

“Dear Christmas Island”

The Historical Document As a Commons For Feeling



Christmas Island: Background

Population: ~1600

Ethnically Chinese, Malay, Australian, & European

1899 First large-scale human settlement: Indentured laborers from South China, Singapore, and Malaysia mining with Christmas Island Phosphate Co.

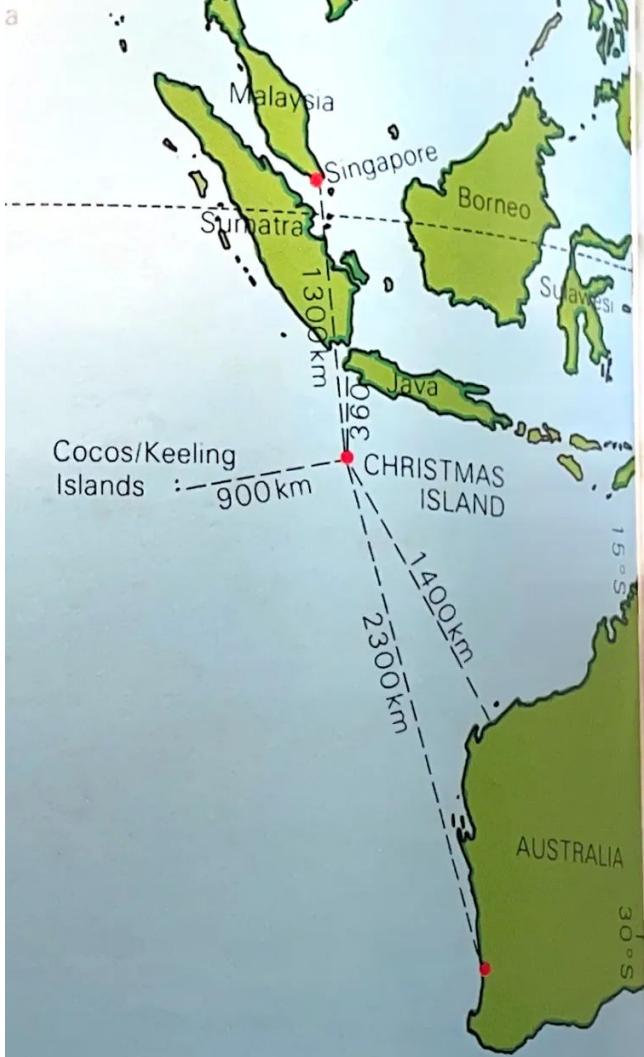
Labor conditions:

- Hard manual labour
- Beriberi - 500 die in first 5 years
- Exploitative trade practices

1942-45 Japanese occupation

1949-1958 Singaporean administration

1958 Island becomes an Australian Territory



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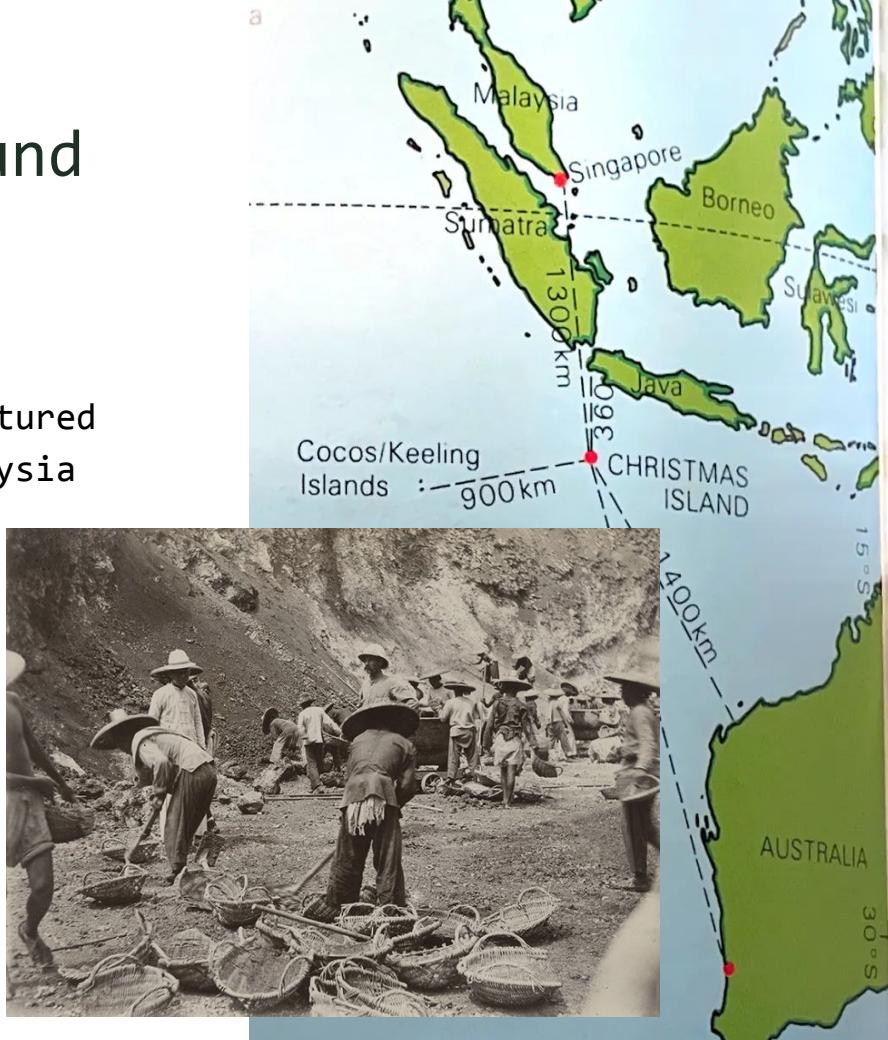
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Postwar Christmas Island

1960s-70s Racial apartheid system, poor working conditions, threat of NTR

1974 Union of Christmas Island Workers founded

1970s-80s Union wins wage parity, improved accommodation, citizenship rights

1976 Race-based Resettlement Scheme relocates Asian residents to the mainland

1987 Australian government closes the mine (British Phosphate Company)

1990 Union repurchases the mine from the Australian government

1998 No more births allowed on the island



European pool near Post Office Padang .



Asian pool near Settlement .

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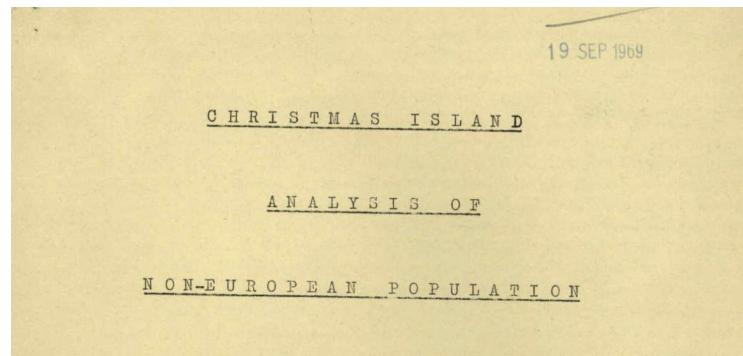
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Asian pool near Settlement .

Community Archiving & Claims to Islandness

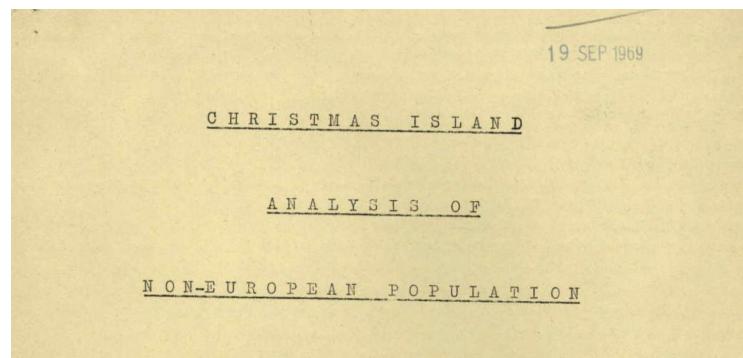
- Limited records from Islanders themselves
- Depopulation via Resettlement and mine closure
- Loss of birthright in 1998 makes birth
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(Roach and Downes 2007)



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Non-traditional archival collection specifically tied to a particular group, often one that may be undocumented or under-documented by traditional archival institutions



Bastian and Flinn 2020

Community Archiving & Claims to Islandness



Tony Chia

That flight of steps in the front looks like the steps from Cheng's house he owns the ice cream and drinks shops nearest the cinema, he was also an electrical foreman at the Settlement electrical shop.

Like Reply 32w

2

↳ Dave Lee replied · 4 Replies



Kit Chia

We lived on the 2nd level. Used to play "sticks" around that Flame of Forrest tree. From memory, we could pluck the flowers and buds by hand! That was back in the 60's, so this picture predates that as the tree is so much lower.

Like Reply 32w

2

↳ Fran Yeoh replied · 3 Replies



Choy Mee Seet

Nice pic..we used to live in the 1st flooron the other side (next to the trade store) .

Like Reply 32w

4

↳ Fran Yeoh replied · 1 Reply

Dear Christmas Island:



A PHOTO EXHIBIT
of 1950s-1980s CI

Wednesday 27 Sept • 5pm
Tai Jin House First Floor

Celebrate the opening of a week-long interactive exhibit showcasing archival photos of Christmas Island with market food stalls and a public welcome.

Rediscover the island's history of physical and social transformation through never-before-seen photos of CI in the 1950s-80s.

Gallery open 5pm
Market stalls 5:30pm
Public launch 6pm

Gallery open 28-29 Sept, 1-5 Oct. 9am-5pm.
STEPHANIE NIU + SHIRE OF CHRISTMAS ISLAND

What are the benefits and considerations of using the historic document as a site of emotional memory?

What role can the historic document play in facilitating discussion of island identity?



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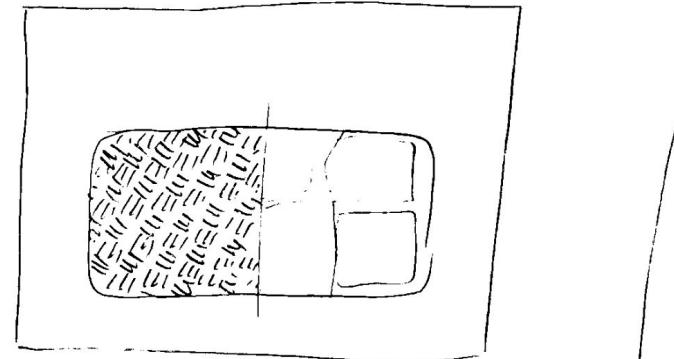
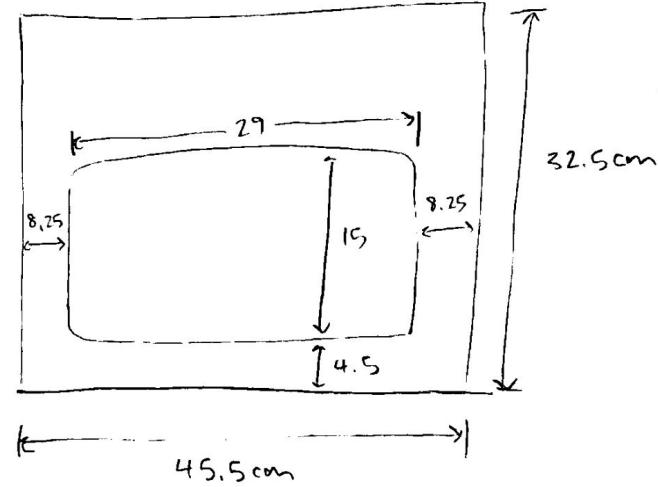
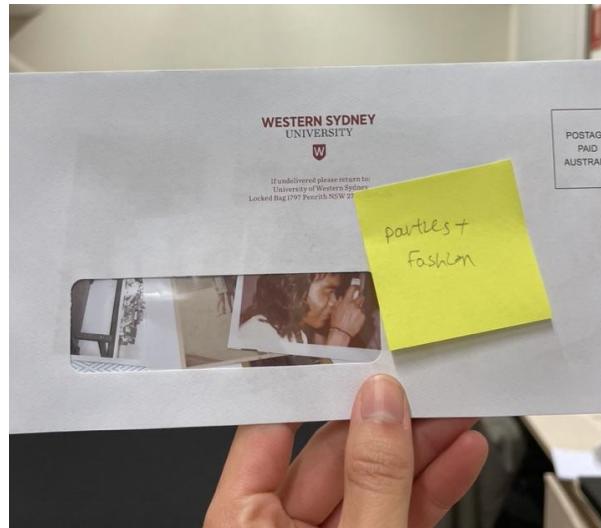
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Method: Letters to the Past



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[Zines] may more resemble a photocopied scrapbook rather than anything that we would otherwise consciously identify as a ‘publication’...[through] disrespect for institutional rules, professional techniques and the re-writing of majority and mainstream culture to reflect subcultural and often subversive values.

Fife 2019, on the aesthetics and politics of zines

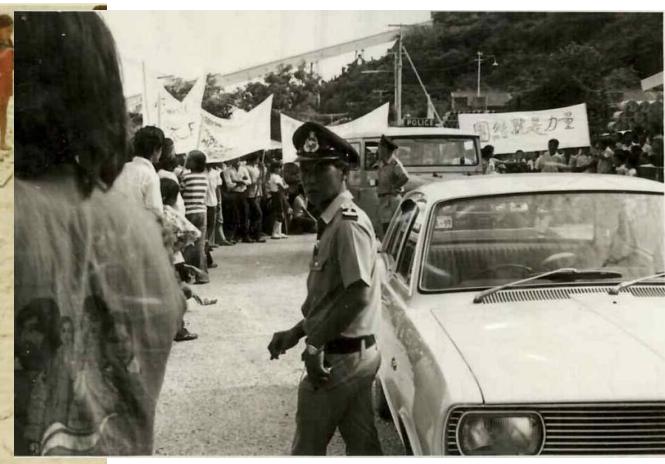


Curation: Feeling the Past without giving in to nostalgia

- Questions frame the past as an emotional construct rather than purely material legacy (Magdin and Lesh 2022)
- Resist nostalgia by engaging with the present and future (Lowenthal 1985)

Obsolescence confers instant bygone status...history was being recycled as nostalgia almost as soon as it happened.

Lowenthal 1985



“What are your memories of the Yellow House?”



“What are your memories of the Yellow House?”



Christmas Island's Two Pools

Before the 1988 Cyclone destroyed many public spaces along Christmas Island's northern coast, many Islanders spent their afternoons leaping from a diving board into an open-air pool sprayed with swell-season seawater. "The showers used to be under the diving board, so you'd come out and go, 'Ah, shoot' – and bang – get hit with warm water."

Several residents recall the Christmas Island Public Pool, located in Settlement near the present-day police station, being uncannily warm, sometimes up to 32 degrees. At the time, the pool was fed with water that cooled the old power station that was located across the street, drawing excess heat away from the generators and redirecting them into the pool. On occasion, an island resident and former pool-goer recalls seeing a sheen of oil floating on the pool's surface.

The island's other pool, located next to the present-day post office, was restricted to CI Club Members. "Really it was for white people only," a long-time Islander recalls. Though membership into the CI Club was based on company status – reserved for supervisors, foremen, and people in similar roles – access to the CI Club could not be separated from race. Fred Mah, who was born on and grew up on Christmas Island, recalls his Chinese-Malaysian brother-in-law being reported for allowing him into the CI Club to play pool/snooker. Despite being a CI Club member as a supervisor at the Drumsite Phosphate Drying Plant (i.e. "The Dryers"), his brother-in-law was harassed by members, which led him to cancel his membership.

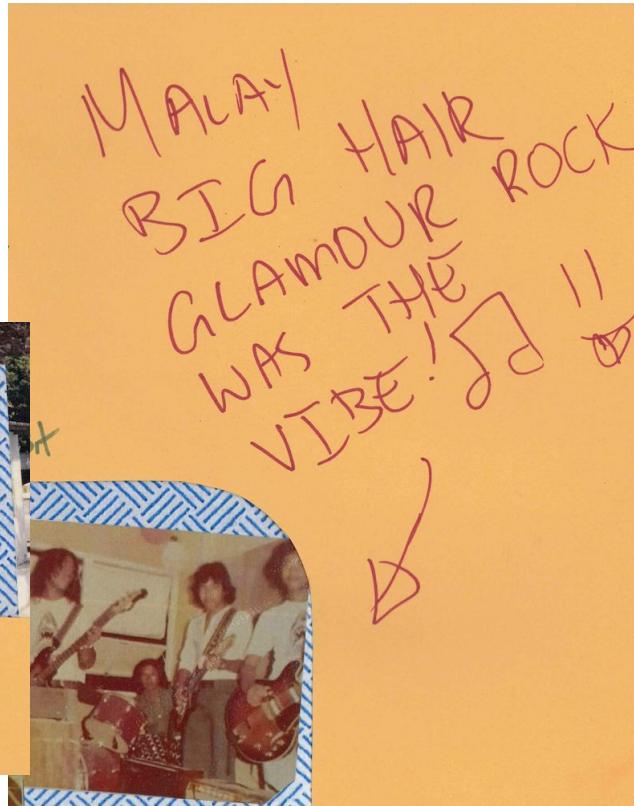
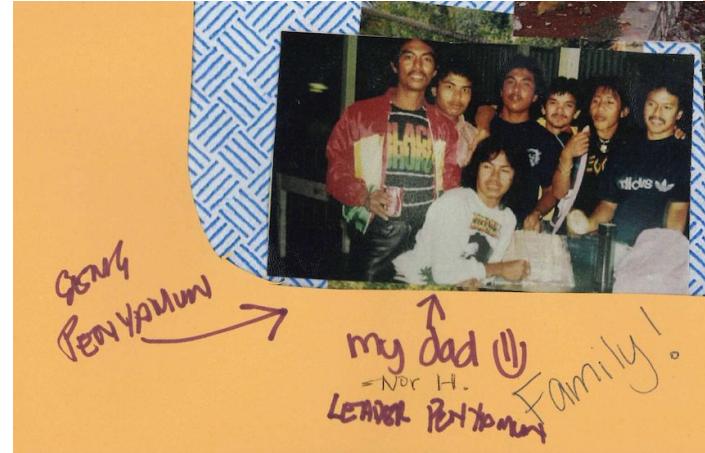
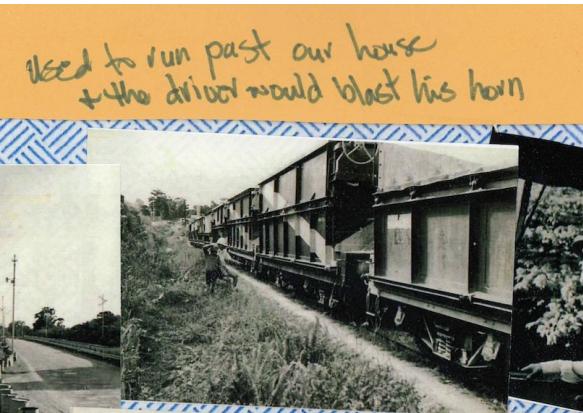
Clockwise, from top left: 1978 CI Swimming Carnival at the public pool (courtesy of Patrick Yeoh). "Settlement pool" (courtesy of Kenny Yeoh). CI Public pool (courtesy of Roy Gardner). European pool, c.1974-76 (courtesy of Roland Marsh).

“How do you hope people will remember the island 50 years from now?”



Results: History off the Page

- 350-500 attendees
- Types of information captured: emotions, senses, identification, common experiences and metaphors, personal narratives



IT FACTION WERE YOU IN,
D WHY WAS IT THE BEST?

Crab.

dark head!
draw at first
or 6yo

23.5
23.5
23.5
23.5
23.5
Goldie Posan

Red Crabs
Red Crabs
Red Crabs
Red Crabs
Red Crabs

RED NEVER SAY DIA?
Mr. Lim Kew Teng

go green!!

Green the magicteam.

BLUE MARLIN
PATRICK YEOH



RED

Red!

Red Crabs

1st
Venus
rival

Green the winning Machine!

Yellow House!

Red

win the most

Gold Yellow is the best
it is just because the best

Red is the best
because we just
are the best

What do you think these figures are thinking about?



What do you think these figures are thinking about?



How many centipedes do you see?



"Mmm... I'm sure there's a better view somewhere"

Have you seen how cool my socks look?

Document as Commons

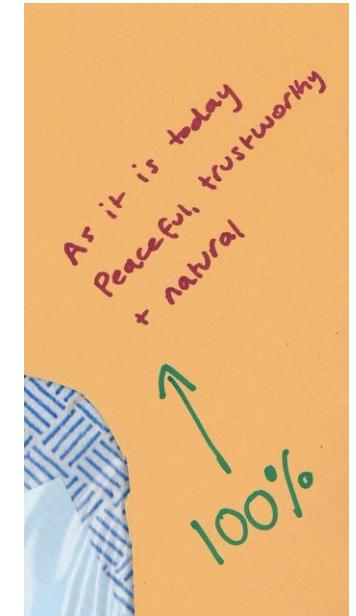
- “Unofficial” aesthetic with “official” archival documents allowed the document to become a site of response
- Digital vs. Analog commons: physical and digital blackboard



A web of remembrance: a memory shared, another memory triggered, a moment of recognition of a place or person remembered, a realisation...

Baker and Cantillon on Collaborative Reminiscence, 2022

SOLIDARITY!
FOREVER.
what's that mean?? ↗



Identity through Dialogue

- Shared experiences - “jurassic park” metaphor, arrival, ocean as a site of peace (i.e. fishing) and violence (i.e. boat disaster)
- Longing for both the past and for things to stay as they are

Flew in for a holiday - fell in love with the natural beauty of the island - so rugged, untouched, adventurous ... so came back for 5 more visits before moving here permanently.

Jurassic park! OMG...
2022

16/01/97
came for a Holiday & never left..

Arriveer met ys
15 Feb 23.
Geskot & verras
Jurasic Par
ojo

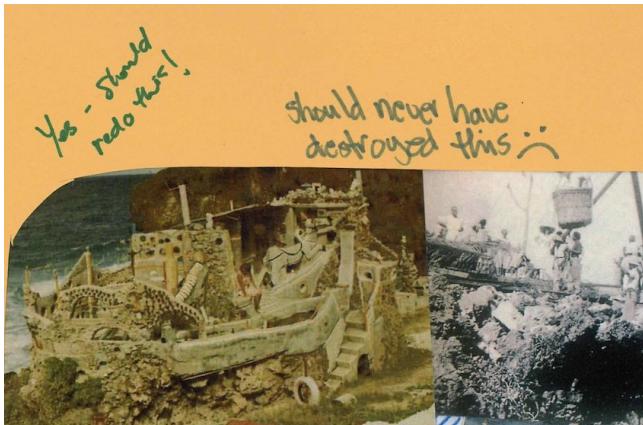
Identity through Dialogue

wildlife, free from
feral cats, mining and
marine debris.

ABSOLUTELY!!

- Shared experiences - “jurassic park” metaphor, arrival, ocean as a site of peace (i.e. fishing) and violence (i.e. boat disaster)
- Longing for both the past and for things to stay as they are

Like it is today



2 Blue-stripe snapper at Jetty,
with 7 yr old daughter
here was bigger
she never took me
fishing again

The heartbreak of the Christmas Island boat disaster –
heroic locals, devastating scenes, so much sadness.

Challenges and Limitations

- Who should be included?
- Accuracy and attributability
- What cannot be captured

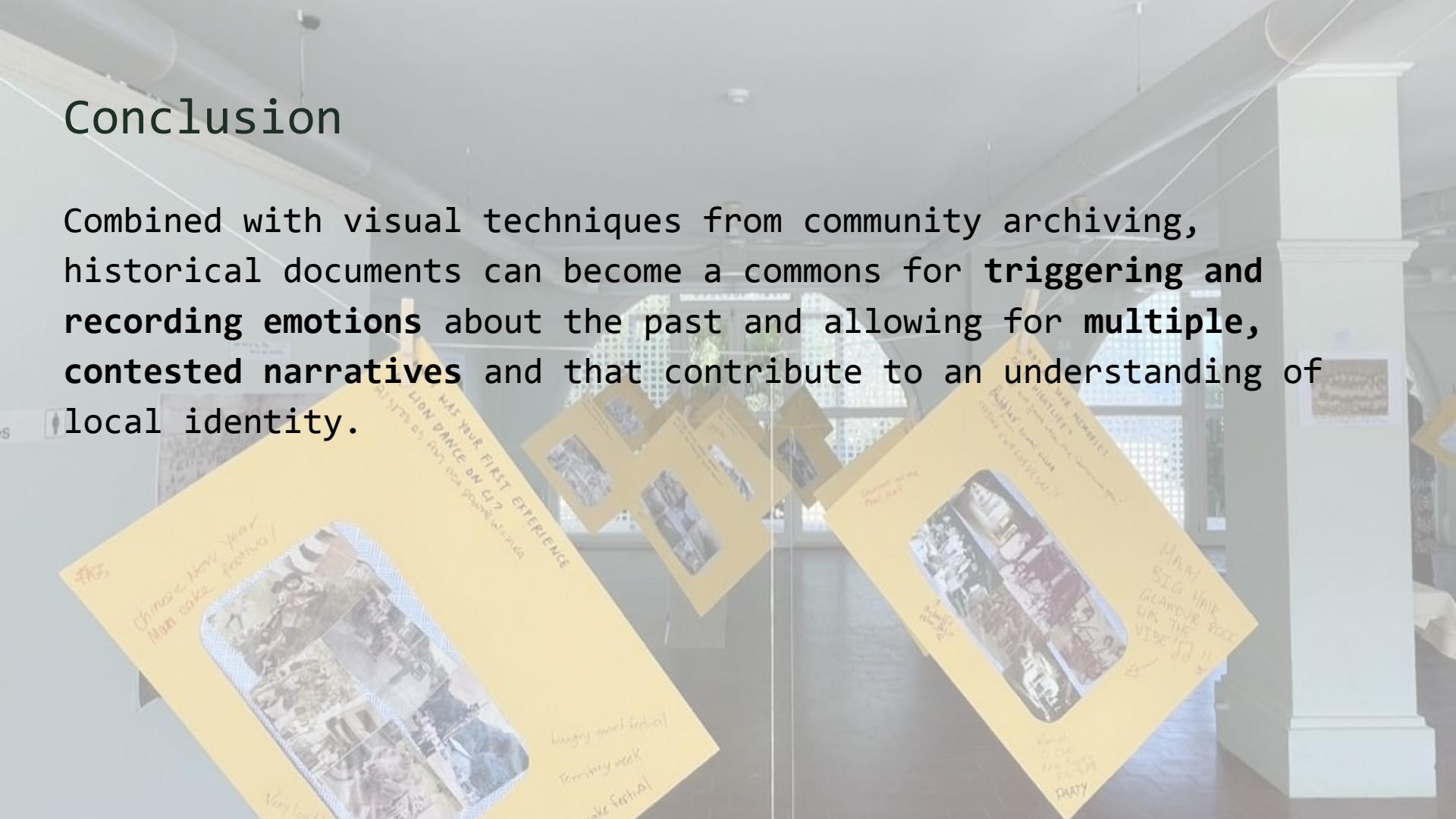


Although these qualities of collaborative reminiscence transcend what can be represented in the materiality of the zines, the pages produced nonetheless capture the collectivity that was experienced in the room

Baker and Cantillon, 2022

Conclusion

Combined with visual techniques from community archiving, historical documents can become a commons for triggering and recording emotions about the past and allowing for multiple, contested narratives and that contribute to an understanding of local identity.



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Thank you!
Website: livingmuseum.cx