

Archiving Undocumented Central Americans: A Series of Considerations for Archival Actors

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My earliest encounters with archives were in the comfort of family homes. These archives were collections of records that included letters, photographs, VHS tapes, publications, and other documents. My grandmother in Guatemala perhaps had the largest collection to my knowledge. As the mother of 10 children who had six of her sons clandestinely migrate and settle in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C. by the mid-1990s, my grandmother collected records, especially photographs and VHS tapes, adamantly. The photographs and VHS tapes mostly date from the 1980s onward and document smiling sons with their wives and newly born children, as well as reunions with friends and family a part of a growing diaspora in the region. All of the documentary records let her know that her children and her growing family was largely doing okay in a faraway foreign nation. My father, her eldest, was the same way. He meticulously kept records, wherever he could: in dressers and desks, under beds, and other locations. Among his things were not only precious photographs and VHS tapes, but also his counterfeit social security card, a copy of his deportation order, tax records, and a number of other government-adjacent documents.

The urgency that underlined both my grandmother and father's archival practice was illegality. Illegality is the condition of legally excluding a subject that is physically within a nation-state.¹ "Migrant 'illegality,' Nicholas De Genova says, "is lived through a palpable sense

¹ Nicholas P. De Genova, "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31, no. 1 (2002): 419–47, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.31.040402.085432>; Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible*

of deportability, which is to say the possibility of deportation, the possibility of being removed from the space of the nation-state.”² Although undocumented migrants consistently experience the threat of deportation, some remain years, decades, and lifetimes without returning to their countries of origin. These significant gaps of time are the result of migrant illegality, preventing in-person connectivity. What I am attempting to illustrate is how illegality not only affects the undocumented migrant, but also their kin. My grandmother, unsure of when she would see her children, in-laws, and grandchildren, ensured she kept records that reminded her of us. My father, on the other hand, kept records for affective purposes, but also because he needed them to navigate his day-to-day—obtain employment, access personal transportation, housing, and so on—as a (formerly) undocumented Ladino from Guatemala. For undocumented migrants and their families, archives are therefore not only personal but excruciatingly political.

As actors within a wide-range of archival repositories become increasingly interested in archiving—that is collecting, assessing, and preserving—undocumented Central American histories, we must consider *how* it is done and its sequential implications. In the name of representation, many archival actors a part of, or adjacent to, institutions like archivists, artists, journalists, and scholars among others, seek to diversify acquisitions.³ However, we may be doing more harm than good if we are not attentive to the people we are collecting from and about. I use the collective pronoun “we” in this instance, because I am uniquely situated as an “outsider within.” Patricia Hill Collins explains that “outsider within” is a marginal status held

Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

² De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life,” 439.

³ I use the term archival actors to denote individuals who may or may not have professional training in archival science, but are broadly collecting, assessing, and preserving records within an institution or for institutional recognition. This term allows us to think of archiving beyond traditional repositories.

by Black women in academic settings.⁴ That is to say, Black women are simultaneously afforded access to white institutions because of their credentials, while being held as outsiders because of their social position as Black women. Similarly, I am an outsider within as a woman of color and the daughter of formerly undocumented immigrants from Central America, working in and alongside academic institutions. At the same time, I am not, nor was I ever, undocumented myself. I grew up in a mixed-status household and was profoundly shaped by the weight of illegality, but cannot speak directly to the experiences of undocumented Central Americans. To that effect, I have a distinctive position from which I approach the archiving of undocumented Central Americans. Nonetheless, my proximity brings me to the archives of undocumented Central Americans with an ethic of care that mirrors the practice undocumented Central Americans have utilized to archive their own narratives.⁵ That is to say, that my approach to the archive highlights the inter-related responsibilities held within the Central American community.

Therefore, this essay questions what factors we must consider when and how we go about archiving undocumented Central Americans. As such, I am concerned with repositories at various scales, from those held within institutions to those in the comfort of people's personal homes. Through an analysis of various traditional and untraditional archives, I find that some archives have the tendency to incite and perpetuate epistemic, emotive, and material violence on the Black, Indigenous, Ladinx, and Mestizx people that largely constitute undocumented Central Americans. However, I argue that in order to undo and combat the violence of the archive we must privilege the multiple embodied experiences of undocumented Central Americans of color

⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): S14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800672>.

⁵ For more on ethics of care in the archive see Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81, no. Spring (2016): 23–43.

while engaging in archival processes. In doing such, we are centering the knowledges and needs of undocumented Central Americans themselves, and making archives sites of empowerment.

(undocumented) Central Americans

Central American migration to the United States is directly connected to US intervention, which has occurred in the isthmus since the 19th century.⁶ Despite the multi-century unequal relationship between the United States and Central America, sizeable Central American communities began forming in cities like San Francisco, Washington, DC, and New York in the late 1960s and '70s.⁷ These early Central American migrants were largely legal labor recruits and their families, who established the enclaves that would later turn into heavily concentrated Central American metropolitan regions in the 1980s and '90s.⁸ The exponential increase in Central American migration was due to crumbling economies, right-wing dictatorships, and terrorizing war in isthmus. Unlike their predecessors, this cohort of Central American migrants were overwhelmingly categorized as “illegal aliens.” This categorization among Central American migrants persists in the decades of the 21st century, as well. Ana Patricia Rodríguez concisely asserts that Central Americans were initially displaced because of right-wing American geopolitics and continue to be displaced because of a globalizing economy that disproportionately benefits the global North, while taking from the global South.⁹ The presence

⁶ Ana Patricia Rodríguez, “Salvadoran Immigrant Acts and Migration to San Francisco (circa 1960s and '70s),” in Karina Oliva Alvarado, Alicia I. Estrada, and Ester E. Hernández, eds., *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2017), 44.

⁷ Ana Patricia Rodríguez, “Salvadoran Immigrant Acts and Migration to San Francisco (circa 1960s and '70s),” in Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández, 49; Terry A. Repak, *Waiting on Washington: Central American Workers in the Nation's Capital* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

⁸ Ana Patricia Rodríguez, “Salvadoran Immigrant Acts and Migration to San Francisco (circa 1960s and '70s),” Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández, *U.S. Central Americans*; Repak, *Waiting on Washington*.

⁹ Ana Patricia Rodríguez, “Refugees of the South: Central Americans in the U.S. Latino Imaginary,” *American Literature* 73, no. 2 (2001): 387.

of Central American migrants in the US is therefore the result of destructive and extractive US policies. Despite the state-initiated displacement, many Central Americans are forced to migrate to the United States clandestinely.

Although asylum or temporary protected status may be sought out and pathways to legalization are leveraged when possible, the temporality of illegality is significant in determining subjectivity in the US. In other words, undocumented Central Americans are interpolated into “illegality,” a subject condition from which they navigate their lives. Illegality among Central Americans intersects with migrants’ respective racial subjectivities, as well. At this intersection, undocumented Central Americans experience a racialized illegality. I use racialized illegality to describe how Central Americans of color are visually signified with illegality. Black, Indigenous, Mestizx, or Ladinx Central Americans exceed the visual paradigms of legal American citizenship and are therefore viewed as “illegal” in one way or another. However, in accordance with Juan Herrera’s theorization, racialized illegality also denotes how illegality is experienced differently based on the convergence of racial hierarchies in Latin America and the United States, which both position Blackness and Indigeneity at the bottom.¹⁰ As such, racialized illegality explains why there is a racial figure that comes to mind when imagining an “illegal immigrant” and also explains why Black immigrants are overly represented in criminal and immigration enforcement,¹¹ because of pervasive anti-Blackness. In short, the life of undocumented Central Americans is shaped not only by illegality, but also by race.

I am reminded of how racialized illegality manifests in acts of everyday life when I think about my father, who fit the dominant racial profile of an undocumented immigrant: working-

¹⁰ Juan Herrera, “Racialized Illegality: The Regulation of Informal Labor and Space,” *Latino Studies* 14, no. 3 (October 2016): 320–43, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-016-0007-1>.

¹¹ Juliana Morgan-Trostle and Kexin Zheng, “The State of Black Immigrants” (New York: New York University School of Law and Black Alliance for Just Immigration, 2016).

class, with tan skin and dark features. When he passed away in 2017, I rummaged through his personal archive. One of the records that I came across was his permanent resident card, which he obtained in 2006. I found it tucked away in the hidden folds of his wallet, protected from grime by a paper folder, which was further secured by a plastic bag. My father never left the house without his wallet. Therefore, since 2006 until his passing in 2017, he travelled everywhere with his permanent resident card, colloquially known as his green card. My father's carefulness and specific use of his green card illustrate his racialized illegality. As someone who fit the racial profile of an undocumented immigrant, he knew he could be questioned while traveling through the various jurisdiction in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. If his presence in the US was questioned, his defense would be his green card.

There is a particular performance that is demanded of someone with my father's racial and "illegal" subjectivity. The performance of racialized illegality becomes knowable through an analysis of his personal records. In this sense, my fathers' personal archive becomes what Robb Hernández calls an archival body. An archival body is the "exteriorization of the individual, social, and cultural self in a type of ontological surrogacy constituted by the material record."¹² Racialized illegality requires the accumulation of records and artifacts that speak to their subjectivities. While my father's green card was an example of the necessity of a legal record, archival materials can also be classified as affective and quotidian. The classifications: affective, legal, and quotidian, are not mutually exclusive. Oftentimes records in the archives of undocumented Central Americans of color are simultaneously affective, legal, and quotidian. These records speak to the complexity of racialized illegality as it is experienced by Black, Indigenous, Mestizx, and Ladinx undocumented Central Americans. Yet, most archival actors do

¹² Robb Hernández, "Drawn from the Scraps: The Finding AIDS of Mundo Meza," *Radical History Review* 2015, no. 122 (May 2015): 78, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2849540>.

not consider the intricacy and implications of archiving undocumented Central Americans of color.

Archiving Undocumented Central Americans

Considering Radical Archival Logics

There are a number of considerations that must be weighed when archiving undocumented Central Americans of color. The first thing that must be considered is what Kirsten Weld refers to as the archival logic. According to Weld, the archival logic is the organizing principle or the reasoning why the records were accumulated.¹³ That is to say, what led to the formation of this collection of records? What purpose did the archive serve? Since archives are assembled and preserved by a variety of institutions and individuals, they each have different ends. While the archival logic of each collection varies, it can be placed within a liberatory or oppressive matrix.

Many archives, however, uphold oppressive state power. According to Verne Harris and Achille Mbembe, the archives—especially institutional repositories—are in fact a vital component of the powerful state.¹⁴ There are a number of scenarios concerning Central Americans that demonstrate how archives uphold the oppressive state. In Guatemala, for example, Weld narrates the developments of the Project for the Recovery of the National Police Historical Archives. The National Police Historical Archives is a vast collection of records that carefully document Guatemala's counterinsurgency efforts that resulted in the capturing, disappearing, and killing of many civilians deemed leftists and enemies of the right-wing state.

¹³ Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, American Encounters/Global Interactions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 6.

¹⁴ Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (March 2002): 71, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435631>; Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19, http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-94-010-0570-8_2.

In this sense, Weld argues that the archive was a weapon of the state used for surveillance and social discipline.¹⁵ It was by chance that a group of humanitarian activists came across the deteriorating archive of Guatemala's now defunct National Police and were then able to use the same archive in pursuit of justice for crimes committed against Guatemalan citizens, most of whom were indigenous Maya, during its 36-year civil war.

The National Police Historical Archives effectively evidence the crimes the Guatemalan state committed against humanity. Why would state agents not erase their record of violence? Weld suggests that such an archive was not destroyed because the “[d]ocuments both *represent* power and *are* power—not in some deracinated postmodern sense but all too concretely in their creation, keeping, and use by political actors.”¹⁶ The records themselves gave the National Police permission to enact disappearances, tortures, and killings against those deemed enemies of the state. Though the very same records would later be used to hold the same institution accountable, at the time of their creation they upheld the state's right-wing initiatives. When the National Police and their records no longer served the direct priorities of the state, the archive remained. However, they remained difficult to access, abandoned, and nearly destroyed. These were the archives' circumstances because, as Mbembe claims, “[m]ore than on its ability to recall, the power of the state relies on its ability to consume time, that is to abolish the archive and anaesthetise the past.”¹⁷ That is, once the archive no longer serves the needs of the oppressive state, the archival records begin its descension to destruction.

A similar phenomenon impacting undocumented Central Americans occurred in the United States, as well. In 2017, the US National Archives announced their approval for the

¹⁵ Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 6.

¹⁶ Weld, 87.

¹⁷ Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits,” 23.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency to destroy documents regarding the sexual abuse and death of detained migrants.¹⁸ Given the data available online we cannot identify the nationality of the subjects of the archival records. However, the overall number of detained migrants reigning from Central America allow us to infer that Central Americans are also affected by the atrocities detailed in the ICE documents that various state agencies wanted to destroy.¹⁹ Although public protests halted the destruction of the aforementioned documents, in early 2020 the National Archives announced its approval for ICE to destroy other files pertaining to civil rights violations and poor detainee medical care.²⁰

Archival record appraisals like this are commonplace. Nonetheless, the recent decision to dispose of documents pertaining to migrant detainee maltreatment reveal that the National Archives is interested in preserving the power of ICE and thereby the US government at large. The National Archives is far from interested in revealing any atrocities that ICE commits because it does not benefit the stability of the state. In disposing documents pertaining to migrant detainees' distress, the archival institution is facilitating the enactment of physical violence against people at the hands of state agencies. Furthermore, the archival institution enacts an epistemic violence because it prevents the wider public from learning about these atrocities and holding the state accountable.²¹

¹⁸ Matthew Connelly, "Why You May Never Learn the Truth About ICE," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2020, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/04/opinion/archives-document-destruction.html>.

¹⁹ In 2018, the American Immigration Council published a report stating the 46 percent of ICE detainees were from Central America. Emily Ryo and Ian Peacock, "The Landscape of Immigration Detention in the United States" (Washington, D.C.: American Immigration Council, December 5, 2018).

²⁰ Connelly, "Why You May Never Learn the Truth About ICE."

²¹ Patrick Williams, Laura Chrisman, and Gayatri Spivak, eds., "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, 2015, 66–111, <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=none&isbn=9781315656496>.

As demonstrated, archives—primarily institutional repositories— all too often uphold oppressive state power. Archival actors accumulate records to serve the state and then descend into destruction when they become an inconvenience or risk to the state.²² Record obliteration can either be gradual like the deteriorating National Police archive in Guatemala or more immediate and direct like the disposal of ICE records in the US. Nonetheless, regardless of the rate, any destruction of archival documents perpetuates physical and epistemic violence onto the marginalized communities who are the subjects of those records. While the archival logic behind the archives discussed in this section served the oppressive initiatives of the state, a more radical archival logic can also be unearthed from the same records, as was done with the National Police archives in Guatemala. Archival actors, especially within institutions, must work counteractive to the state’s priorities and consider the radical potential particular records hold when pursuing acquisitions and conducting appraisals.

Identifying Community Nuances

There is an established interest in collecting and archiving artifacts and documents as they relate to the migration of Latinxs, especially clandestine migration across the US-Mexico border. The collection of migration-related materials is one of the ways Central Americans are beginning to be archived in scholarly institutions. Though the racial and ethnic identities of undocumented migrants are not always clear in the documents and artifacts of the collection, as archival actors we must remain cognizant of not homogenizing the undocumented migrant experience as much as possible. And where the collection specifically pertains to undocumented Central Americans, the same cognizance is required.

²² Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits”; Harris, “The Archival Sliver”; Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 86.

This is important because, as Juan Herrera’s theory of racialized illegality makes clear, the experience of illegality is profoundly shaped by racial subjectivity.²³ I do not mean to say that there are not any points of convergence amongst undocumented Central American migrants, or undocumented migrants more broadly; there surely are. However, in our acquisition, appraisal, and description of related materials, archival actors must consider the similarities, as well as the dissimilarities among undocumented migrants across racial and ethnic subjectivities. Maintaining undocumented Central Americans as a homogenous racial group in the archive perpetuates the erasure of Black and Indigenous Central Americaness, which is already at the margins of discourse on the isthmus and its diaspora. Moreover, ignoring racialized illegality can obscure an understanding of how race shapes the cause, journey, and outcome of migration to the US.

Contemporary artist Tom Kiefer’s series *El Sueño Americano/The American Dream* is an example of how an archive on migrant illegality is riddled of multiple subjectivities, namely race. Although not an archive by traditional standards, Tom Kiefer’s archive of migrant materials do in fact serve the functions of an archive: acquiring, organizing, and preserving items with perceived value.²⁴ Kiefer’s archive consists of photographs of mundane materials like hygiene products, personal mementos, and survival tools that US Customs and Border Protection (USCBP) confiscated from undocumented migrants—many of whom were certainly Central Americans of color— in a detainee processing center in Arizona. As a part-time janitor at the processing center, Kiefer gained access to the confiscated migrant materials, took them home,

²³ Herrera, “Racialized Illegality.”

²⁴ “Archives,” in *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, accessed December 10, 2020, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archives.html>.

and began to photograph them,²⁵ effectively dispossessing migrants (again) and creating an archive of stolen migrant materials. His photographic archive has gained acclaim for evoking pro-immigrant sentiment through the depictions of banal objects, which circulate throughout galleries nationally and on the social media platform Instagram internationally. However, Kiefer's aesthetic arrangement and descriptive language on Instagram does not illuminate the nuances of migration to the US nor US state violence against migrants. On the contrary, the understanding of migration and related state violence remains quite superficial at best and absent at worst.

On November 14, 2018 Kiefer shared a photograph of multi-colored combs, a pick, and brushes—some with dark hair still tangled within the bristles—against a white backdrop (figure 1). The various personal grooming tools are positioned horizontally and vertically to maximize the space available in the frame. The image caption states, “When apprehended by USCBP personal belongings carried by migrants crossing the desert that are considered non-essential or potentially lethal are confiscated. #elsuenoamericanoproject #refugees #caravan #claudiagonzalez.”

²⁵ Tom Kiefer, “About — T O M K I E F E R,” T O M K I E F E R, accessed January 22, 2021, <https://www.tomkiefer.com/about>.

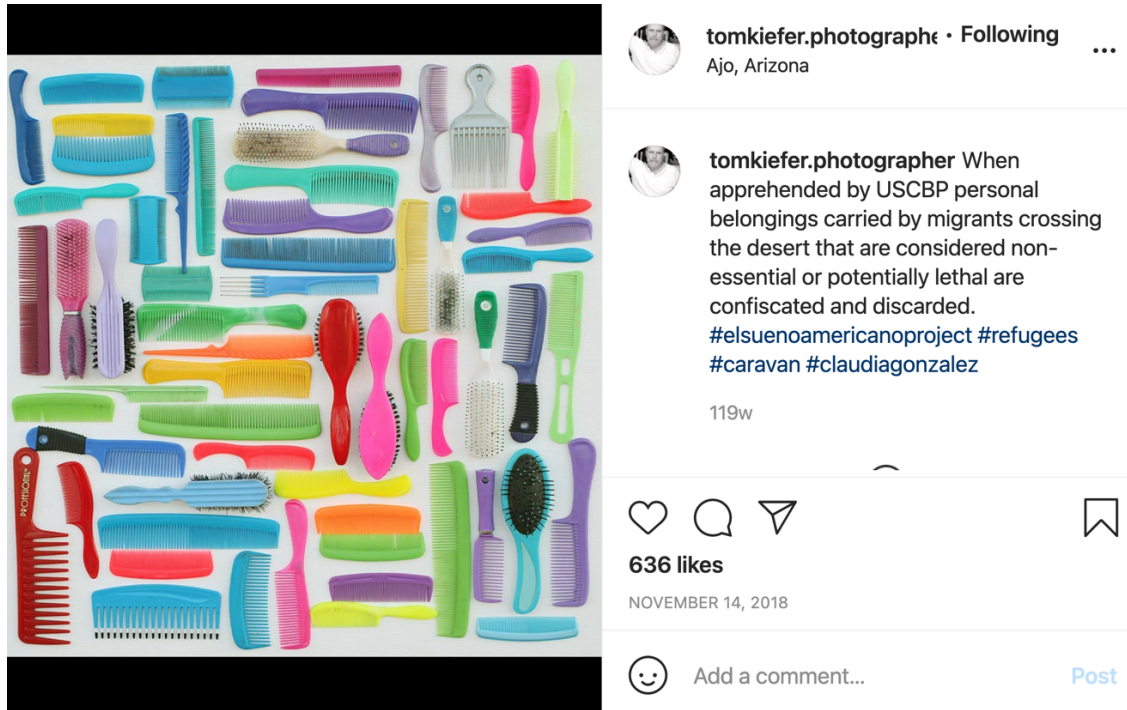


Figure 1 Screen capture of Tom Kiefer's Instagram post, shared on November 14, 2018.

Kiefer has articulated that one of the intentions behind *El Sueño Americano/The American Dream* is to “explore the humanity of those who risk their lives crossing the desert.”²⁶ In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Kiefer expressed that he is “presenting these deeply personal objects in a way that is reverential and respectful.”²⁷ I do not believe this is the case in photographs similar to the one shared above (figure 1). The photograph focuses on quantity, communicating the sheer mass of unidentified migrants being detained at the southern US border. Additionally, the grooming tools are also arranged in multiple directions, making it disturbingly reminiscent of how detained migrants position themselves when crammed into holding cells at detention facilities. These concerns, however, are countered by the bright color

²⁶ Kiefer.

²⁷ Peter C. Baker, “A Janitor Preserves the Seized Belongings of Migrants,” *The New Yorker*, March 12, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/a-janitors-collection-of-things-confiscated-from-migrants-in-the-desert>.

palette, which evoke commercial innocence alike that of pop-art. Altogether, the quantity, positioning, and color palette, present a dichotomy of pleasantries and grim realities. The grim reality of immigrant detention centers, however, is obfuscated in Kiefer's imagery. Visually viewers are unable to grasp the full inhumanity of detention centers because of the pop-art aesthetic, nor are viewers able to fully grasp migrant's complex humanity because it is reduced to a mass of grooming tools without significant contextualization. In short, Kiefer's imagery objectifies and homogenizes the migrant experience.

The accompanying caption does not express the state violence necessary for such an image to be possible either. It simply says that items like the ones depicted are confiscated from migrants. Sterile captions like this were repeatedly used throughout the Instagram account, not bridging the gaps of knowledge that may exist among the digital audience. Importantly, I want to highlight the use of the #claudiagonzalez hashtag in the November 14, 2018 post. Claudia Patricia Gómez González was a 20-year-old Indigenous woman from the Maya Mam community in Guatemala, who US Customs and Border Protection killed on May 23, 2018 after she crossed the border into Texas.²⁸ While Kiefer utilizes the #claudiagonzalez hashtag to ambiguously refer to the Maya woman who USCBP killed just a few months prior, he does not explicate who she was in neither the November 14th post or others in which he includes the hashtag. To elaborate on who Claudia Patricia Gómez González was, would begin to highlight the multiple dimensions of Central Americanness and the particular obstacles of various racial and ethnic groups from Central America. Instead, Kiefer clumps all migrants—many of them Black and Indigenous from Central America—into an aesthetically pleasing pictorial frame, disregarding their differences. In

²⁸ Nina Lakhani, "'I Want Justice': A Year on, Family of Guatemalan Woman Shot Dead in Texas Wait for Answers," *the Guardian*, May 22, 2019, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/may/22/guatemala-woman-claudia-gomez-texas-border-agents>.

this aesthetic and descriptive disregard, Kiefer upholds the notion of Central American mestizaje, a white supremacist project that attempts to erase Blackness and Indigeneity from Latinidad.

Archival actors must refrain from upholding white supremacist projects through the homogenization of people and their experiences in the archive. While I focus on critical race theories, archival actors should also use queer and feminist theories to identify the macro and micro convergences and divergences of vast communities like undocumented Central Americans. These nuances should be kept in mind throughout all archival functions from acquisition and appraisal to description. In identifying how structures of power impact various groups differently, archival actors are facilitating a more nuanced understanding of communities like Central Americans.

Understanding Multiple Use-Values

Another element archival actors need to keep in mind is how undocumented Central Americans fundamentally rely on the archive to navigate their racialized illegality in the day-to-day. An awareness of the fundamental necessity of the archive for undocumented Central Americans should guide archival actors, particularly those situated outside of the community, in their pursuits to acquire collections for either artistic or scholarly purposes. Because undocumented Central American archives have legal, affective, and even quotidian functions, acquisition initiatives may work contrary to the needs and desires of the community. To this extent, archival actors must understand how undocumented Central American archives are not necessarily best preserved nor used within institutions. In what follows, I will address the primary functions of undocumented Central American archives to illustrate how the community actively needs the archives in their domain and that they in fact are the best caretakers of their archive.

When Central Americans migrate to the US clandestinely, what they can bring with them is severely limited. What undocumented Central Americans can bring is shaped by the urgency of their departure and their method of travel. In some instances, the migration guides do not specify the date of departure and in other situations unexpected violence propels immediate migration. Moreover, what an undocumented migrant brings on their journey is highly determined by whether they are travelling *por tierra* (by land) or with false documents via airplane. Under these stringent conditions, undocumented Central Americans leave behind important personal records and artifacts. Jason De León discusses undocumented migrants' strategic selection and use of material culture. He argues that various forms of material culture are used—sometimes ineffectively—to achieve the goal of crossing the US-Mexico border undetected.²⁹ While De León focuses on the strategic selection and use of water bottles, shoes, and articles of clothing to migrate across the US-Mexico border, I would add that critical thought is also utilized when choosing to bring other items like call cards, photographs, notes, prayer cards, and rosaries. Something like a call card serves a very functional purpose, allowing migrants to communicate with family in times of need along their journey. The other mementos may not materially assist migrants in their journey; however, they do provide emotional and psychological sustenance. Perhaps the photograph in their wallet is reminder of why they are putting their lives at great risk or the prayer in their pocket is the last note a loved one wrote to them. Needless to say, migrants need their archival records during their migration and continue to need it thereafter for physical, emotional, and psychological survival.

²⁹ Jason De León, "Better to Be Hot than Caught': Excavating the Conflicting Roles of Migrant Material Culture," *American Anthropologist* 114, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 477–95, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2012.01447.x>.

Upon arriving to the US, undocumented Central Americans also need to accumulate an archive of a different kind to do ordinary activities, like obtain employment and a driver's license. These activities have become increasingly difficult over the past decades. For example, in 1986, the Ronald Reagan administration signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which—among a number of things—prohibited employers from hiring undocumented migrants and required them to verify employee legal status. However, IRCA did not hold employers accountable for verifying employment eligibility or authenticating records. Therefore, undocumented migrants utilized counterfeit records at their disposal to obtain employment. Once migrants add a single form of identification to their personal archive, it facilitates the attainment of other activities like leasing apartments, enrolling in schools, or opening bank accounts, which all require forms of identification. In turn, activities like this produce more records to document elements of undocumented Central Americans' social life in the US. These activities and their corresponding records seem mundane but when personal archives are not readily available, the accumulation of these papers become significant and facilitate access to basic needs and services.

Undocumented Central Americans' personal archives are also used to justify their existence in the US and legalize their status. In a number of legal adjustment cases, proof of residence, medical records, and personal identifications are required, along with personal photographs and documents. Multiple forms of evidence are required for asylum seekers and those filing for temporary protected status or permanent residence. Consider, for example, a legal case in which a migrant is adjusting their status through marriage with a US citizen. The undocumented migrant and their spouse have to prove the validity of their relationship through photographs and affidavits, among a number of other records that include paystubs, taxes, and the likes. Susan Bibler Coutin claims that records documenting social life help legalize migrants'

status because they evidence a form of social citizenship.³⁰ That is to say that archives with a variety of legal, quotidian, and affective records prove migrants' productivity and contributions to American society. Therefore, archival actors should be mindful of both the cultural-historical value of mundane records and artifacts, as well as the pragmatic value undocumented Central American archives hold. And it does not stop at pragmatic value, there is a lot of affective value in undocumented Central American archives, as well. Restricted mobility makes it so a number of documents like photographs, prayer cards, and letters are the only records that connect undocumented Central Americans and their loved ones across space and time. And on the other hand, extended durations of restricted mobility also make records that allow for movement very precious.

With these multiple use-values in mind, acquiring custody of undocumented Central American collections is not always ideal. The University of Texas Libraries' (UTL) Human Rights Documentation Initiative also acknowledged that documents had both cultural, historical, and research value, as well as an immediate functional, symbolic, legal, and memorial value for record creators and record subjects.³¹ As a result, UTL enacted what Christian Kelleher describes as a non-custodial model in which "physical records are in the custody—under ownership and control—of an institution completely separate from the manuscript repository."³² Now, imagine this model utilized among institutional repositories with Central American individuals, collectives, and small organizations, it prevents the perpetuation of dispossession that the community has already experienced as a result of migration. As Kelleher argues, a non-custodial

³⁰ Susan Bibler Coutin, *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants' Struggle for U.S. Residency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 41–42.

³¹ Christian Kelleher, "Archives Without Archives: (Re)Locating and (Re)Defining the Archive Through Post-Custodial Praxis," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017): 3, <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/29>.

³² Kelleher, 14.

model helps re-negotiate and re-balance power dynamics between institutional repositories and record creators and subjects.³³ To acquire collections without critical thought and acknowledgment of the implications can ultimately do more harm than good to the undocumented Central American community. Archival actors must remain conscientious of how the archives of undocumented Central Americans are not static records, but are very much needed in a variety of ways in the day-to-day. As such, archival actors must create models that prioritize undocumented Central American needs over initiatives that seek to own diverse collections.

Forgetting and re-membering trauma and loss

Archives are vital to the preservation of cultural memory, but there are some records that should not be displayed—and some, not even preserved. Undocumented Central Americans carry with them traumas from their countries of origin, their migration journeys, and experiences in the United States. As a multiply-marginalized group, social justice-oriented archival actors are eager to preserve the experiences of undocumented Central Americans, especially those with traumatic and sorrowful underpinnings. Archival actors, myself included, feel a sort of archival anxiety in knowing that the lives of ordinary undocumented Central Americans go unnoticed and will likely be forgotten in the near future. Yet, there are instances in which undocumented Central Americans do not want to display nor preserve a historical record because of the trauma it reignites. Archival actors—in particular the outsiders within, like myself—must learn how to navigate our own archival anxiety, the need to display and preserve the archives, and the trauma of a community we care about. This requires establishing archival models in which

³³ Kelleher, “Archives Without Archives.”

undocumented Central Americans are not only centered, but also hold archival power and where archival actors know when to step back. In other words, archiving undocumented Central Americans always requires a participatory archival model.³⁴

I encountered this bind between archival anxiety and care for my community's trauma and sorrow with my own parents' archive. In the years leading up to my father's death, I introduced him to the possibility of me recording his oral history to keep in my digital archives by casually asking questions. I would ask, "*¿por qué decidiste inmigrar a los Estados?*" (why did you decide to migrate to the US?) and he would reply "*porque quería una vida mejor*" (because I wanted a better future). His brief, irritable response shutdown the possibilities of a recorded interview. Meanwhile, I was left with burning questions about my origins in the US. I always knew he came from an impoverished *campesino* (peasant farmer) family, though I did not know much detail beyond that. Nonetheless, I figured that was a major reasoning behind his migration. Posthumously, however, I learned he was also a conscription target for the Guatemalan military during its violent civil war. While I questioned why my father never told me about his childhood or any political occurrences in Guatemala, it dawned on me that he may not have wanted me to know. He may not have wanted to re-member fragments of his past.

My father was within his own right to not want to piece his potentially traumatic past for me, an archival actor. Eira Tansey explicitly asserts, "[n]o one owes their trauma to archivists." In a critical reflection of archivists' role amidst the COVID pandemic and ongoing racist police brutality in the US, Tansey claims that trauma has become an "archival commodity" that

³⁴ Lae'I Hughes-Watkins, "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Science* 5, no. 6 (2018): 1–19; Danielle Allard and Shawna Ferris, "Antiviolence and Marginalized Communities: Knowledge Creation, Community Mobilization, and Social Justice through a Participatory Archiving Approach," *Library Trends* 64, no. 2 (2015): 360–83, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0043>.

ultimately benefits archival administrators and not the people who are confronting traumatic events first-hand.³⁵ Calls to document and submit potentially traumatic experiences to repositories establishes a relationship in which repositories extract from the public, whose lives are significantly altered by harsh realities. This practice is an enduring legacy of the archive and ignores efforts by Black archivists like Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, Stacie Williams, and Bergis Jules among others, to undo the extractive relationship between an archive and marginalized publics.³⁶ Yet archival actors, even those who are outsiders-within, are especially driven by their archival anxiety and pursue the collection of trauma-related records. Tansey provides insightful advice stating, “archivists have an ethical obligation to understand that respecting people’s privacy and right to forget their own past means accepting that we will lose parts of the historical record[.]” And that’s alright.

Robb Hernández challenges the notion that preservation is the primary function of archiving. Instead, he insists on the possibility of analyzing the ruins or fragments of an archive. This approach is particularly necessary for marginalized communities.³⁷ While Hernández focuses on the queer Latinx community that was persecuted by the AIDS epidemic, a similar approach can be applied to undocumented Central Americans whose archives remain fragmented as a result of displacement, on-going trauma, and general sorrow. For marginalized communities

³⁵ Eira Tansey, “No One Owes Their Trauma to Archivists, or, the Commodification of Contemporaneous Collecting « Eira Tansey,” accessed March 5, 2021, <https://eiratansey.com/2020/06/05/no-one-owes-their-trauma-to-archivists-or-the-commodification-of-contemporaneous-collecting/>.

³⁶ Hughes-Watkins, “Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices”; S. Williams, “Building a Community Archive of Police Violence,” *Medium* (blog), September 7, 2018, <https://medium.com/community-archives/building-a-community-archive-of-police-violence-3ebc66c557d6>; Bergis Jules, Ed Summers, and Vernon Mitchell, Jr., “Ethical Considerations for Archiving Social Media Content Generated by Contemporary Social Movements: Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations,” *Documenting the Now* (blog), April 2018, <https://www.docnow.io/docs/docnow-whitepaper-2018.pdf>.

³⁷ Robb Hernández, *Archiving an Epidemic: Art, AIDS, and the Queer Chicanx Avant-Garde*, Sexual Cultures (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

like undocumented Central Americans or queer Latinxs, dis-membering and fragmenting the archival record can be just as empowering as re-membering and preserving. It is important, however, to distinguish between powerful institutions destroying records and when traditionally disempowered record subjects, creators, and custodians exert agency over how their historical record is kept. I am reminded of my mother's own archival practices after my father passed away. She asked my grandmother and her cousin to put all his clothes in a box, with the exception of his cowboy boots, slippers, and pajamas. Thereafter, my mother began clearing their shared bedroom, which was full of papers my father kept over the years: checkbooks, tax returns, our certificates, and so on. She discarded that which she deemed invaluable, transferred other documents to a safe box or her night stand, and stored yet others in containers that were out of sight, out of mind. While in this at-home appraisal and records management process my mother may have gotten rid of things I preferred she had not, it was driven by grief, sorrow, and a desire to remember her husband in a way that was suitable and healthy for her. In this sense, my mother was enacting an archival practice that does not necessarily achieve preservation, but that centers what her needs were after her loss. This may mean that the records reflect my father less as a "subject" of racialized illegality and more of a life partner. And that's okay. Archival actors interested in the personal archives of undocumented Central Americans must be careful not to impress their own professional standards of preservation, but follow the lead of the Central Americans whose trauma and despair is embedded in the record. We must ask, what do undocumented Central Americans want to re-member about themselves?

Representing Undocumented Central Americans Wholly

Among the things my mother kept after my father's death was a number of photographs that visually narrate their social lives as both undocumented and documented Central Americans in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. The photographs depict dates at restaurants, trips to nearby amusement parks, apartment parties, cook-outs, and the likes. These photographic records are just as important as the deportation record or the counterfeit social security card in my father's archive. The personal archives of undocumented Central Americans contain a plethora of diverse records that must be processed and understood as a collective whole. All too often, archival actors focus on Central Americans' hardships as undocumented and racial minorities and do not focus enough on the vibrant social lives and communities they build and maintain both in the US and in their countries of origin. In their respective projects, archival actors must ensure that they collect and represent undocumented Central Americans as whole, dynamic humans with a wide range of emotions, interests, and experiences.

Similar to records like taxes and paystubs, quotidian visual records seem to be of little historical or cultural value. However, upon deeper analysis the significance of quotidian visual records is made clear when superimposed with the affective and social forces at play beyond the scope of the frame.³⁸ As Tina Campt claims, “[The quotidian] is a practice honed by the dispossessed in the struggle to create possibility within the constraints of everyday life.”³⁹ Take for example, a photograph from my father's personal archive (figure 2). This photograph features my father standing in front of a sound system, wall posters, and framed photographs in an apartment in Arlington, Virginia. My father's hometown friend lived in this apartment, likely with other undocumented men from the same town.

³⁸ Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 6. Campt refers to this phenomenon as the social life of the photo.

³⁹ Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

I am captivated by my father's large grin in the picture. His grin stretches so wide that it hides his dark-brown eyes, communicating excitement. He wears business casual attire and crosses his arms in front of his chest while he stands hip-width apart, almost as if to say, "Look at me. I'm here. I'm living good." My father's attire and strong stance in front of the American consumer items suggests that he and his peers not only successfully migrated to the US but were also starting to obtain financial gains in a way that was not possible for them in Guatemala. While my father and many of his peers were construction workers and their income was minimal to others, their financial gains were plentiful in comparison to their income as agricultural laborers in rural Guatemala. I find it interesting the way nothing in the image alludes to the arduous labor they exerted to attain and furnish an apartment, as if to say there is more to me than being an undocumented construction worker. Moreover, the accumulation of consumer goods shown in the photograph probes at what capitalist America promises, albeit falsely for most. The promise of possibilities in the US is perhaps best represented in the central position of a poster depicting a white, blonde, seductive firewoman, who for heterosexual, Ladino Central American men is a symbol of desire. This sexually indicative poster, however, is strongly contrasted with a cheap replica of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*, a staple image in many catholic Central American homes. These contrasting wall details allude to who they were, who they are, and who they want to be.



Figure 2 My father, Julio, posing in front of a large sound system, wall posters, and photographs circa 1987.

Like the Black European family photographs Campt examines, my father's photograph(s) situate him and the undocumented Central American community geographically, historically, and socially in a particular setting. Additionally, however, undocumented Central American visual records also "articulate a profound aspiration to forms of national and cultural belonging, inclusion, and social status."⁴⁰ As they articulate desire, they simultaneously reveal vernacular performances of their subjectivities that expand beyond their illegality. The vernacular performances documented in visual records can be easily disregarded as insignificant if not analyzed carefully and critically. That is to say, if archival actors do not regard undocumented Central Americans' entire humanity, quotidian visual records like this will be lost to time.

⁴⁰ Campt, *Image Matters*, 8.

Conclusion

In this white paper, I set out to question and provide recommendations on how archival actors should approach archiving undocumented Central Americans in the United States. This question arose from my own interest in archiving undocumented Central American experiences as a member of the Central American diaspora with the same care and intention my family archivists enacted. Through an examination of traditional and untraditional archives, I identified five recommendations for those interested in archiving the undocumented Central American experience in a method that is empowering to a marginalized community.

1. *Consider the radical archival logics present.* Archives, especially institutional repositories, tend to destroy records that no longer serve the needs of the state. Archival actors working in such institutions must go against the grain in their appraisal and think about all the ways a record can be used to pursue justice for Black, Indigenous, people of color.
2. *Identify community nuances.* Archival actors must recognize the complexity of a communal identity like “Central American.” Therefore, they must approach undocumented Central American archives with an understanding as to how multiple subjectivities alter the migrant experience.
3. *Understand multiple use-value.* The archives of undocumented Central Americans have multiple legal, quotidian, and affective value. Archival actors must keep in mind the multiple values before eagerly collecting.
4. *Forgetting and re-membering trauma and loss.* Due to their subject positions, the archives of undocumented Central Americans are riddled with traumatic memories that

they may want to guard or forget entirely. This may cause archival anxiety for archival actors eager to preserve marginalized experiences. Nonetheless, we must follow the lead of undocumented Central Americans who care for their own archives in order to determine if and how their experiences are forgotten, re-membered, displayed and preserved.

5. *Represent undocumented Central Americans wholly.* It is more common to focus on records pertaining to Central American trauma. However, it is equally as important to highlight records that assert the wide range of emotions, interests, and experiences Central Americans hold.

Ultimately, I argue that archival actors must privilege the embodied multiplicity of undocumented Central Americans of color over their own scholarly or artistic endeavors and demonstrate an ethic of care for the Central American community.

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