Documenting Doha: Community Archiving and Collective Memory in Qatar

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Cover Page Footnote

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In the late 1970s, a white British traveler visited the Arabian Gulf nation-state of Qatar. Although his observations are tinged with Orientalist tropes, his comments about Qataris' visiting the newly opened and first Qatar National Museum, if accurate, point to the place the museum occupied in the life of locals. He wrote,

> There were, curiously, more Qataris in the museum than anywhere else in the city. . . . Once it had been a fort; now it was a defense of another kind. . . . Inside the air-conditioned gloom of the old fort, there were waxworks behind glass illustrating bedu [Bedouin] customs. But it was the people on my side of the glass who interested me most. . . . They stood absorbed in front of waxwork figures who looked exactly like themselves. Did these women come each week to look in the mirror of the museum to reassure themselves that they really existed?[1]

The museum opened in 1975 with an ethnographic collection bought from or donated by the Qatari public.[2] Conceived by Sheikh Khalifa bin Hamad al-Thani (1934–2016), the ruler at the time, as a way to document Qatari cultural heritage, the institution was designed to serve as a counterbalance to development projects financed by the oil revenues he anticipated would significantly change the nature of the society.[3] Today, nearly fifty years later, that first museum has closed but Qatar is now home to multiple contemporary world-class museums. Some scholarship has sought to understand present-day Qataris' relatively low interest in the exhibits of these mainstream museums, sometimes attributing the disinterest to cultural differences instead of considering that many of the museum exhibits, curated by non-Qataris for an international audience, do not appeal to local cultural concerns and interests.

In this article, I demonstrate how Qataris, in not seeing themselves or their communities reflected in these modern-day mainstream institutions, are actively engaging in community archiving activity. I maintain that community archiving activity is happening in Qatar (and other places in the Arabian, also known as Persian, Gulf) because of the estrangement the importation of foreign heritage expertise has caused. I call for us to recognize how everyday Qataris, neither heritage "experts" nor professionally trained archivists and yet possessing expertise in their own cultural practices, have created cultural identity-affirming archival collections within the last decade on social media sites such as Instagram and Twitter. The article draws on my experience teaching graduate students in a Library and Information Science program in Qatar for three years. As an insider/outsider, a Muslim, Black American instructor working at a branch of a British university in Qatar, I was privy to the intellectual discussions of heritage sector colleagues as well as the private reflections of local Qatari and Qatar-born students on the state of heritage projects in their country. Building on these experiences and qualitative research that includes analysis of the content of Qatari social media accounts, this article maintains that in light of the relative absence of relatable representations of their cultural heritage, Qataris have taken to documenting and sharing their cultural heritage materials outside of the formal heritage sector using online social

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[1] Jonathan Raban, *Arabia: Through the Looking Glass* (London: Eland, 1979), 71–72.
[2] Mariam Ibrahim al-Mulla, "The Development of the First Qatar National Museum," in *Cultural Heritage in the Arabian Peninsula: Debates, Discourses and Practices,* ed. Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2014), 95.
[3] National Museum of Qatar (booklet), n.d.

media platforms in vibrant, identity-affirming forms of what has come to be referred to in the field of archival studies as community archiving.

Qataris are consciously using social media to create collections that call forth and nurture collective memory in ways and around topics that are not presented in the multimillion-dollar museums in their country. Western heritage experts working in Qatar have claimed that their adherence to international museum standards does not allow them to engage with "local constructs of heritage interpretation and valorization."[4] Such a stance is meant to absolve heritage experts of any fault for the disconnect between what Qataris know and experience as their culture and what is mounted in the museums of the country. It both ignores the cultural specificity of museum practices and standards and downplays the agency, however limited, expatriate heritage experts *do* have in shaping heritage discourses that acknowledge the lived experiences of Qataris and long-term Qatari residents.[5]

In order to understand the development and role of Qatari online community archiving, this article first briefly reviews some background on what has come to be known as the "community archives movement." Turning to Qatar, it provides a brief overview of the history of museums in Qatar, from the established tradition of locally run ethnographic museums operated by laypeople in the Gulf to the "heritage boom" that brought an influx of Western heritage expertise into the country in order to develop the heritage sector.[6] Finally, the piece looks at the social dynamics that led Qataris to document themselves and their memories via social media. By reviewing examples of online community archives, it notes correspondences to the characteristics of community archives that archival scholars have identified. It concludes that many of the collections Qataris have placed online via Instagram and Twitter are indeed community archives in the sense of nontraditional collections "tied to a particular group, often one that may be undocumented or under-documented by traditional archival institutions."[7]

Community, Archives, and Museums

There is no one standard definition of community archives. However, they are understood to be "collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control." Furthermore, the community actively participates in self-documentation, "making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality *on their own terms.*"[8] Community archives discourse largely originated in the United Kingdom and United States, in each case taking on characteristics relevant to identity-based archival and heritage activism on the part of communities whose voices and experiences are under- or unrepresented, often deliberately, by more mainstream heritage institutions.[9] Although a 2020 anthology on community archives edited by Jeanette Bastian and Andrew Flinn provides discussions of what community archiving looks like in some other national and cultural contexts,

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[4] Serena Iervolino, "Qatar's Accelerated Developmental Model," in *Museums of the Arabian Peninsula: Historical Developments and Contemporary Discourses*, ed. Sarina Wakefield (London: Routledge, 2020), 80.

[5] Pamela Erskine-Loftus, "Does It Matter If Museum Practices Are Thought of as 'Global'?" in Wakefield, ed., *Museums of the Arabian Peninsula*, 209–23.

[6] Gerd Nonneman and Marc Valeri, "The 'Heritage' Boom in the Gulf: Critical and Interdisciplinary Perspectives," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2017): 155–56.

[7] Jeanette Bastian and Andrew Flinn, "Introduction," in *Community Archives, Community Spaces: Heritage, Memory and Identity*, ed. Jeanette Bastian and Andrew Flinn (London: Facet, 2020), xx.

[8] Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream," *Archival Science*, 9, nos.1–2 (2009): 73.

[9] Andrew Flinn, "The Impact of Independent and Community Archives on Professional Archival Thinking and Practice," in *The Future of Archives and Recordkeeping: A Reader,* ed. Jennie Hill (London: Facet, 2011), 151.

it remains unclear the extent to which the community archives models that have received attention in the United States and United Kingdom, and have been celebrated for their ability to make space for nonelite experiences on the historical record, can function or are even appropriate outside of the original cultural contexts in which they developed.[10] For example, archival scholar Anne Gilliland asks, to what extent is it possible for community members in surveillance-heavy autocratic societies to openly produce identity-based narratives that may go against dominant state narratives?[11] Instead of examining the extent to which prevailing community archives models can be universally adopted, this article looks at how Qataris are actually carrying out community archiving activity online, outside of the formal heritage sector. It examines the collections they make to remember and preserve Qatari cultural heritage and argues that one of the impetuses for their activity is the perceived absence of relatable content in the international-facing museums in their country that are shaped by imported and primarily European heritage expertise. It argues that Qataris, who are in the unusual position of being demographic minorities in their own country (due to the presence of a large expatriate population), are eager for ways to safeguard both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.[12] As a result, they have undertaken "community archiving activity" in the manner Paul Long and colleagues describe in which communities self-document as a response to a perceived sense of "cultural injustice" and marginalization of their culture. In this vein, community archiving activity is a conscious intervention in the "representation, interpretation and communication of culture" by a community that produces archives about itself which speak to its experiences and that is for its own consumption.[13]

In the West, community archives have increasingly become the refuge and instrument of the marginalized. By contrast, native Qatari citizens are, in general, neither socially nor economically disadvantaged. However, the adaptation of Qatar's museums (and cultural heritage narratives) to fit a global palette has meant that social media–based Qatari community archiving activities are, like community archives elsewhere, filling "the gap left by mainstream repositories." The initiatives examined in this article meet some of the principles that Michelle Caswell, a leading archival scholar and theorist, delineated for community archives including:

> Broad *participation* in all or most aspects of archival collecting from appraisal to description to outreach; shared ongoing *stewardship* of cultural heritage between the archival organization and the larger community it represents; *multiplicity* of voices and formats, including those not traditionally found in mainstream archives such as ephemera and artifacts; and the positioning of archival collecting as a form of *activism* and ongoing *reflexivity* about the shifting nature of community and identity.

Most notably, the online Qatari community archives are alternative spaces where Qataris have made "collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them and to control the means through which stories about their past are constructed."[14]

Qatari Community and Qatari Heritage Concerns

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[10] Bastian and Flinn, "Introduction."

[11] Anne Gilliland, personal communication, May 3, 2018.

[12] Eman Kamel, "Qataris Call for Safeguarding a Heritage That's Slipping Away," *Al Fanar Media*, November 15, 2019, https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2019/11/qataris-call-for-safeguarding-a-heritage-thats-slipping-away/.

[13] Paul Long et al., "Popular Music, Community Archives and Public History Online: Cultural Justice and the DIY Approach to Heritage," in Bastian and Flinn, eds., *Community Archives, Community Spaces*, 99.

[14] Michelle Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight against Symbolic Annihilation," *Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 31.

The Qatari community is not a monolith but rather the result of historical movements of populations within and to the Gulf region. Within the country, people of African, Bedouin (Arab), and Persian ancestry all see themselves as Qatari in what Mariam al-Hammadi, a leading Qatari heritage scholar, considers a noncompetitive interdependence, while admitting that certain lineages are seen to be better than others. Still, writing a year before the opening of a new National Museum of Qatar, she hoped that the diversity of the Qatari historical experience would not be portrayed as a monolith or even as a binary (desert Bedouin versus coastal village inhabitants).[15]

Prior to the 2019 opening of the new National Museum of Qatar, the Qatar National Research Fund (QNRF) sponsored the UCL-Qatar–based National Museums and the Public Imagination Project, which set out to understand "the social and cultural perception and impact of the National Museum of Qatar [NMoQ] across key demographic groups in Qatar, both Qatari nationals and expatriates."[16] One survey the project undertook of 350 students at Qatar University asked their opinion on how Qatari identity should be presented at the new museum. The results showed that 87 percent of the students preferred "a presentation of different Qatari cultural identities, rather than politically accepting the idea of a unified identity."[17] I infer from this that they wanted the ethnic, religious, tribal, and racial differences that exist among Qataris to be positively highlighted instead of obscured under the guise of a unifying homogenous identity. However, this is not something public museums in Qatar deliver. The relative absence of family and tribal signifiers appears to be purposeful. For example, Jocelyn Sage Mitchell and Scott Curtis considered the documentation of Qatari tribes carried out by the Danish Expedition to the country in 1959 to have produced "inconvenient artefacts" in the form of hundreds of photos and videos of Bedouin life that some might consider "primitive" or embarrassing for modern-day Qataris. The images are inconvenient in that they "depict the diversity of Qatari lifestyles of the past, in contrast to the unified identity narrative of the new national museum."[18] While some photos from the Danish Expedition do hang in the new National Museum, they stand alone, without any contextual captions, and thus lack the relevant panel information that would connect them to specific tribes and tribal practices.

Relatively little of the diversity of the local population can be seen in Qatar's museums (with the exception of the Bin Jelmood slavery museum, which provides a history of the enslavement of people from East Africa and South Asia in Qatar but falls short of connecting the lasting social effects of enslavement to any present-day communities). Yet, the absence of the tribe is perhaps most glaring considering how prominent tribal relations still are for modern-day people in the Gulf. Tribes (*qaba'il*), as extended familial social arrangements in the Gulf, are important sources of stability and connectors with tradition. Sebastian Maisel writes that the tribe has "withstood the pressures of modernity" and even "gained momentum in the current debate over national heritage and identity."[19] Strange, then, that the tribe is so absent from the public museum space, which values national unity narratives over tribal distinctions. The absence of tribes from the formal heritage sector is intentional and meant to avoid inciting any dormant rivalries by seeming to give preference to a specific tribal group. Furthermore, as a Qatari acquaintance explained, this absence

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[15] Mariam Ibrahim al-Hammadi, "Presentation of Qatari Identity at National Museum of Qatar: Between Imagination and Reality," *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies* 16, no. 1 (2018): 5.

[16] National Museum of Qatar and the Public Imagination Research Project, 2016, https://www.-museumsimagination-ucl.com/ [site no longer functional; see https://web.archive.org/web/20190620210035/-https://www.museumsimagination-ucl.com/new-page/].

[17] Al-Hammadi, "Presentation of Qatari Identity," 6.

[18] Jocelyn Sage Mitchell and Scott Curtis, "Old Media, New Narratives: Repurposing Inconvenient Artifacts for the National Museum of Qatar," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 8, no. 2 (2018): 210.

[19] Sebastian Maisel, "Tribalism and Family Affairs in the Arabian Peninsula," *Hawwa* 16, nos. 1–3 (2018): 54.

also serves to avoid inadvertently honoring or giving prominence to a faction that may not be on good terms with the ruling family. Museums in Qatar have kept tribal relations outside, aiding in the construction of a singular narrative of Qatari identity.

It is noteworthy that Mariam al-Mulla (later al-Hammadi) says the first national museum opened in the 1970s in order to make up for "the absence of a national archives" in light of the role of national archives to nation-building.[20] It was in the first national museum that Sheikh Khalifa intended to preserve Qatar's heritage materials. He established the Qatar National Committee for Collecting Ethnographical Materials, whose members traveled around the country looking to acquire objects for the museum, sometimes by just knocking on doors. The only criteria the committee had for the materials it sought was that they should be "old and Qatari" and could have multiple and new readings in the context of the first national museum.[21] The pivot toward museums in Qatar at that time was "part of a wider, complex desire to provide a *simple* analytical narrative that offered proof of the country's heritage."[22] The museum was to house the documentary proof of Qatari heritage that is, to this day, often casually dismissed by outsiders due to a paucity of written records and material objects.[23]

A museum facilitates nation-building in ways archives may not, because although archival appraisal and description practices are ripe with opportunities for subjective decisions that can define the scope of the historical record, in museums individual objects are consciously and intentionally assembled "in various configurations to produce meaningful narratives." The "collection management, documentation and interpretive traditions" of archives and museums are not redundant, although there is a tendency to classify them both as memory institutions.[24] The sense-making work museum curators do is explicit and intentional in a way that is not professionally acceptable in most traditional archives, although it is common in community archives.[25]

Identity-Building with the Museum

The modern museums of Qatar are nation-building projects as much as they are tourist attractions designed to impress international audiences. When in late 2020 the Qatar Central Bank issued the new two hundred riyal note with images of Doha's Museum of Islamic Art and the new National Museum of Qatar, Shaikha Al Mayassa al-Thani, the chair of the Board of Trustees of Qatar Museums (and sister of the country's ruler), explained the choice of the images as "a recognition that museums play a key role in nation's [*sic*] economies and identity building."[26]

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[20] Mariam al-Mulla, "Collecting the Collection: Changing Qataris' Attitudes and Practices," in *Museums and the Material World: Collecting the Arabian Peninsula,* ed. Pamela Erskine-Loftus (Edinburgh: Museums Etc. 2014), 108; Stefan Berger, "The Role of National Archives in Constructing National Master Narratives in Europe," *Archival Science* 13, no. 1 (2013): 1–22.

[21] Qatar National Museum (booklet).

[22] Al-Mulla, "Collecting the Collection," 105; emphasis added.

[23] Karen Exell and Trinidad Rico, "'There Is No Heritage in Qatar': Orientalism, Colonialism and Other Problematic Histories," *World Archaeology* 45, no. 4 (2013): 670–85; mariam cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

[24] Helena Robinson, "Remembering Things Differently: Museums, Libraries and Archives as Memory Institutions and Their Implications for Convergence," *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 27, no. 4 (2012): 420, 425.

[25] Flinn, "The Impact of Independent and Community Archives," 155.

[26] "This is a recognition that museums play a key role." Shaikha Al Mayassa (@almayassahamad), tweet, December 13, 2020, https://twitter.com/almayassahamad/status/1338166712257179650.

Suzi Mirgani sees Qatar's museums as part of a top-down effort to "create a new national identity that is fluid and globally connected."[27] Karen Exell, a British heritage expert instrumental in the development of the 2019 National Museum of Qatar, notes the continued investment in "western-style museum projects" by the Qatari government as a demonstration of its "desire . . . to utilize western heritage institutions, epistemologies and methodologies as part of an agenda of international communication and cultural diplomacy."[28] These museums are celebrated in the West because of the extent to which they adhere to Western models and are able to accomplish this with considerable reference to foreign expertise.[29]

In the cultural heritage sector in Qatar, people designated as experts play a key role. In the Gulf, these experts are brought in from abroad to "oversee and manage" cultural heritage interventions in the region, with the rapid development of museums in Qatar attributed primarily to the role played by "foreign technical expertise."[30]

Ironically, not being intimately familiar with local culture and language does not prohibit one from being an expert controlling how heritage projects in the region are implemented. Neha Vora, an anthropologist who focuses on citizenship, belonging, and South Asian diasporas in the Arab Gulf, has shown how whiteness is a chief criterion for being considered an expert in the Gulf (and obviously outside of the Gulf as well). She writes that the white Westerner brings, in addition to their knowhow in the cultural heritage field (expertise), the "symbolic capital" of their whiteness, which serves as a "marker of their expert status, regardless of their skill set in comparison to other nationalities."[31] It seems natural to ask to what extent the flown-in or resident Western expatriate expert who is unfamiliar with (and at times dismissive of) Qatari culture can produce heritage-based exhibits and programming that engages the local population. Exell admits that the discourse and practices introduced by foreign heritage expertise in Qatar's museums are not intuitive and "do not represent local concerns."[32] Western heritage experts are aware of the criticisms of their work in the Gulf but counter that they are beholden to "top-down decision-making mechanisms and power structures" in which the ruling elites in a nondemocratic nation-state give dictates. Serena Iervolino, a European museum scholar who once taught in Qatar, is emphatic that, although Western expertise has been "critical" to the development of Qatar's museum sector, Qatar's museum program is not the handiwork of "foreign actors with unlimited agency."[33]

Museum Outreach to Local Communities

Mainstream museums in the Gulf are aware of the disconnect between their exhibitions and the local, native publics. They are also aware of the private collections of cultural heritage items circulated by people in the Gulf "deliberately outside the national collections and official national

[27] Suzi Mirgani, "Consumer Citizenship: National Identity and Museum Merchandise in Qatar," *Middle East Journal* 73, no. 4 (2019): 571.

[28] Karen Exell, "Locating Qatar on the World Stage: Museums, Foreign Expertise and the Construction of Qatar's Contemporary Identity," in *Representing the Nation: Heritage, Museums, National Narratives and Identity in the Arab Gulf States*, ed. Pamela Erskine-Loftus, Victoria P. Hightower, and Mariam I. al-Mulla (London: Routledge, 2016), 27.

[29] Iervolino, "Qatar's Accelerated Developmental Model," 67–84.

[30] Trinidad Rico, "Expertise and Heritage Ethics in the Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 743; Iervolino, "Qatar's Accelerated Developmental Model," 68.

[31] Neha Vora, *Teach for Arabia: American Universities, Liberalism, and Transnational Qatar* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2018), 47.

[32] Exell, "Locating Qatar on the World Stage," 33.

[33] Iervolino, "Qatar's Accelerated Developmental Model," 79.

heritage discourse."[34] The private museums of the Gulf (accessible to family and invited guests only) were some of the earliest heritage spaces locals created to demonstrate the issues and heritage concerns that matter to them, which either "intersect or deviate from the authorized historical narratives in state museums." In 2012, Qatar Museums, the government body that manages the country's museums, asked locals to show the contents of their collections publicly, via an exhibit entitled "Mal Lawal," and again in 2014–15, primarily with the goal of enticing locals to sell parts of their collections to the then in-progress National Museum of Qatar. It did not go unnoticed that the 2012 "Mal Lawal" exhibit received the highest percentage of visits by Qatari nationals to that point.[35] During a community listening session I attended at the National Museum of Qatar in early 2020 to plan for a third digital iteration of "Mal Lawal," a video of earlier years of the exhibit drew criticism from a Qatari man in attendance who noted the poor quality of the video and lamented the lack of documentation for previous iterations (although a book was published). A person involved with the project acknowledged the issue and said that many events have happened for which "there are not archives of them," highlighting a weakness in the formal heritage scene in Qatar in terms of documenting itself.

Elsewhere in the Gulf, the National Museum of the United Arab Emirates pursued similar outreach efforts. In 2014, it launched the "Lest We Forget: Structures of Memory" exhibit, which was the first in the country to put the personal belongings of Emiratis on display. This was followed by a 2015 version that focused on Emirati family photographs.[36] So, while museums in the Gulf, and the field of museums in general, are conscious of the need to relinquish some curatorial and interpretive control to the local community, the pressure put on them as international-facing, nation-building tools means that exhibits geared toward local audiences are rare and it does not seem as if the voices and viewpoints of local community collections wield any lasting influence.[37]

Community Archiving Activity on Social Media

Examples of online Qatari community archiving show the documentation priorities that matter to those communities and the narrative frameworks used to engage their collective memory. In affirming their own memories via social media platforms (primarily Instagram and Twitter), those who practice community archiving among the local Qatari community put themselves into conversation with state heritage discourse, and in doing so highlight their own absences. Haidy Geismar sees social media as not only a commercial initiative but also a potent "form of self-expression," and speaks of the possibilities platforms such as Instagram open to "archiving a slice of reality that was absent in the traditional archive, and in so doing makes it possible to incorporate that into circuits of value and the production of meaning."[38]

Instagram, as the key platform of what has been termed "visual social media," allows for the presentation of images and their description, categorization, and then group assessment or annotation, all crucial aspects to the community archiving process.[39] Instagram as archives is now a commonly used functional metaphor that, while not necessarily adhering to the best practices of traditional archival practices, has provided a platform for networked personal and collective

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[34] Exell, "Locating Qatar on the World Stage," 37.

[35] Karen Exell, *Modernity and the Museum in the Arabian Peninsula* (London: Routledge, 2016), 166, 182.

[36] Hülya Yağcıoğlu, "Afterword: All Things Collected," in *All Things Arabia: Arabian Identity and Material Culture,* ed. Ileana Baird and Hülya Yağcıoğlu (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 227.

[37] Bernice Murphy, "Memory, History and Museums," *Museum International* 57, no. 3 (2005): 70–78.

[38] Haidy Geismar, "Instant Archives?" in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Ethnography*, ed. Larissa Hjorth et al. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 340, 341–42.

[39] Tama Leaver, Tim Highfield, and Crystal Abidin, *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures* (New York: Wiley, 2020); Geismar, "Instant Archives?" 331–43.

memory.[40] Photographs posted on the site are essentially performances of memory that represent a negotiation between personal identity and collective memory.[41]

Pierre Nora, the noted French scholar of memory and identity, contends that modern-day memory is "archival," by which he means it is dependent on the material forms of records, such as the "the immediacy of the recording, [or] the visibility of the image."[42] It is the photograph, the lost photograph, the photograph of old Qatar that Qataris seek out, collect, exhibit, and preserve as evidence of what once was and to demonstrate how much life has changed over the past few decades. They use these images in many of the ways that Susan Sontag says photographs perform memory work. All at once the photos of old Qatar "furnish evidence," are "defenses against anxiety," "promote nostalgia," and "testify to time's relentless melt." They serve as "tokens of absence" that allow people to inventory those very absences.[43]

Documenting Doha

Qatari community archiving on social media seeks to create past time in local space. Digital archivist Zakiya Collier sees the mounting of community-based archives on Instagram to be a kind of "archival activism" that meets people where they are because "Instagram is accessible and already a community space."[44] Michelle Caswell and colleagues found that space, both physical and digital, is central to the representational work of community archiving. Through the spaces that community archives inhabit, whether they be on the ground or on social media, communities create sites of belonging.[45] These sites assert the existence of the community on its own terms, often in the face of the "omissions of memory institutions" that produce situations to which Caswell had earlier applied the term "symbolic annihilation."[46] The community archiving spaces Qataris create on social media are Nora's sites of memory (*lieux de memoire*), the "material, symbolic, and functional" places where memory and history are entangled.[47] The following sections of this paper look at specific examples from Qatari social media accounts practicing community archiving. In the "places of memory" on Qatari social media, community archives' images (photos and video) "become 'timeless' (or better, time-thickened)," and the members of the online community "are all in the same times together."[48]

Asma al-Kuwari, who looked at the Qatari Instagram sites @mal_awal0, @qadeem_qtr, and @bokuwara_archives, recognizes the memory work being done by those whom she calls "citizen archivists." She considers the sites to be efforts to keep the Qatari "community intact" in their efforts to connect Qataris with "their history" and "their memories."[49] However, she has been

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[40] Elisa Serafinelli, "Networked Remembrance in the Time of Insta-Memories," *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 3 (2020): 1–12.

[41] Maria Paula Arias, "Instagram Trends: Visual Narratives of Embodied Experiences at the Museum of Islamic Art," paper presented at MW18: Museums and the Web, Vancouver, Canada, 2018, https://mw18.mwconf.org/-paper/instagram-trends-visual-narratives-of-embodied-experiences-at-the-museum-of-islamic-art/.

[42] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (1989): 13.

[43] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 5, 8, 15, 22.

[44] Zakiya Collier, "Archival Activism: Community-Centred Approaches to Archives" (online webinar), Digital Repository of Ireland, October 22, 2020, https://dri.ie/recording-archival-activism-available.

[45] Michelle Caswell et al., "Imagining Transformative Spaces: The Personal-Political Sites of Community Archives," *Archival Science* 18, no. 1 (2018): 73–93.

[46] Caswell, "Seeing Yourself in History," 32, 27.

[47] Nora, "Between Memory and History," 7.

[48] Nadav Hochman and Lev Manovich, "Zooming into an Instagram City: Reading the Local through social media," *First Monday*,18, no.7 (2013), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v18i7.4711.

[49] Asma al-Kuwari, "Instagram as Archives-Qatar" (Unpublished M.A. paper, University College of London, Qatar, 2019), 5.

hesitant to label them community archives although she deems them to have the potential to one day become full-fledged community archives in the model of what exists in the United States and United Kingdom. I argue that the Instagram accounts that al-Kuwari analyzed, in addition to the different Qatari Instagram and Twitter sites this paper considers, are all the products of "community archiving activity."[50] So, although Qatari community archiving practices may not manifest in the forms typical in the West, or use the term "community archives" to describe themselves, they are "the products of their attempts to document the history of their commonality."[51] Whether on Twitter or Instagram, the accounts document, teach, and actively remember what Qatar once was for the sake of the local community. This satisfies, for me, their acceptability as community archives, while al-Kuwari may have been looking for more intentional and explicit utilization of Western community archiving frameworks. On these sites, Qataris are using the Internet, like other community archives groups, as grounds wherein they make connections based on a relationship to an actual geographic location.[52] In these next few examples, I examine how four social media sites engage the general Qatari community in the documentation of collective memory. The sites came to my attention either through my own following of heritage-based sites or through their promotion in news articles and public talks. I believe they are salient examples because they are all consistently maintained by a person or group of people with conscious goals of documenting Qatari history, eliciting commentary and contributions from the Qatari public, and making connections beyond the actual social media platforms on which they are based.

@AnalogFilm.qa

The Qatar based Analog Film Club is born of the anxiety people in the Gulf feel "that old space is being destroyed," and the compulsion people feel to use photography to document what is still standing.[53] The Instagram account and the on-the-ground club began with a simple premise: that the use of analog film is not "dead," and that it might actually be a good medium to document what is known as "old Doha," those parts of the city that show their age either in the sense of decay or the datedness of the architecture and that are slowly being conceded to new developments.[54] The founders of the club thought it poignant that a part of the city which is "slowly fading" could be documented with a dying form of documentation, analog film. Asmaa al-Mohannadi and colleagues refer to what is happening to the built environment in Doha as the loss of Qatari urban architectural identity, tracing the loss to modernization projects put into place by foreign consultants since the 1950s. The result, for the average Qatari, has been alienation from their local built environment through the demolition of "valuable vernacular structures or early-modern buildings," including family- and tribe-based neighborhoods and houses that were built based on sociocultural, religious, and tribal norms.[55] Trinidad Rico, a cultural heritage scholar whose work focuses on Qatar, cites the willful neglect of a specific historic neighborhood in Doha as an example of a "failure to heritagize," attributable to "structural shortcomings in methodological and discursive aspects of heritage preservation," and points to the "absences in the discursive and

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[50] Long et al., "Popular Music," 99.

[51] Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, "Whose Memories," 75.

[52] Andrew Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28, no. 2 (2007): 158.

[53] Nadia Rahman, "Place and Space in the Memory of United Arab Emirates Elders," in *Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States*, ed. Alanoud Alsharekh and Robert Springborg (London: Middle East Institute SOAS, 2008), 38; Sontag, *On Photography,* 24.

[54] A. al Baker and A. Debrina, "Nostalgic Portraits of a Bygone Doha," *New York Times Style Magazine,* November 16, 2020, https://tstyleqatar.com/nostalgic_doha/.

[55] Asmaa al-Mohannadi, Raffaello Furlan, and Mark David Major, "A Cultural Heritage Framework for Preserving Qatari Vernacular Domestic Architecture," *Sustainability* 12, no. 18 (2020): 2.

material practices of heritage preservation" that need to be studied.[56] Community archiving activity in Qatar blooms in these absences.

The Analog Film Club of Qatar, which at one point described itself as being "from film photographers [and] for film photographers," has 1,440 followers (at the time of this writing) and features the photographs of those who post their photos using the tag #analogqatar. Photographers also post information on the camera and film used to take their photos. While membership is not entirely Qatari, members seem united in the goal of capturing the ever-fleeting past in everyday Qatar. The club arranges "photowalks" of decaying neighborhoods or old buildings of historical significance, for example, a popular movie theater or a formerly prestigious school. These nostalgia walks enable the club to document old Doha, capture it, hold it close, and stop it from passing on. They are active attempts to document what once was and what may likely not be for much longer, and to juxtapose, where possible, the relics of old Doha with its newest forms. On November 28, 2020, a member posted a photo of Souq al Ali, one of the older markets in Doha and a go-to place for tailors of traditional clothing, incense sellers, and other traders of cultural paraphernalia. Its description read, "Souq Al Ali on film. #35mm #ektar100." It received 107 likes. One follower responded simply with the word "timeless." On January 16, 2021, a photo of a preadolescent boy of South Asian background posed with his scooter in front of the traditional door of an old house was posted with the description, "Environmental portraits in Old Doha / Rolliefex f2.8 / Kodak Potra 160 / Lab: @khalifaartcenter." A photo with a similar composition posted on December 15, 2020, captured a young South Asian man walking past a building that was dilapidated and empty; at an angle behind him, the viewer sees the tell-tale older traditional doors of buildings in old Doha. The photo was posted to Instagram with the description, "Sometimes [*sic*] before the building of the new Doha / Konika c35 / Kodak gold." The photos, while documenting old Doha, do not try to hide the present and the presence of the marginalized, mostly South Asian migrant workers who still inhabit some of the decaying buildings, keeping them in use for a little longer.

@Turath_Lawal

@Turath_Lawal is a Qatari Instagram site with 114,000 followers at the time of this writing. It was begun in 2011 by Jaber al-Hajri, then a university student who was unsatisfied with the lack of information on Qatari heritage he found either online or in local libraries. Al-Hajri, who describes himself as a researcher and expert of Qatari heritage, lauds the older generation of Qataris who have preserved or memorized important aspects of Qatari culture such as folk sayings (*amthal sha'abia*) and poetry (*qasā'id*), arguing that they are a source from which his account has greatly benefited. Today, the material he shares on Instagram (and to a lesser extent on a twin Twitter account) are the product of his personal research, which includes texts and information he has gathered orally from Qataris. Al-Hajri defines heritage as that which is "taken from earlier generations without being changed [*bidun taghir*]," and he says that "heritage is a message. . . . It is 'identity.'" During an online talk at the Qatar National Library in December 2020, al-Hajri stated emphatically that "there is heritage [*turāth*] in every house, and every person carries with(in) them heritage," before adding again that he has found more benefit from people than from books.[57]

Al-Hajri describes the @Turath_Lawal Instagram site as a valuable reference source for the community that has become a serious responsibility. He is adamant that the site needs outside

[56] Trinidad Rico, "Heritage Failure and Its Public: Thoughts on the Preservation of Old Doha, Qatar," *Public Historian* 41, no. 1 (2019): 120, 114.

[57] Jaber al-Hajri, "Promoting Qatari Heritage with Social Media with Turath Lawal" (online talk), Qatar National Library, December 15, 2020.

support because of the demands the Qatari community puts on it. Al-Hajri's stewardship of @Turath_Lawal is reminiscent of the dynamics of community archives that Anne Gilliland and Andrew Flinn note when they explain that

> Roles within community-based archives often do not fall into the clearly defined categories we might expect to find in mainstream heritage bodies. Collectors and curators, community archivists and the users of community archives are often the same individuals. Many community archives are based around one or two key personal collections, with these collectors often being at the core of the organisation providing much of the inspiration and drive. The personal sacrifice and drive to document that many of these central figures exhibit is both crucial to the initial growth and survival of these archives but also represents a potential problem in terms of identifying equally committed successors to take on the archive.[58]

The @Turath_Lawal Instagram account, with its multiple themed collections on different aspects of the Qatari past and present, is functioning as a community archives, providing access to materials that validate and preserve the memories of the local Qatari population. It makes dynamic use of video, film photography, and aerial photos, some of which have been published elsewhere, to document customs, terms, and knowledge that is slowly being lost.

For example, on January 19, 2021, the site posted a black-and-white photo of a Qatari scrivener who would work in the marketplace producing whatever documents were needed by his clients, who were primarily illiterate. It provided a description of the kinds of documents the scrivener might produce as well as the instruments used.

@Turath_Lawal uses photos of the past in ways that engage its followers in emotive longing for the Qatari past. On January 18, 2021, al-Hajri posted a picture of the front of a dilapidated house with a large green decorative door with ironwork and a smaller door carved into its bottom right side. From the metal bars at the top of the door, overgrown palm trees can be seen. In the description, al-Hajri complimented the design of the door and the beauty of the palm trees before telling us that it was the house of his grandfather. He then offered a prayer for all the people who lived in the house (who presumably have now died). Another photo of a door was posted on January 6. This worn, metal door is not decorative and the cement walls around it are in decay. With the photo was posted a poetic commentary, "They went away and left the door locked [there is a padlock on the door] / I pass by the door for no reason / perhaps I might get a glimpse of you / or of someone who beheld you." The post received 1,060 likes and a follower responded with their own poetry about a house with walls but no roof. In the follower's poem, the house speaks to the shocked passerby about the fleetingness of life.

On the @Turath_Lawal Instagram site it becomes apparent that actual people from the past are intimately missed as well as traditions and built structures. On September 15, 2020, the account posted a picture of a group of Qatari boys standing in front of a doorway of a house that would now be considered part of old Doha. An older Qatari woman in traditional dress has just walked past them, perhaps having exited the house. The photo was accompanied by a lamentation that the time captured in the photo is no longer. It received 1,154 likes with followers lamenting the passing of such a "good era," using the crying and broken heart emoticons as punctuation.

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[58] Anne Gilliland and Andrew Flinn, "Community Archives: What Are We Really Talking About?" CIRN Prato Community Informatics Conference, October 28–30, 2013, 9, https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/-0007/920626/gilliland_flinn_keynote.pdf.

@Qatar_identity

Begun in 2012 by an unaffiliated group of Qatari youth with the stated goal of "supporting, valuing and preserving [Qatari] identity," the @Qatar_identity twitter account tweets images from the past, often asking, "Do you know what this image is? What does this image mean to you?" Its relatively modest number of followers (4,959 at the time of this writing) may submit materials they want to share related to Qatari identity, a definition of which is in the account's pinned tweet. This definition explains that identity encompasses all those living in the same land with shared religion, language, and dress, as well as the norms and traditions (*a'dāt wa taqālid*) that are passed from generation to generation (literally, from parents and grandparents). It then connects identity to the 2030 vision for the country, goals for human development promoted by the government.

The followers of the @Qatar_identity account engage the prompts with emotive and informative responses. On December 4, 2020, the account posted a photo of an old sewing machine that a follower had shared with its signature questions, "Do you know what this image is? What does this image mean to you?" One of the first people to respond provided the old Qatari Arabic term for the machine. Another follower wrote that their mother used such a machine to sew their *dara'a* (traditional girls' dresses). Another follower replied that sewing machines were important to the livelihoods of many Qataris in the past who used them to start businesses. Yet another twitter user added that in the past, the machine would have been one of the most important possessions in a Qatari home.

On June 18, 2020, the account tweeted out a vintage video clip of a radio announcing the names of students who had successfully passed their classes. It asked, "Who followed the announcement of the results on the radio? What were your feelings while you waited to hear your name?" The post elicited many affective responses from the twitter users. One person said that they felt "joy" while another wrote that they would hold their breath while listening, ostensibly out of nervous excitement. Another person explained that they cried when they listened to the radio, adding, "It would be impossible to forget how I felt." "Those were the best days," another person commented in the replies to the initial tweet.

@Qatar_identity is actively working to nourish and harvest the memories of the local community, providing a platform for people to share and document their artifacts and recollections. In addition to its own original tweets, it often retweets from another account, Dhakirat Qatar (@atiqasoliti), one of the most extensive Qatari social media accounts on Twitter carrying out the work of community archiving.

Dhakirat Qatar

In the biography for the Dhakirat Qatar (@atiqasoliti) account, its founder, Ateeq Muhammad al-Sulaiti, expresses his interest in Qatari "historical pictures and folk traditions." Begun in 2011, the account has 22,900 followers on Twitter at the time of this writing. Al-Sulaiti summons the community through his posts, sometimes by simply posting a picture of a place that no longer exists or that has changed drastically since the time the photo was taken. Supportive descriptive information (metadata) may be partial, and there are times when he does not have complete information and is asking his followers for their "observations and suggestions." For example, on January 7, 2021, the account posted a photo of a popular shop from 1960s Qatar and asked for information on its location. Qatari Twitter users chimed in with the name of the street and the neighborhood where the store once stood.

On December 31, 2020, the account posted a picture of a mosque from the 1960s. A Twitter user replied that it was her grandfather's mosque (meaning he built it). Another user said, "I grew up seeing this mosque and learned to pray in it." The granddaughter replied again to say that "the land is still there, but the building is not [heartbreak emoticon]." She reminded readers that her grandfather's intention for the mosque was that it be a perpetual pious endowment (*waqf*) and therefore needs to be continued by someone.

Dhakirat Qatar, which can be translated as "memories of Qatar," often explains the Qatari past through posts that highlight "firsts." Photos of what the site says was the first community hospital in Qatar were posted on December 3, 2020, some showing people waiting in its courtyard area in the 1940s and 1950s. Later that month on December 31, the account posted a photo of the first building to have been supplied with electricity in Doha, giving its official name and then its more popular name and location in the eastern part of Doha. In another post from December 10, followers saw a 1970s photo of the original dam in a neighborhood called "the dam" (*al-Sadd*), which explains why the modern neighborhood was given that name. Dhakirat Qatar wants to both teach and learn from the local Qatari community as it carries out its documentation of the country's past.

Conclusion

If the role of social media in societal discourse in the Gulf has been understudied, then the place of heritage-focused social media accounts actively practicing community archiving has been given even less attention.[59] This paper has sought to demonstrate how the Instagram and Twitter accounts made by Qataris to document their communities are inserting themselves into an internal discourse about how Qatari pasts should be remembered. These accounts are actively documenting what has been and is being lost, not just with a passing hashtag but with narrative and often crowdsourced descriptions. The community archives collections they create fill the need left by a perceived absence of relatable representations of the past in formal heritage institutions in the country. The audience for these community archiving social media accounts consists of Qataris or long-term residents of Qatar who long for a past that has been bulldozed and is being transformed daily. The photographs shared via social media help to build "a new world of memory."[60]

While community archiving has not yet become a term Qataris apply when documenting their heritage, it is an activity regularly being practiced in local private museums and on social media sites. As creative and inspiring as community archives can be, they are also a reminder of the failure of the formal heritage sector to adequately engage with heterogenous narratives.[61] Furthermore, they highlight that "groups who share common beliefs, geographies, ethnicities or lifestyles" cannot wait around to be documented by experts.[62]

The sustainability of community archiving social media accounts is tenuous due to lack of infrastructure for long-term digital preservation.[63] In the case of such accounts, the preservation burden is placed on those who manage the accounts, and while account holders are able to

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[59] Jocelyn Sage Mitchell, "#Blockade: Social Media and the Gulf Diplomatic Crisis," *Review of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 2 (2019): 200–220.

[60] Jason Kalin, "Remembering with Rephotography: A Social Practice for the Inventions of Memories," *Visual Communication Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2013): 168–79.

[61] Gilliland and Flinn, "Community Archives," 14.

[62] Jeanette Bastian, "Documenting Communities through the Lens of Collective Memory," in *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the US and Canada*, ed. A. S. Levi and D. Daniel (Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2013), 26.

[63] Flinn, "Community Histories, Community Archives," 158.

download their information from social media sites, the platforms themselves strip away "context from activity streams as they provide access to platform data." This means that account holders are given metadata in a form that does not mirror the essential character of the platform they were using. For example, on the content level, the data generated may not show the meaningful relationships between the textual context of the posts, digital images, and engagement information such as likes or retweets.[64] In arguing for these Qatari accounts to be considered community archives, I am not saying that they conform to the necessary requirements of archival practice and digital preservation. Perhaps one day these social media sites will have an online presence on their own autonomous websites, like many self-declared community archives worldwide. One might hope as well that cultural heritage intuitions in the country can become partners in the archiving and digital preservation of community archiving social media accounts.

Michelle Caswell advocated for mainstream archives (and we extend this to the cultural heritage sector in general) to learn from community archives how to "explicitly foreground the emotional impact of materials of the communities they serve."[65] If we accept that the work of archivists necessarily implicates them "in webs of affective relations," as Marika Cifor maintains, then, as she also argues, the affective memory work that community archives instinctively do and the attention that they pay to the emotional experiences of their users' needs to be adopted by mainstream archives and cultural heritage institutions during the appraisal process. Cifor makes connections among the ability of affect, when applied during appraisal, to bring about emotional justice; accountability to communities; and societal reckonings.[66] In Qatar, there is certainly room for mainstream heritage institutions to employ affect as an appraisal tool and consider how Qataris feel about the exhibits that purport to represent their heritage. The formal cultural heritage sector in Qatar can learn from online community archives how to present local culture in ways that resonate with the Qatari people.

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[64] Melody Condron, "Archiving Social Media," in *The Complete Guide to Personal Digital Archiving*, ed. Brianna H. Marshall (Chicago: American Library Association, 2017), 19–32; Amelia Acker and Adam Kreisberg, "Social Media Data Archives in an API-Driven World," *Archival Science* 20, no. 2 (2020): 105–123.

[65] Michelle Caswell, "Affective Bonds: What Community Archives Can Teach Mainstream Institutions," in Bastian and Flinn, eds., *Community Archives, Community Spaces*, 37.

[66] Marika Cifor, "Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7–31.