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Collecting the easily missed stories: digital participatory microhistory and the South Asian American Digital Archive

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This paper defines and delineates the concept of participatory microhistory through an examination of the South Asian American Digital Archive's First Days Project, a community-based online project that solicits short audio, video and written narratives about South Asians immigrants' first day in the United States. First, this paper provides a brief overview of the history of the South Asian American Digital Archive and the First Days Project. Next, this paper highlights three important functions filled by participatory microhistory projects: they generate new records that represent perspectives not commonly found in archives, they convey an important sense of emotion and affect, and they effectively solicit community participation in the archival endeavour. Throughout, this paper explores participatory microhistory projects as tools to harness technology for community empowerment and build support for archives.

Keywords: digital archives; digital participatory microhistory; community archives

A first day is so much more than just one day. The first day in a new country can be full of excitement, nervousness, loss, humor, sadness, anticipation, confusion, and a mixture of many other emotions. One day can encapsulate both what has come before and anticipate what will come after.[1]

Thus begins the introduction to the First Days Project, a community-based online project that solicits brief audio, video and written narratives about South Asian immigrants' first day in the United States. The project is run by the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) (<*http://www.saadigitalarchive.org*>), a community-based online archive that documents, preserves and shares stories about South Asian American experiences in the United States.[2] The organisation seeks to counter the silences, under-representation and misrepresentation of South Asians in mainstream American archives and historical narratives through a publically accessible digital archive that reflects the community's century-old history in the US. The short records generated by the First Days Project represent a very brief window into this immigrant community which,

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taken as individual stories, personalises and complicates the metanarrative of immigration to the US and, taken collectively, reflects the diversity of South Asian immigrant experiences.

The records generated by First Days are not impartial by-products of activity as defined by the dominant Western archival tradition, but rather were created with the explicit goal of inclusion in an archives.[3] While more traditional archivists might deem this an 'artificial' collection, the First Days stories meet more pluralist definitions of records, such as that provided by Shannon Faulkhead, who writes: 'A record is any account, regardless of form, that preserves memory or knowledge of facts and events. A record can be a document, an individual's memory, an image, or a recording. It can also be an actual person, a community, or the land itself.'[4] As the stories generated by First Days preserve memory and knowledge of events, and they are included in a repository explicitly designed to make them accessible across space and time, the project is inherently archival in nature.

This paper defines and delineates the concept of participatory microhistory through an examination of SAADA's First Days Project. First, this paper will provide a brief overview of the history of SAADA and the First Days Project. Next, this paper will highlight three important functions filled by participatory microhistory projects like this one: the representation of groups not usually represented in the archive, the communication of affect and emotion as historically significant categories and the effective solicitation of community participation in the archival endeavour. Finally, this paper will expand on the concept of participatory microhistory as a tool to harness technology for community empowerment.

The primary method used for this paper is action research. Action research consists of 'critical reflection on experience of participating in action', and differs from case study method in the involvement of the researcher in the phenomenon he or she is investigating.[5] As Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemmish point out, this method has been used in archival studies in the collaborative development of archival projects between researchers and practitioners, as in Terry Cook's work on macroappraisal at the National Archives of Canada.[6] The first author of this paper is primarily a researcher (though also involved in archival activity) while the second author of this paper is primarily a practitioner (though also involved in research). In conducting this action research project, the authors of this paper hope to improve practice – not only their own practice as archivists for the South Asian American Digital Archive, but also the practice of others, as they hope this research inspires others to develop their own participatory microhistory projects. Through this research the authors also aim to reflect critically on the First Days Project, pointing out its successes as well as areas in need of improvement moving forward.

SAADA and the First Days Project

First, some brief background information on SAADA is necessary. SAADA is a US-based online community archival repository that the two authors co-founded in 2008. At that time, we were both working at the University of Chicago; Mallick was the Outreach Coordinator for the Center for Southern Asian Studies, Caswell was the Assistant Bibliographer for Southern Asia. We did an assessment of archival materials related to South Asian American history and found that no single repository was systematically collecting these materials and that none even had South Asian American history as a collecting priority. We sensed an urgent need; with much of the material history from the early twentieth century in the possession of children and grandchildren

of first-generation immigrants who lack the capacity to preserve them, many of the South Asians who came after American immigration policy opened up in the Immigration & Nationality Act of 1965 aging, and many of the early community websites and born-digital materials from the 1990s disappearing, we felt that much of this history would be lost had someone not intervened. Furthermore, we sensed a real need for these materials to remain under community control and not be subsumed under larger institutional repositories, where they could be undervalued, get lost in the shuffle or misinterpreted. We also knew that we didn't have the financial resources or stability to create a physical space where the materials could be housed permanently.

So what do a librarian and community organiser do when faced with this dilemma? We pitched in $100 each, bought some server space, found a friend with experience managing non-profit finances to help us out, incorporated as a nongovernmental organisation and created the South Asian American Digital Archive as an independent, online-only, community-based repository. Five years later, SAADA holds the world's largest publicly accessible collection of materials documenting South Asian American experiences and remains the only non-profit organisation working nationally to document, preserve and provide access to the rich history of South Asians in the United States. We have a particular emphasis on collecting materials related to early South Asian immigration to the US, to anti-South Asian race riots, to labour, student and religious organisations, to political involvement, and to artists and intellectuals. We collect materials that are not just celebratory in nature, but reflect the diverse range of South Asian American experiences, from pamphlets created by Punjabi labourers organising against British rule in the 1910s to webzines created by Muslim punk bands in the 2010s. Through our collection priorities, we explicitly aim to counter the myth of South Asians as a model minority.[7] In this regard, we see ourselves not just as archivists, but anti-racist activists working towards a more inclusive society.

We define South Asian American as broadly as possible and take a transnational, regional approach. Our collection reflects records created by or about people residing in the United States who trace their heritage to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the many South Asian diaspora communities across the globe.[8] This later point – the many South Asian diaspora communities across the globe – is key to the inclusion of immigrants of South Asian descent from places like Trinidad and Fiji, where many Indians migrated as indentured labourers in the nineteenth century. Some of the descendants of these indentured labourers have migrated to the United States, forming substantial Indo-Caribbean communities (and to a lesser extent, Indo-Fijian communities) in places like Queens, New York. While these 'secondary diaspora' communities are often excluded from or overlooked by other South Asian American organisations, SAADA makes a concerted effort to include them in our collections.[9]

We are radically focused on access (in the sense that access is the primary archival service we provide) and still have no physical public location; we digitise historic materials and collect born-digital sources, archivally describe them using culturally appropriate terminology that the community itself uses, link them to related materials in the archives and make them freely accessible online to anyone in the world with an Internet connection. After digitisation, the physical materials remain with the individual, family, organisation or repository from which they originated. We currently have 1600 unique digital items in our collection and the archive is growing by the day.

SAADA is governed by a five-member board made up of two archivists, two professors whose work focuses on Asian American studies, and a non-profit development

professional. Caswell is the only board member who is not of South Asian descent. We also have an amazing group of volunteers nationwide who help us track down, digitise and describe materials, as well as pro bono lawyers who helped us fill out the incorporation paperwork, craft our deed of gift and address copyright issues. Mallick is the organisation's only paid staff and we are in the middle of a fundraising campaign that aims to raise enough money to ensure his employment on a fulltime basis and hire additional staff. Fundraising is our biggest challenge, and, like many community organisations, we are trying to find the balance between independence and sustainability.[10] We use our website, online magazine, Facebook page, Twitter account and email list to update the public about our activities. SAADA board members have also presented at more than 40 events around the country, including numerous community forums across the US in which we solicit input on what our collection priorities should be and address any concerns or questions community members might have.

As an organisation run by professionally trained archivists, preservation is important to us, but we are also realistic and acknowledge that preservation is contingent. We digitise materials with the highest quality scanners using the Library of Congress's digitisation guidelines when possible, but we have also scanned materials using low-quality handheld scanners when individuals would not let their beloved grandfather's papers out of their homes. Adhering to the LOCKSS principle, we keep several back-up servers in cities across the US, as well as storing data in the cloud. We are committed to sound archival practice and the proper stewardship of digital materials into the future; we are also realists working with a limited budget and a volunteer staff. We had more than 153,000 unique visitors in 2013; this nearly triples the figure of 54,000 from the previous year. We are still working on ways to evaluate who uses SAADA and how, and how to gauge the level of engagement with the materials the collection and track our impact. Figuring out how best to measure our success is one of our biggest challenges, particularly given our pressing need to build ongoing relationships with funders.

Although SAADA is a unique organisation dealing with the particularities of one community's history, we have been inundated with requests from other community groups seeking advice on how to digitise and provide access to archival materials. It is clear from these requests that many community organisations are also seeking to take control of the means by which their own histories are documented, but many of these groups lack the infrastructure and expertise to harness the power of technology to increase community participation in archival collecting. SAADA hopes to serve as a model for these community groups.

In June 2013, SAADA launched its First Days Project. The project presents a departure from SAADA's previous efforts digitising pre-existing records in that it seeks to generate new audio, visual and textual records that record the experiences of South Asian immigrants about their first day in the United States. Community members generate many of these records themselves – either by recording their own narratives or interviewing others using video cameras, cellphones or personal computers. They then directly upload these files to SAADA; Mallick approves all files before they are made available to the public. The records that result are short in scope, limited to three minutes for audio and video, 300 words for text. SAADA's aim was to show the breadth of the South Asian American immigrant experience rather than explore any single narrative in depth. While this brevity limits what can be conveyed in each record, it also allows participants to condense their experiences into major themes and prevents them from being overwhelmed by pressure to create lengthy contributions. At the time of writing (December 2013), there are 89 stories included in the First Days Project.

Entries have reflected the national, regional and religious diversity of the community. First Days stories have ranged from a video interview with Basdeo Mangal, a Hindu priest who came from Guyana in 1996, to a textual narrative written by Rashna Batliwala Singh, who came from Mumbai to attend Mount Holyoke College in 1970, to a video narrative in American Sign Language recorded by Shaji Chacko, who came to the US from Hyderabad at age 11 in 1983.

Yet despite the diversity of these narratives, including narratives that reflect socioeconomic diversity and diversity of immigration status has proved to be more of a struggle. Barriers of spare time and access to technology prevent many working-class immigrants from participating. This has been partially mitigated by SAADA volunteers conducting targeted interviews with working-class immigrants.[11] Furthermore, undocumented immigrants may not want to participate for fear that participation could attract unwanted attention from the Department of Homeland Security. We have offered participants the option of remaining anonymous, and indeed, the two anonymous entries we currently have are from recent immigrants from Pakistan who feel speaking candidly about their experiences may have a negative impact on their lives if attributed. Across all of the entries, we are keenly aware that participants are constructing narratives for public consumption and may leave out details that they wish to remain private.

Since its launch in June, the First Days Project section of the SAADA website has had nearly 18,000 unique page views (as of December 2013), representing nearly 10% of all total page views on the entire SAADA website in the same period. We've also observed that First Day stories are shared widely through social media and have heard anecdotally from a number of members of our user community about their excitement about the project.

First Days as digital participatory microhistory

While SAADA's First Days Project reflects the historical, social and cultural particularities of a specific community, the idea of using the Internet to generate short records directly from community members for inclusion in archives is not limited to this particular project or community. Indeed, we see First Days as a digital participatory microhistory project, which we define as any programmatic activity that uses Internet-based technologies to encourage community members to directly create short records for inclusion in an archives. Four elements are key to this definition: first, the project must use interactive digital technologies; second, it must facilitate the generation of new records directly by users themselves; third, these records must document some past or ongoing event or events, and finally, the records generated from such participation must be included in an archives where they are subject to archival interventions, such as preservation and description, and made publicly accessible. This definition builds on significant historiographical work on the concept of microhistory, updating participatory microhistory for the Internet age.[12] SAADA's status as a community archives also positions the First Days project as a community history project, defined by Thomson as 'history about a particular community, however defined, created in partnership with members of that community, and for the benefit of that community'.[13] Yet while SAADA is a community-based archives, participatory microhistory projects can be administered by institutions of all types, including government, university and corporate archives.[14]

Though the term 'digital participatory microhistory' is proposed by the authors of this paper, neither the type of project it describes, nor the underlying concepts, are

unique to SAADA or to the First Days Project. Indeed, for the past decade archivists and scholars of archival studies have investigated ways in which Internet technologies can be used to increase user participation in the archival endeavour. A growing stream of archival scholarship has addressed the role of emerging Web 2.0 technologies in opening archival appraisal and description for user participation. Magia Krause and Elizabeth Yakel proposed harnessing digital platforms for participatory archival description.[15] Similarly, Huvila suggested archivists take advantage of digital technologies to encourage broader participation, experiment in decentralised curation and adopt a 'radical user orientation'.[16] In a rare overlap between the community archives and digital archives literature, Shilton and Srinivasan proposed to harness Web 2.0 technologies to encourage community participation in archival appraisal.[17] Yet, despite the theoretical importance of Shilton and Srinivasan's South Asia Web project and Krause and Yakel's Polar Bear Expedition 'second generation' finding aid, neither of these projects has involved user generation of records, nor have they proved to be sustainable in the long term.

By contrast, the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University has developed several web-based projects that fit the proposed definition of digital participatory microhistory. The Center's September 11 Digital Archive and its Hurricane Digital Memory Bank both allow users to directly upload text, audio, video and photographic files that document their experiences on or responses to major historical events.[18] The Center's Bracero History Archives also allows users to contribute a brief textual narrative about the migrant labourer program, which is then made publically available on the site.[19] Similarly, Moving Here, a project organised by the National Archives of the United Kingdom that involved 30 archives, libraries and museums from 2004 to 2007, created a platform whereby immigrants could directly contribute written narratives about their immigration experiences.[20] Although there are many other online projects that solicit user-generated content, very few of these projects have long-term preservation commitments.

Both SAADA's First Days Project and those of the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media take as precedent and are inspired by the ethos of oral history projects documenting twentieth-century American social movements. While many cultures have relied on oral transmission of information about the past for thousands of years, there was a distinct surge in interest in using oral history interviewing to document the lives of everyday people by American historians after World War II.[21] The popularity of oral history grew in the 1960s and 1970s, as historians like Howard Zinn and Studs Terkel called for greater academic attention to the historical importance of everyday people.[22] Participatory microhistories are logical extensions of these oral history projects in that they validate the historical importance of the lived experience of everyday people.

As creators of the First Days Project, we were also inspired by Helen Samuels' work on documentation strategy in the sense that we thought it was our duty as archivists to 'intervene in the records creation process' in order to document an under-documented community.[23] We agree wholeheartedly with Samuels' assertion that 'the concern is less what does exist than what should exist', and see First Days as a first step in envisioning what records should exist for the South Asian American community.[24] While inspired by both oral history projects and documentation strategy, we hope that participatory microhistory projects take the logic of such approaches a step further by encouraging everyday people to document their own experiences, eliminating (or at least diminishing the role of) intermediaries such as the historian taking the interview

or the archivist appraising the record, and ensuring widespread access of such histories by everyday users through the Internet.[25]

What participatory microhistories do

Now that we have defined digital participatory microhistory and described some pre-cursors and examples, this article will now explicate their relevance. First, we argue that digital participatory microhistories can fill in gaps in the historic record by generating documentation of groups that are under-represented or misrepresented in archives. Secondly, by documenting the emotional aspects of historical events, participatory microhistories reveal the ways in which affect can be read as a historically significant category. And thirdly, participatory microhistories effectively get communities involved in archival collecting, breaking down barriers between archives and communities.

Participatory microhistories can be effective at generating records from groups whose histories are under-represented or misrepresented in archives. As anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes, not all events are recorded and not all records make their way into archives.[26] Power dictates who has the ability, literacy level, time and means to create written records; women, the poor, and people of colour have, for many generations in the US, been unable, unlikely or less likely than dominant groups to create written records in the first place. Furthermore, when such records do exist, they have been undervalued and ignored by archivists, who have been and still are disproportionately drawn from positions of privilege.[27] Traditionally, archivists have neither actively gone out to recruit donors of materials from marginalised groups, nor have they emphasised the importance of such records in their appraisal decisions. The result is a horribly lopsided archival record that amplifies the voices of the powerful and further silences the marginalised.[28]

Participatory microhistory projects are one way that archivists can actively counter these silences. By soliciting records from marginalised groups and using Internet technologies to make such records widely accessible, archivists can ensure that at least some of these previously silenced voices will be heard.[29] While such projects are not a panacea that will cure all archival imbalances, they do fill important gaps where no previous material records existed or, when material records did exist, they would not have been deemed worthy of archivation.[30] In this way, participatory microhistory projects are concrete measures that archivists can take to give voice to marginalised groups.

The ability to give voice to those previously silent in the historic record was one of the prime motivating factors behind the First Days Project. As a community-based archive focused on collecting, preserving and sharing the records of South Asian Americans, we considered immigration and immigrant experiences to be top collecting priorities. Yet, the pre-existing material records surrounding immigration consist largely of bureaucratic documents like passports, visas and plane tickets. If we were going to rely solely on these administrative records to tell the stories of South Asian immigrants to the US, what stories would we be telling and what would we be missing? Whose voices would we be privileging? At whose expense?

Bureaucratic records are created by bureaucrats; they do not (at least not straightforwardly) reflect the voices of the subjects whose lives they seek to administer.[31] Soliciting participatory microhistories fills in this gap by generating records that give voice in the archives to those who have no voice in the pre-existing historical record.

In this way, it constitutes a form of archival activism in which archivists can generate records to counter silences rife in the historical record.

Here, let us provide just a few examples of First Days stories that capture voices that would otherwise go unheard. CM Naim came to San Francisco from Kolkata, India in 1957 at age 21. Naim's luggage – which contained his passport, his degrees, 25 US dollars (his only American money) and directions on how to get to the International House at the University of California, Berkeley, where Naim would stay – was lost at the airport. Alone, confused and exhausted, Naim sat down and started crying. A stranger offered to help, tracked down the woman who had accidentally taken Naim's bag and convinced a cab driver to take Naim to retrieve the bag. After retrieving the bag, Naim narrates:

> I then asked him [the cab driver] if he could take me straight to the International House in Berkeley. It was on the other side of the Bay, and there were tolls to pay. I showed him the money I had. 'Was it enough?' He nodded, and away we went. Gradually, my senses crept back into me. I began to see the sights, hear the noises, feel the air blowing in. And then suddenly a whole new sense of confidence filled me.

> There we were, on that amazing bridge, with vast stretches of sun-lit blue water spread underneath us. A powerful machine was speeding me ever so smoothly to a destination that now seemed so certain. The cab no doubt had a roof, but it felt as if there was no barrier of any kind between this world and me. An openness prevailed. The new world held no terror for me any more. I had witnessed a miracle, wrought by a total stranger who had helped me when I had no one to turn to and lost all hope. I gained that day a kind of confidence and feeling of trust that has come to my rescue many a time since then. Not that I have not despaired since that day. I've hit the bottom several times. I have been lonely and angry and terrified, and worse. I have experienced exploitation and racial prejudice. But thanks to that day I have always managed not to blame some anonymous America for my troubles.[32]

In this brief narrative, Naim eloquently communicates the highs and lows of being an immigrant, and provides a perspective on South Asian American immigrant experiences that are not commonly found in archives. His is not a story that could be effectively communicated through administrative records. Naim's first day is much more than his passport, more than his boarding pass, more than the directions he carried. Without Naim telling the story in his own words, we (and future users of archives) would miss the context that might make those administrative records worthy of archiving. We would miss the detail that can only come from a first-person account. We would also miss an essential component of immigrant experiences, the despair and the redemption that are often two sides of the same coin. Without the First Days Project, Naim's story would likely never be included in an archives.

Similarly, without First Days, the story of Bernard Despot, an immigrant of Indian descent who came from Port of Spain, Trinidad to Queens, New York in 1989, would likely never wind up in an archives. In his three-minute video narrative, he recounts:

> My name is Bernard Despot and I am 60 years old. I am also a citizen of the United States and I have to say that this did not come easy. I came here in the year 1989. I was about 38 years old. I worked very very hard for everything that I have but the United States has given me that opportunity. I am a resident of Queens [New York] where I have lived since the time I first came here … I achieved a lot. I have seen my three children go through college. I myself, have taken the opportunity to get my GED [high school diploma equivalency] … It is all a challenging process. It is very tough. I have worked many places, as a

dishwasher …, as a parking attendant, I have driven buses for Greyhound, and finally I am working as a shuttle driver for the Hilton Hotel. I have worked a lot of places to achieve the things that I want. The successes that I have came with very, very hard work.

I remember when I first came to this country, one of the first things I remember and I will always remember is the street vendors. I remember the souvlaki and the gyros, it was around Christmas time, and I can get the smell of that food in my nose. And even now, every time it's Christmas, I get that smell, and it brings me right back to my first time in the United States …[33]

For Despot, being an immigrant has meant hard work, sacrifice and watching his children succeed in ways he could not, but it has also meant encountering the strange smell of other immigrants' foods. This visceral detail, especially when contextualised within Despot's narrative of hard work, conveys important historical information about what it feels like to start a new life far away from home.

Yet, like Naim's story, Despot's would not likely be deemed worthy of archiving by most mainstream repositories. Despot is, after all, a working-class immigrant of colour who did not directly play a role in any major historical event. While each short individual account may not seem historically significant, taken together they are 'evidence of us' to use Sue McKemmish's apt phrase, conveying crucial information about what it was like to be a South Asian American immigrant.[34] Without SAADA, this evidence of us would go uncollected.

Furthermore, as Naim's and Despot's stories confirm, the participatory microhistories generated by the First Days Project reveal the importance of affect in ways that administrative records do not. For the immigrants whose stories are recorded through the First Days Project, their experiences leaving home, travelling halfway around the world and building a new life in a strange country are much more than their visa stamps; they are narratives animated by sorrow, joy, pride, excitement and confusion.

Loneliness is a common thread in the First Days Project. Participant Ali Khataw arrived in Fayetteville, Arkansas from Karachi, Pakistan in 1980. In his audio interview with Mallick, he said:

But the first day when I arrived it was... I don't know what to say... it was... very lonely. You don't have the people that you have been growing up with. Your friends, your parents, your sister, brother. And then you come over and then suddenly it's a different environment and you don't have a single friend. I mean zero. Zilch. You're starting with a blank slate. And I create friends very easily and all that, but loneliness was the number one... if you want me to put it in one word... initially the first day was loneliness because you don't have anybody to count on, you don't know who to ask for advice and you don't know if they're going to give you the right advice. It was very interesting. It was different. I think helpless and loneliness were the two words that I would put the experience into the first day. Now... ask me about after a month? Oh my god, I was a party animal![35]

Khataw's interview is accompanied by a snapshot of him in a dorm room, looking every bit the party animal part.

Loneliness was also a key theme of Tahrat Naushaba Shahid's written entry. Shahid travelled from Dhaka, Bangladesh to South Hadley, Massachusetts in 1997 to attend college. She wrote:

My first night, once I got there and we'd dropped off my things and I got out my bedsheets and I was settled in, it was pitch-dark outside the window and completely quiet.

> I kind of understood the term 'thundering silence' for the first time. 'Cause, where I grew up, I used to hear rickshaws ting-tinging outside and prostitutes fighting and things, you know? And now, nothing. Just quiet! I think I cried that first night [laughs] – I'm pretty sure I cried, like, all night that night. It was pretty scary. It was, oddly, the loneliest I've ever felt because, having grown up in such a big, busy city, and I was 17. So, that was the first culture-shock moment.[36]

Shahid's entry is accompanied by her initial US visa bearing a 'Cancelled without Prejudice' stamp. The official government record serves as a visual to supplement and corroborate the text, but it is clear the important record is the narrative.

All four of the First Day stories highlighted here are animated by emotion. Naim's despair and elation, Despot's pride, and Khataw's and Shahid's loneliness each convey essential elements of immigrant experiences that would go undocumented if we were to rely solely on official records.[37] The emotional encounters with the archive enabled by participatory microhistories connect people to the past in ways that administrative records cannot. A classroom full of college first years cares little about a cancelled visa, but a videotaped narrative that invokes pride, sacrifice and the smell of gyros brings history to life; immigrants are no longer faceless masses, but become real people with hopes and fears to whom students can relate. In this way, emotion becomes a teaching tool, a way into the archive for new groups of users. Furthermore, even scholarly users of archives have expressed increasing interest in the historical significance of emotion over the past three decades. For scholars influenced by 'the affective turn' such as Eve Kosofsky Sedwick and Sara Ahmed, emotions are not just archival entry points, but a primary object of study.[38] Enabled by participatory microhistories, the expression of emotions conveys powerful information about the past not commonly found in official records.

Finally, participatory microhistory projects enable archives to effectively solicit community participation in the archival endeavour. Before SAADA launched the First Days Project, we actively solicited archival materials from South Asian American communities through in-person forums across the country. We also solicit materials through a prominent 'contribute' button on our website, which outlines our collection development policy and provides an email address where potential donors of materials can contact us. We have also been very successful at getting community members involved through SAADA's Facebook page, through which we have solicited translations of materials in South Asian languages, contextual information about photographic records and questions to ask the subjects of oral history interviews. In addition to the success of these outreach efforts, the First Days Project has generated unprecedented community interest. Not only has the project generated more than 80 entries thus far, it has moreover proven to be an effective way to engage SAADA's existing user community and engage new constituents. During a recent visit to Austin, Texas for the grand opening of the Asian American Resource Center, Mallick recorded nearly 15 first-day stories from local community members. These are 15 new people who are now invested in SAADA's mission.

First Days has also generated a great deal of interest from the media. On 29 August 2013, the project was featured on Public Radio International's show 'The World', and listeners were encouraged to call in to share their own stories.[39] 'You could easily miss American stories like these if nobody was around to collect them', the story concluded.[40] The same story was later rebroadcast on the BBC World Service program 'Boston Calling'. Five major Indian American publications – *India West*, *Desi Talk*,

IndoAmerican News, *News India Times* and *India Abroad* – ran features on the project, as did four newspapers in India, including *The Times of India*.[41] While the SAADA board originally intended First Days to be a limited, six-week project, the overwhelming response we have gotten from the community and the press has led us to continue the project indefinitely.

As SAADA's experience has shown, participatory microhistory projects demonstrate how archives value the everyday experiences of community members, and in turn, get community members to value the archives. In this way, participatory microhistories forge symbiotic bonds that are crucial to other aspects of archival practice such as collecting records, promoting use and fundraising. A community member who feels his or her story has a place in the archives is more likely to donate physical materials, tell other community members to use the archives and make a monetary gift. These symbiotic bonds are especially important for community-based archives trying to represent diverse voices, as such projects can be designed to target groups who are, at present, under-represented in the archives. Furthermore, participatory microhistory projects effectively convey that archives are about sharing stories. When we try to explain to community members that archives collect records and records are evidence of activity, their eyes glaze over, they get despondent and they change the subject. When we explain to community members that archives are about sharing stories with people in the present to increase understanding in the future, they get excited, they become engaged and they understand the importance of archival work.

Conclusion: Using technology for community participation

As we have discussed in this article, digital participatory microhistory projects harness the power of the Internet to solicit and distribute short records of archival significance. These projects can successfully contribute to archives by filling in historical gaps, by documenting emotion and affect, and by directly involving community members in the archival endeavour.

Above all, digital participatory microhistory projects reveal how widespread technologies such as the Internet, word-processing software and built-in recording devices can be used to enrich archives and, in turn, empower the communities whose histories they seek to document and preserve. While digital divides still present significant challenges (particularly to representing poor and working-class people), commonplace technologies can be liberatory tools for archival activism, if only archives actively engage them.

Over the past few decades, archives have been plagued by problems: historic and current imbalances in power and representation in the records we collect, increasing pressure to digitise records despite decreasing fiscal support and widespread disinterest in, mistrust of and/or misunderstanding of archives. In response, archivists have done an inadequate job demonstrating our value to society. While digital participatory microhistory projects will not entirely solve these significant challenges, they do represent a small way to get communities to care about archives. And caring, we hope, is the first step in building strong relationships that can ensure that archives remain meaningful institutions in the future.

Notes

1. SAADA, 'First Days: FAQ', available at <*http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/firstdays/faq*>, accessed 22 October 2013.
2. SAADA defines South Asia very broadly; the collection reflects the vast range of experiences of those in the United States who trace their heritage to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the many South Asian diaspora communities across the globe.
3. For a discussion of impartiality rooted in the dominant Western archival tradition, see Terry Eastwood, 'What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?' *Archivaria*, no. 37, Spring 1994, pp. 122–130.
4. Shannon Faulkhead, 'Connecting Through Records: Narratives of Koorie Victoria', *Archives & Manuscripts*, vol. 37, no. 2, p. 67.
5. A Gilliland and S McKemmish, 'Building an Infrastructure for Archival Research', *Archival Science*, vol. 4, nos 3–4, 2004, p. 184.
6. Ibid. For an example, see T Cook, 'Appraisal Methodology: Macro-Appraisal and Functional Analysis. Part A: Concepts and Theory' and 'Part B: Guidelines for Performing an Archival Appraisal on Government Records', 2002, available at <*http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/government/disposition/007007-1035-e.html*>, accessed 22 October 2013.
7. The American Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 gave preference to highly educated immigrants, resulting in a 'brain drain' from South Asia to the US, and the common American stereotyping of Indians as quiet, hard-working, apolitical professionals. For more information see Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2000.
8. 'South Asia' emerged as a term during the Cold War and reflects the interests of US military intelligence in the region. It is by no means meant to convey political coherence; many of the nation-states included under the rubric of South Asia have since engaged in armed conflict. While many first-generation immigrants from the region are more likely to identify along nationalist, religious, linguistic or regional lines, the second generation is likely to identify as South Asian American. For more information on the complicated issue of identity among South Asian Americans, and the role archives like SAADA play in identity formation, see Michelle Caswell, 'Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives', in D Daniel and A S Levi (eds), *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U. S. and Canada*, Litwin Books, Los Angeles, 2014, forthcoming.
9. For more information on Indians in Trinidad, see Viranjini Munasinghe, *Callaloo or Tossed Salad? East Indians and the Cultural Politics of Identity in Trinidad,* Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2001.
10. A Flinn, M Stevens and E Shepherd, 'Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy, and the Mainstream', *Archival Science*, vol. 9, nos 1–2, 2009, pp. 71–86.
11. Kamal Badhey's interview with Basdeo Mangal is a good example of this. SAADA, 'First Days: Basdeo Mangal', available at <*http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/firstdays/story/3019*>, accessed 22 October 2013.
12. The term 'microhistory' has been used by historians for at least the past 40 years. See Carlo Ginzburg, 'Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About it', in *Threads and Traces*: *True False Fictive*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012, pp. 193–214.
13. Alistair Thomson, 'Oral History and Community History in Britain: Personal and Critical Reflections on Twenty-Five Years of Continuity and Change', *Oral History*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2008, p. 97.
14. While definitions of community are contextual and shifting, Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd define community as 'any manner of people who come together and present themselves as such, and a "community archive" is the product of their attempts to document the history of their commonality' (p. 75).
15. M Krause and E Yakel, 'Interaction in Virtual Archives: The Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections Next Generation Finding Aid', *American Archivist*, vol. 70, no. 2, 2007, pp. 282–314.

16. I Huvila, 'Participatory Archive: Towards Decentralised Curation, Radical User Orientation, and Broader Conextualisation of Records Management', *Archival Science*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2008, pp. 15–36.
17. K Shilton and R Srinivasan, 'Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections', *Archivaria*, no. 63, Spring 2007, pp. 87–101.
18. Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, '911 Digital Archive', available at <*http://911digitalarchive.org*>, accessed 22 October 2013. Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, 'Hurricane Archive', available at <*http://www.hurricanearchive.org*>, accessed 22 October 2013.
19. Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, 'Bracero Archive', available at <*http://braceroarchive.org*>, accessed 22 October 2013.
20. National Archives of the United Kingdom, 'Moving Here', available at <http://www.moving-here.org.uk>, accessed 17 December 2013.
21. A more detailed history of the oral history movement is beyond the scope of this paper. See Donald A Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, pp. 19–46.
22. H Zinn, 'Secrecy, Archives and the Public Interest', *The Midwestern Archivist*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1977, pp. 14–26. Studs Terkel, *Working*, Pantheon, New York, 1972.
23. HW Samuels, 'Who Controls the Past', *American Archivist*, vol. 49, no. 2, Spring 1986, p. 122.
24. Ibid., p. 120.
25. We do not mean to imply that the archivist has no role in participatory microhistory projects, but rather this role shifts from appraiser to conceiver of the project, designer of the system that enables the project and allows access to it, and promoter and advocate of the project.
26. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon, Boston, 1995.
27. Zinn, pp. 14–26. A recent survey conducted by the Society of American Archivists revealed that 89% of archivists in the US self-identify as white. Society of American Archivists, 'Membership Needs & Satisfaction Survey', available at <http://files.archivists.org/membership/surveys/saaMemberSurvey-2012r2.pdf>, accessed 13 December 2013.
28. Ibid., RS Carter, 'Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and the Power in Silence', *Archivaria*, no. 61, Spring 2006, pp. 215–233.
29. Thomson, pp. 95–104.
30. By 'archivation', I mean deemed worthy of inclusion in an archives. V Harris, 'Genres of the Trace: Memory, Archives and Trouble', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2012, pp. 147–157.
31. There has been much discussion of late about reading against the grain of bureaucratic records to uncover the voices of the enslaved, colonised or otherwise marginalised. See J Bastian, 'Reading Colonial Records Through an Archival Lens: The Provenance of Place, Space, and Creation', *Archival Science*, vol. 6, nos 3–4, 2006, pp. 267–284. See also C Hurley, 'Parallel Provenance: What if Anything is Archival Description?' *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2005, pp. 110–145.
32. SAADA, 'First Days: C.M. Naim', available at <*http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/firstdays/story/3187*>, accessed 22 October 2013.
33. SAADA, 'First Days: Bernard Despot', available at <http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/firstdays/story/3182>, accessed 22 October 2013.
34. S McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 24, no. 1, May 1996, pp. 28–45. See also S McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me... in a Digital World', in *I, Digital: Personal Collections in the Digital Era*, Christopher A Lee (ed.), Society of American Archivists, Chicago, 2011, pp. 115–148.
35. SAADA, 'First Days: Ali Khataw', available at <*http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/firstdays/story/2854*>, accessed 22 October 2013.
36. SAADA, 'First Days: Tahrat Naushaba Shahid', available at <*http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/firstdays/story/3063*>, accessed 22 October 2013.
37. While such vivid descriptions of emotion might have been written down in letters sent back home, it is unlikely that such letters would wind up in archives, particularly in archives in the US.

38. See Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity,* Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2003 and Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Routledge, New York, 2004. For a broader sweep, see Melissa Gregg and Gregory J Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2010.
39. The World, 'First Days: South Asian Americans Share Their Stories of Arrival in America', available at <*http://www.theworld.org/2013/08/first-days-south-asian-americans-share-stories-of-their-first-days-in-america/*>, accessed 22 October 2013.
40. Ibid.
41. For a full listing of press coverage, visit SAADA, 'Press', available at <*http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/press*>, accessed 22 October 2013.