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Warming Up Records: Archives, Memory, Power and *Index of the Disappeared*

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**Abstract:**

Policies of censorship and secrecy in federal governance skyrocketed under the Bush Administration in the wake of 9/11; these measures allowed for the detainment of some 700 predominately Arab and South Asian immigrants, though no evidence was released linking them with the terrorist attacks. The documents pertaining to the holding of these “special interest” detainees were kept secret for a number of years, and only released by the Department of Justice after significant external pressures from watchdog groups such as the ACLU. Two artists, Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani, have called into question this exponential increase in the concealment of government documents with a project titled *Index of the Disappeared*. The multifaceted work, which utilizes several media as well as a variety of site-specific methods of engagement, employs radical archival practices in an attempt to “[foreground] the difficult histories of immigrant, ‘Other’ and dissenting communities in the U.S. since 9/11.” Through these efforts, the artists question the structures of archives and power in place in this country today. Using Ganesh and Ghani’s work as a touchstone, this paper seeks to examine the ways in which archival and recordkeeping practices function in the United States, and the potential long-term consequences increased secrecy might have on our cultural memory. Mobilizing archival, social, and critical theories, this paper interrogates The Archive’s relationship to power, and how that authority is translated into a collective memory. Building from Ganesh and Ghani’s notion of “warm data” – that which is opposed to the “cold data” of official records – the paper ultimately suggests that an integration of history and art, such as that suggested by Nietzsche, could proliferate in The Archive, therefore both arousing our instincts and preserving them.



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**Warming up Records:  
Archives, Memory, Power and *Index of the Disappeared***

In *The Use and Abuse of History*, Friedrich Nietzsche (1957) questions society's relationship to and importance placed upon history, broadly defined. While his overall opinion is that what he sees as an overemphasis on history leads to halting progress in society, he nonetheless gives credit to history where he feels credit is due. He says, "Only, perhaps, if history suffers transformation into a pure work of art, can it preserve instincts or arouse them. Such history would be quite against the analytical and inartistic tendencies of our time, and even be considered false" (p. 42). In light of this, and given that archives are one of the key forces in the practice of writing history, one might ponder Nietzsche's take on these institutions. The Archive is known for many things, of which a sense of artistry is not one. Indeed, much of the legitimacy bestowed upon archives stems from precisely their *inartistic* sensibilities; that is to say, their sense of the empirical, of truth. Nietzsche's point remains worth considering from an archival perspective, however, and raises several interesting questions to that end: Would adding an artistic component to archival practice make history more resonant for society? Would the artistic inclination to provoke prove beneficial in creating discourse surrounding historical events? Or would Nietzsche's conjecture regarding a perceived falsehood prove true, leading to a delegitimization of historical practice? These questions, among others, are investigated by Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani in a multifaceted contemporary art project titled *Index of the Disappeared*.<sup>1</sup> From 2004 through the present, this project has examined the frequently difficult lives of Arab and South Asian immigrant communities in the United States since September 11, 2001, and in so doing, questioned the structures of archives and power in place in this country today.

***Index of the Disappeared***

With seven installations complete and a continuing web-based component created at the time of writing, Ganesh and Ghani have employed several media and a variety of site-specific methods of engagement in their work on *Index of the Disappeared*. On her website, Ganesh (n.d.) describes the project as follows:

As an archive, *Index of the Disappeared* foregrounds the difficult histories of immigrant, "Other" and dissenting communities in the U.S. since 9/11. Through official documents, secondary literature, and personal narratives, the Index archive traces the ways in which censorship and data blackouts are part of a discursive shift to secrecy that allows for disappearances, deportations, renditions and detentions on an unprecedented scale. The Index builds up its collection by collaborating with others actively engaged in political and legal challenges to the

policies we track, and draws on radical archival, legal and activist traditions to select, group, and arrange information. (n.p.)

In addition to its archival component, the project is also what Ganesh and Ghani describe as a platform, which, through site-specific art inspired by information from the archive, seeks “to confront audiences with the human costs of public policies, challenging them to re-consider the abstractions of political debate in specific, individual terms” (Ganesh, n.d.). To date, the artists have created works including video, portraits, postcards, neon signs, paintings, drawings, an online database, a zine, and a traveling library (Ghani, n.d.). Additionally, in March of 2008, the artists organized a series of panels titled “Tracing the Index,” in which they discussed some of the project’s key themes with other artists and academics.

Of the seven installations already completed as part of *Index of the Disappeared*, three serve as examinations of The Archive as place; in each, the artists construct a space similar to a library, office, or indeed, the reading room of an archive, and actually install the archival component of the project on shelves, and in boxes, drawers, and cabinets. The first of such installations was at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council’s Nassau gallery in 2005 and included both a “warm” and “cold” side, each with space and seating for reading, writing, and reflection, inviting visitors to take time and explore the documents for themselves. The two sides were diametrically opposed to one another both aesthetically (the warm side had a comfortable couch and rug, whereas the cold had a hard table and chairs surrounded by sterile metal cabinets) and in terms of the information they contained; the concept of “warm data” is used by the artists to exist in contradistinction to the “cold data” gathered in official government questioning of immigrants.<sup>2</sup>

In order to gather “warm data,” the artists have created a questionnaire (Ghani & Ganesh, n.d.) that can be filled out anonymously online by anyone. Questions include: “Who was the first person you ever fell in love with?” “Which muscle do you use the most in your normal daily activities?” “Which past accomplishment are you the proudest of?” and “How have you been affected by U.S. immigration policies, detention and/or deportation?” (n.p.). Once accumulated, the artists made this information public in 2004 via an online database called *How Do You See The Disappeared?: A Warm Database*. According to Ghani (n.d.), the artists’ goal in gathering and presenting this data is to “scale the political back to the personal, the abstract to the specific, and the foreign to the familiar” (n.p.). The sheer volume of work done on this project by these two artists is impressive; on top of that, it has been consistently challenging, thought-provoking, and tangibly useful both for giving voice to those who have disappeared and creating discourse surrounding their archival representations.

### **Censorship and Government Records: an Archival Perspective**

*Index of the Disappeared* was conceived as the artists' reaction against the treatment of "special interest" detainees in the wake of 9/11. These some 700 immigrants, most of whom are Arab and South Asian Muslims, were detained by Immigration and Naturalization Services directly following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, held for nearly three years on the basis of potential affiliations with the attacks, and eventually deported without charges ever being filed against them. Their eventual deportation was brought about through the efforts of human rights groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), which focused on both the rights violations committed against the detainees while in custody and the levels of secrecy surrounding their detainment in its investigation.

Noting the Department of Justice's avoidance of transparency in their operations and urging oversight to that end, the ACLU states in a June 2003 letter to the House Judiciary Committee, "Even twenty months after the arrests, the Justice Department continues to refuse to release the names of the detainees and has appealed a U.S. District Court decision ordering such release" (n.p.). The ACLU's work eventually paid off, and the documents were released, but with a series of substantive and problematic caveats on the part of the Department of Justice. Of this, Ghani (n.d.) notes,

A series of lists were disseminated into the public domain in a carefully controlled progression: first a list where almost every identifier was blacked out, then a list where everything but the detainees' nationalities was censored, next a list that revealed the violations for which they had been detained. (n.p.)

Were it not for the gravity of the situation, the level of censorship found in these documents would be almost comic, with only a handful of words not blacked out on any given page. Of course, the situation is very grave indeed, and the black marks on the page represent more than simply withheld information; they stand for the erasure of a human being from the country to which s/he claims citizenship. Though watchdog groups, led by the ACLU, were ultimately successful in redressing breaches of the constitution, the actions taken by the federal government regarding privacy, censorship, and human rights in the name of protection from a vague notion of "evil" gives me pause. Thinking about this from an archival perspective, I wonder: Would these records have gone undisclosed forever without the help of organizations external to our government? If so, what are the structures currently in place that could have allowed this government-sanctioned erasure to take place?

Though the transparency with which the United States federal government handles its records has generally been on the rise since the Federal Records Act

was passed in 1950, this progress came to a halt under the administration of George W. Bush, especially after September 11, 2001. Fortunately, the Bush administration's policy of secrecy was never all that secretive in and of itself, and there were a number of investigations into what information was being withheld while the 43<sup>rd</sup> president was still in office. Prepared by the House Committee on Government Reform in September of 2004 for Representative Henry A. Waxman (D-CA), one such investigation is called simply, *Secrecy in the Bush Administration*. After beginning with an outline of the federal laws that assure the public availability of government records, the report goes on to detail the ways in which the Bush administration undermined those laws or modified them to suit its own desires. It says,

The Clinton Administration increased public access to government information by restricting the ability of officials to classify information and establishing an improved system for the declassification of information. These steps have been reversed under the Bush Administration, which has expanded the capacity of the government to classify documents and to operate in secret. (p. v).

Specifically, the report argues that the Bush administration relied heavily on laws like The USA PATRIOT Act and Presidential Order 13292 to classify documents and hence restrict public access to government records, with a 95% increase in the number of "derivative classification decisions" made between 2001 and 2003 (p. 49).

With all of the censorship of government records taking place under the Bush administration, an archivist must ask him/herself: Do these records represent us truly? Stanley Chodorow (2006) posed this question in light of the massive proliferation of documents that has accompanied history's technological evolution. Shifting focus from scholars of ancient history to those of the present, Chodorow concerns himself primarily with thinking about how researchers must sift through the vast amounts of modern records to get at the root of who we are as a culture. Of these modern historians, Chodorow says,

The problem for them is that they cannot with certainty distinguish the pure metal from the dross. They face such a mass of material that it is nearly as difficult for them to find the gems in the apparently endless stream of data as it is for medievalists to understand and weigh the significance of the fragments with which they must work. (p. 376)

Continuing Chodorow's line of thought, these historians have enough things to worry about and ought not be bothered with having to discern where there are glaring omissions in the latter-day cultural record. Yet, the aforementioned Bush policies create just such a concern, forcing today's archivists and historians to spend more and more of their time figuring out if we are accurately portrayed by

our cultural record. In his article, Chodorow discusses the Kilgarlin Center for the Preservation of the Cultural Record at the University of Texas at Austin, and how it should address pressing archival concerns such as, “Principles of selection, techniques for the preservation of fragile media, and new ways to catalog materials that our existing cataloging processes and techniques never contemplated” (p. 379). These are the issues about which archivists should spend time thinking, and not the censorship of records that are lawfully bound to be available to the public. Unfortunately, the Bush Doctrine forces a reevaluation of priorities in the world of archives and records in order to assure that they “represent us truly.”

What goes unsaid in Chodorow’s argument is that the documents comprising the cultural record of which he speaks are ultimately what make up the collective memory; that is to say, how we remember ourselves as a society. Thus, the stakes are incredibly high in the creation of the cultural record, and any omission—whether accidental or on purpose—must be considered. Kenneth E. Foote (2000) discusses these issues in “To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture,” wherein he notes, “Archives transcend the immediate tasks of documentation, education, enrichment, and research to help sustain cultural traditions and values. Although the view of archives as collective memory is sometimes employed metaphorically, it is a claim that can be placed on firmer theoretical foundations” (pp. 29-30). As such, Foote argues, “Archives can be seen as a valuable means of extending the temporal and spatial range of human communication” (p. 30). The examples Foote mobilizes in the piece are practical, and yet the abstract idea of a record communicating the cultural atmosphere of a given time to future generations remains present. Thus, an accurate communication of that atmosphere is important from an archival perspective, even if it portrays the culture in question in a negative light.

Omissions and erasures of the cultural record such as those mandated by the Bush administration prove exceedingly problematic from both archival and historical perspectives, as they contribute to the creation of an inaccurate cultural memory. Though not the fault of an archive itself, this can be considered what Foote describes as “the effacement of memory.” Citing the manipulation of records in George Orwell’s *1984* as an example of memory effacement, Foote says,

Archives are subject to the same social pressures that shape the collective memory of other institutions. Perhaps archivists are more successful at resisting these pressures, but effacement of the past does sometimes occur with respect to representations of the past maintained by other institutions and by society at large. (p. 36)

This unfortunately means that, as government coups do not fall within the boundaries of archival practice, archivists find themselves bound to the dominant power structures in place at any given time. Auspiciously, however, the unprecedented censorship executed by the Bush administration has and continues to be investigated by governmental and non-governmental organizations alike.

### **Power, Semiotics, and *Index of the Disappeared***

While the fact that these archival issues are under investigation no doubt gives us hope, their very presence nonetheless raises relevant questions about systems of power in our society; Ganesh and Ghani address these issues in their project, so I will now return the focus of my analysis to *Index of the Disappeared*. A key goal of the project is to critique the structure of power in place in the United States that allows for the previously described erasure and omission of human beings from the cultural record. In an interview with GammaBlog regarding the “Codes of Conduct” installation created as part of Creative Time’s Democracy in America exhibit at the Park Avenue Armory, Ganesh (2008) describes a focus of *Index of the Disappeared* as “The classified, and then later declassified, documents that detail, sort of, the open secret about the government” (n.p.). Her statement brings to mind Antonio Gramsci’s writings on hegemony, which Leisbet Van Zoonen (1994) summarizes as follows:

Gramsci used “hegemony” to refer to the *process* by which general consent is actively sought for the interpretations of the ruling class. Dominant ideology becomes invisible because it is translated into “common sense,” appearing as the natural, unpolitical state of things accepted by each and everyone...Gramsci identifies ideological institutions and intermediaries like the priest and the intellectual, who translate concepts of the ruling class into the ordinary language and experiences of the worker. (p. 24)

In exposing the methods by which the U.S. government has shaped the way we view Arab and South Asian immigrant communities, Ganesh and Ghani’s art undermines the hegemonic processes at work by revealing them. Their project makes visible that which has been rendered invisible, *re-politicizes* that which has been deemed natural, and names the government as the perpetrator.

Impressively, *Index of the Disappeared* does more than simply make visible the process of U.S. government hegemony in its critique of the dominant power structures that work against the communities in question. The project also relates to an ongoing debate within the world of archives that focuses on how best to represent groups that have traditionally been excluded or underrepresented within archival collections. Howard Zinn has reproached archivists for their failure to assure that minority and other oppressed peoples are represented in



collections. Foote (2000) says of this, “Zinn was maintaining that archives err in favor of preserving records of dominant social groups at the expense of the less powerful” (p. 44). Ganesh and Ghani’s project seeks to correct the omissions and erasures to the archival record that have resulted from the actions of the power system in place in the U.S. today. Through the construction of their own archive, the artists attempt to thwart the effacement of memory—and, by extension, its aid in forgetting—that is slyly advocated by the official record. The artists may not be able to physically return the more than 700 “special detainees” to their families, friends, and communities, but they are making an effort to assure this marginalized group is given at least some portion of the record it deserves. For example, in “Codes of Conduct,” the most recent incarnation of the project, Ganesh (2008) notes that the installation includes, “Interrogation footage, found footage, as well as poetry from Guantanamo, and little other fragments from the trials” (n.p.). These items are presented in addition to the previously discussed declassified records, as well as portraits of the detainees painted in watercolor by Ganesh. All of this adds up to quite a substantive account of a group of people that has been otherwise erased from the cultural record and popular consciousness.

In addition to its critique of governmental systems and processes, *Index of the Disappeared* presents a useful commentary on archival practice with its innovative selection of materials and the creation of its “warm database.” The overwhelming majority of items considered relevant for archival preservation are text-based documents, notably official records, which are thought to provide the most useful information for understanding the key components of any given moment in history. Of course other items are contained in archives, but too often the “official” nature of the government record is given priority over other, perhaps more telling, objects. Ganesh and Ghani describe the narrative presented and maintained by the INS regarding immigrant communities as “cold” and present their data in direct opposition to it (Ghani, n.d., n.p.). In reference to the watercolor paintings mentioned above, Ganesh (2008) says,

We’re interested in this idea of warm data, of trying to give specificity and humanity and illuminate the details of an issue that remains abstract for most Americans; and the choice to use that medium was to bring the subject matter into a more intimate focus than you would see with the wanted posters, or on the internet. (n.p.)

The artists’ intentions are clear: they want to reinsert the lives of the Arab and South Asian immigrant communities who have been erased from the cultural memory back into it, and they want to do so in ways they believe will present a fuller, more human picture than is possible through the use of official data.

The concept of “warm data” becomes even more significant when the objects and information considered as such are viewed from a semiotic perspective. In his aforementioned work, Kenneth E. Foote (2000) bases his argument that archives “expand the temporal and spatial range of human communication” on the assertion that “material objects, artifacts, and documents – including those contained in archival collections – play a special role in communication” (p. 30). Building on the discipline’s tendency to focus on linguistics and verbal communication, Foote launches this assertion from a semiotic analysis of the *object*, referring to his earlier work in *Semiotica*. In a 1988 essay in said journal, Foote notes, “Objects might be seen as an aid to memory, as a resource helping to assure continuity in communication” (p. 245). Seen in this light, it is not only significant that Ganesh and Ghani are creating an archive to represent the otherwise omitted Arab and South Asian immigrant communities and thus insert them into the cultural memory, but also that the diversity of objects they present as archives-worthy in *Index of the Disappeared* markedly diverge from traditional archival practice.

Later, in describing the ways in which objects and *material expression*, as Foote terms their use, are worthwhile in semiosis, he says,

Material forms serve as personal or impersonal agents for participants in communicational exchanges. Just as a last will and testament represents the wishes of a person in interactions after death, objects can stand in for absent participants in other commonplace interactions. (p. 245)

Though unfortunately morbid given the context of my discussion here, Foote’s comparison is both apt and beneficial for the communities in question. Having been silenced by detainment or deportation, the “special interest” detainees represented in *Index of the Disappeared* and the communities to which they belong have no method of communicating with each other within the trying circumstances of their situations. By Foote’s analysis, the objects and information preserved by *Index of the Disappeared* might serve as a surrogate for that communication, however paltry a replacement it may seem to those involved. Additionally, the information gathered and made accessible in the “warm database” expands the archival possibilities of signifier and signified, thus creating a greater depth and breadth of knowledge of the groups of people it seeks to represent.

Despite the best efforts of organizations like the ACLU, the “special interest” detainees were largely treated by media in precisely the way the Bush administration sought through its policy of classification and censorship. Specifically, the aura of secrecy surrounding these individuals allowed the U.S. government to create and widely disseminate stories linking the detainees to acts of terrorism and violence, ultimately contributing to the atmosphere of fear and

panic that followed the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> in this country and the world more broadly. In its complete erasure of a concrete link between *representations* of the “special interest” detainees and the *reality* of their existence, the media’s treatment of the detainees—and thus all that is left of their entry into the cultural record after rampant government censorship—is what Jean Baudrillard would describe as “hyperreal.” In his seminal work, “Simulacra and Simulations,” Baudrillard (1988) details the ways in which the line between the real and the imaginary has been blurred such that images have completely lost their referents. Using Disneyland as a key example, Baudrillard says, “The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real” (p. 172). The cultural logic of hyperreality is also at play in media portrayals of the “special interest” detainees insofar as the way they were presented by media was a fabrication made to appear real, but which ultimately served to deter the public from ascertaining whether or not the circumstances had any actual relationship to reality. Perhaps more resonant for the discussion at hand, Baudrillard later cites Watergate as an example of the hyperreal on the same order as Disneyland, noting that the key feature of each is that they conceal the idea that, as he and other post-structuralists have argued, reality no longer exists.

The warm database of *Index of the Disappeared* attempts to dismantle the hyperreality surrounding the ways in which the “special interest” detainees have been treated by the mainstream media by creating a more human portrait of this community than would have otherwise been available. Though Baudrillard’s analysis does not allow for much hope regarding the possibility of actually finding reality again in our postmodern world, Ganesh and Ghani nonetheless seek to present an alternative to the “official” narrative, which they believe will more fully and accurately represent the “special interest” detainees and their communities. Through their radical archival work, Ganesh and Ghani have begun to reattach images regarding the “special interest” detainees to their referents, thus beginning the long and arduous journey back to the real, while simultaneously throwing into question some of the most fundamental tenets of archival theory and practice.

## Conclusion

Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani’s *Index of the Disappeared* presents a distinct portrait of Arab and South Asian immigrant communities in the United States and at least some portion of their troubled lives in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>. By creating an archive of “warm data,” the artists have offered a potent critique of the ways in which power structures are built and maintained in this country, and brought issues of government censorship to the fore. Moreover,

Ganesh and Ghani's reinterpretation of the term "data" itself raises questions for the archival world regarding how it ought to document the communities represented in its collections, and by what means it should attempt to do so. In putting art and archival practices in conversation, Ganesh and Ghani have entered a previously uninhabited space that is at once frightening and invigorating from an archival perspective. While there are obvious difficulties in answering the questions *Index of the Disappeared* brings about for traditional archival practice—questions such as: How might warm data be integrated into institutional archives? What traditional archival systems should be altered to allow for more nebulous and varied documents to exist in traditional archives? Should radical, grass-roots archival projects such as *Index of the Disappeared* be a call for change within larger archival institutions at all? Or should each remain discreet entities seeking unique goals?—one of the greatest strengths of the project is that it raises these questions at all. Ultimately, *Index of the Disappeared* begins to get at Nietzsche's call for an integration of history and art, and as such, both arouses our instincts and preserves them. Regardless of the eventual answers to any of the questions posed above, my hope is that this paper will stimulate a discourse within the world of archives in response to Nietzsche's plea, and one that follows in the interdisciplinary footsteps of Ganesh and Ghani.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani are New York City-based artists, both of whom focus on, among other things, the constructedness of history and the omissions therein; *Index of the Disappeared* is their first collaboration. Ganesh works primarily in drawing, installation, text, and collaboration to "excavate and circulate buried narratives typically excluded from official canons of history, literature, and art." Ghani's work, through which she "explores, engages with, and occasionally creates points of exchange, with a particular focus on conversations, translations, border zones and political transitions," largely lies within the realms of video, installation, and new media. For more information, visit <http://www.chitraganesh.com/about.html> and <http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/mariam/#bio>.

<sup>2</sup> The term "warm data" was coined by the artists to describe the type of information they seek to collect in the project; Ghani describes it as "diametrically opposed to the questions asked during government processes like special registration, and to elicit data that will be the opposite of the cold, hard facts held in classified files." For more information, go to: <http://www.kabul-reconstructions.net/mariam/projects2.html#Index>.

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