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Advancing Digital Health Humanities Institute

Title

Weaving the Living Archive: Dr. Tolbert Small and History as a Healing Practice

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This project explores the life and ongoing work of Dr. Tolbert Small (b. 1942)—physician, acupuncturist, and former doctor for the Black Panther Party. Born in Coldwater, Mississippi, and raised in Detroit's Black Bottom, Dr. Small has practiced medicine in the Bay Area since 1968, first at Highland Hospital and later at his Harriet Tubman Medical Office. He became the first African American physician to integrate acupuncture into general primary care after traveling to China in 1972 with the Black Panther Party. He also served as an Assistant Clinical Professor in the UCSF Department of Medicine from 1982 to 1988.

Not only is Dr. Small's history significant in its own right, but his role as a historian is equally vital. For more than half a century, he has documented his community's experiences, creating a rare archive of everyday life, political struggle, and healing. Since 2019, I have worked alongside Dr. Small to preserve, extend, and make accessible this archive—digitizing materials, recording oral histories, and filming his practice and teachings. This project reflects on our intergenerational collaboration as a process of history-making, one that understands preservation, care for archives, and storytelling as intertwined practices of healing. Ultimately, we ask: who gets to make history, and for whom?

A central component of this work has been the ongoing development of a digital platform designed with accessibility as a guiding ethos. In response to the persistent challenge that many people do not—or cannot—access traditional archives, museums, or libraries, we want to bring the archive to where people are: in their homes. Institutional spaces can feel unwelcoming or difficult to navigate, while traditional digital tools can offer a more open but still often flattened experience. We aim to move beyond both limitations by building what we think of as an “experiential archive”: one that not only presents documents, but also conveys the feeling of encountering them. What does it feel like to come across something surprising? Unexpected?

Through iterative updates to the website using new technologies, we aim to see how interactivity, storytelling, and multimedia can recreate aspects of the physical archival experience while remaining responsive to users' varied needs, resources, and points of access. Rather than treating the digital archive as an endpoint, it is an entryway—a first small step that invites curiosity, supports learning, and encourages deeper engagement. By integrating audiovisual materials, guided narratives, and contextual prompts, we seek to stimulate not only intellectual understanding but also a more embodied, reflective encounter with history.

At the same time, this project considers how digital access can inspire renewed relationships to physical spaces. What details in an archive environment spark curiosity or shape interpretation? How might a digital encounter motivate someone to pursue further research, visit an institution, or rethink their relationship to their communities and their own history? In this way, the project moves between digital and physical worlds, asking how each can inform and enrich the other.

Looking ahead, we aim to continue developing this platform as a living archive—one that evolves alongside Dr. Small's ongoing work and the communities it serves. By centering accessibility, care, and interactivity, the project seeks not only to preserve history but to expand how it is experienced, shared, and made meaningful across geographies and generations.