part of?
5. When did you first find out about your organization? What was your first reaction to it? How did first finding materials in the collection make you feel?
6. How does your work with the organization make you feel?
7. Do you feel the records in your organization are representative of the history of the community you are a part of? Why or why not?
8. How would you describe the importance of your organization’s work to someone who has never seen it before?
9. Do you consider yourself to be a community activist? Why or why not? If so, what does involvement with your organization bring to your role as a community advocate or activist?
10. Is there anything we haven’t asked that you would like to discuss?