

*Oh Lon Chaney
What's to hold you back?
The Wolfman's¹ dead
And the oldcc black cat is gone
Like a memory faded from your past
You look so sad
With a face of stone
Just skin and bonez
You're all alone
With a hunchback's eye you live
—“Lon Chaney” by Garland Jeffreys (1973)*

A scrapbook, a celebrity shrine, and an archive all deal with the question, “how do we remember the past?” They can act as conduits that allow the living and the dead to communicate, building a bridge so that the past, present, and future may collide. In Fall 2017, I created a shrine to silent horror movie star, Lon Chaney, based on A.Y. Owen’s Lon Chaney scrapbook collection at UCLA Library Special Collections. Questions emerged, such as what does it mean to learn about someone through an admirer’s scrapbook? How is a person’s story crafted when the creator most likely never met the person they admire? What kind of affective engagement emerges for archival users who encounter such a scrapbook? What does it mean to make art based on such archival material? What do archival records tell us about the past, about ourselves, and how power manifests in the archives? Reimagining A.Y. Owen’s Lon Chaney scrapbook collection to make art provided a creative space to critically engage, explore, and understand affect, representation, and memory’s relationship to power in the archives.

An important component of this creative research process was the affective experience. In applying affect theory to the archives, Cifor (2015) uses affect as a “culturally, socially, and historically constructed category that both encompasses and reaches beyond feelings and emotions” (p. 10). There is a very important connection between the sensory experience of touching and viewing the scrapbook as an affective force that influenced how I understood Lon Chaney’s memory and how I came to reimagine the scrapbook as a shrine. Reflecting on my

¹ Fun fact: Lon Chaney did not portray the Wolfman. That was his son, Lon Chaney, Jr.

own affective response to this project helped me understand how power circulates through records and archives.

The Lon Chaney Shrine



Figure 1. The Lon Chaney Shrine.

The shrine was created as a final assignment for Kathy Carbone's class on Archives and Art-Making in UCLA's Information Studies Department. The course was designed to critically engage the "archives as both place and trope for artistic inquiry and art-making" (Carbone, 2017, p. 1), while providing students with the opportunity to "create a visual, performing, or literary artwork" (Carbone, 2017, p. 1) utilizing archival materials from the UCLA Library Special Collections (LSC). The center piece of the shrine is a mobile made from a sewing hoop, decoupage tissue paper, and yarn. Hanging from the yarn are pictures of Lon Chaney's characters. The mobile hangs above a vintage Samsonite toiletries case that represents Chaney's

makeup case. Inside the case are the kinds of greasepaint, powders, and pencils that he recommended for movie makeup as well as photos of Lon in the process of getting into character. On the case's mirror are taped more images of Lon's characters. In front of the case are two folding mirrors. One mirror is covered with a photo collage of Erik from the *Phantom of the Opera* (1925) and the second mirror is collaged with pictures of Quasimodo from the *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923). Since the movies were based on literature, I took a quote about each characters' desire for love and acceptance from each novel and placed them on the inside cover of the mirror. The mirror, which was originally intended to be cracked, represents the distorted view the world has of Erik and Quasimodo. Surrounding the makeup case are additional Lon Chaney photos scattered about loosely, on a candle and in picture frames. A handmade cardboard billboard with "The Man of a Thousand Faces" is also off to the side. There is a folder that contains copies of articles taken directly from the scrapbook as well as four paper puppets I found on the internet. A copy of the introduction to A.Y. Owen's Lon Chaney scrapbook and the Encyclopedia Britannica (1929) article on motion picture makeup written by Lon Chaney are among the scattered photos.

A.Y. Owen's Lon Chaney Scrapbook Collection

A.Y. Owen's Lon Chaney scrapbook collection consists of ephemera, glossy stills, loose paper clippings, a scrapbook, and a 198-page photocopy of the scrapbook. A.Y. Owen (1915-1991), an Oklahoman freelance photographer for Times, Inc. Publications, spent over 60 years making the scrapbook with materials from 1920 to circa 1989 (Introduction). At eight years old, Owen became a fan after seeing Lon Chaney portray Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1923). Not long after, he started his first scrapbook at nine years old. Owen shared a strong desire to get at the man behind the makeup. Pages are filled with articles and images cut from magazines and newspapers covering his career, two marriages, his immense talent with makeup and pantomime, rare interviews, life philosophy and his untimely death.

I spent about seven weeks meticulously combing through the collection, leaving no page unturned while taking photos and

notes. I was moved not just by what I read, but by the sensory experience derived from seeing and touching the scrapbook's crumbling, yellowed pages. I appreciated how much time, labor, and care it took to find, cut, and paste decades of material prior to the birth of the internet. While Lon Chaney was notoriously private, a portrait of the artist emerged. As a prolific silent horror character actor, he made 157 films between 1912 and 1930, with 100 of them considered to be lost films ("The Films of Lon Chaney, Sr.").

Lon Chaney was often portrayed as a humble, hardworking, and thoughtful man. Much of his large salary was donated to charities (Crane, n.d.), and he chose to live like a clerk (Thomas, 1930b). Fan mail was discarded unless it was from a prisoner—then he would write back. The famous movie star was also a card-carrying union member who looked out for the extras and crew members on set, even giving career advice to beginners (Crane, n.d.). The choices he made can be connected to his experience of adversity growing up. Born on April 1, 1883 in Colorado Springs to deaf parents, Lon Chaney was the second of four children. They struggled to survive. His mother suffered from debilitating rheumatoid arthritis that limited the use of her hands (Waterbury, 1927). In order to get by, Lon dropped out of the fifth grade to help manage the house. Not long afterwards, he began to work.

Known as "The Man of a Thousand Faces" for his talented character makeup, he was rarely on screen without it. Instead, he dedicated his career to portraying disfigured social outcasts with empathy, depth, and complexity. He claimed that he acted with the genuine belief "that no matter how bad or distorted the man portrayed may be, he is fundamentally good." (Crane, n.d.). He wanted to remind people that those that exist on the fringes of society "may have the noblest ideals." (Crane, n.d.). Lon Chaney stated, "Most of my roles since *The Hunchback*, such as *The Phantom of the Opera*, *He Who Gets Slapped*, *The Unholy Three*, etc., have carried the theme of self-sacrifice or renunciation. These are the stories I wish to do" (Konow, 2012, p. 12). To portray these characters required a great deal of sacrifice from himself as well. He often went to such extreme lengths on his character design that he put himself in pain to achieve a desirable effect. As Quasimodo, he wore 73 pounds of rubber on his back and chest in order to get the hunch and

twisted limbs for which the character is famous (Parsons, 1930). In *The Penalty* (1920), he devised a way to walk on his knees to portray Blizzard, a double amputee gangster with a grudge (Thomas, 1930a). This care for the underdog seemed to genuinely carry through to his private life.

By the end of the scrapbook, the many pages with articles announcing Lon Chaney's death by throat hemorrhage on August 26, 1930 at 46 years old left me feeling bereft. I felt the sharp pang of sadness and loss before I became aware that I was grieving. The expression of collective grief and loss in the articles announcing his death affected me deeply. It felt like I lost a good friend. I developed an intimacy with Lon Chaney's memory, and I came to identify with him.

Reflections on Power in the Archives

During the research process, I was confronted by Lon Chaney's lack of agency and control over his own narrative. It was not Lon Chaney telling his story, but A.Y. Owen. I felt I knew Chaney, in part because of the way in which Owen curated the scrapbook. However, it was easy to forget the constructed-ness of the scrapbook and accept the scrapbook as an authority on Lon Chaney's life. My acceptance of the scrapbook as the truth was largely due to its association with the archives and its ideals of neutrality, objectivity, evidence, and authenticity. In comparison, Schwartz and Cook (2002) have argued:

Archives and records, in their creation and use by their makers and in their appraisal and use by archivists, will always reflect power relationships. Archives . . . are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed. By extension, memory is not something found or collected in archives, but something that is made, and continually re-made. (p. 172)

Owen was like an archivist, imposing order and control over Lon Chaney's memory, affecting how the present and future will understand this person's past. Lon Chaney was a private person who withheld many details about his personal life. We will never know how he would have felt about having all of these records amassed together. In particular, we can never know if he would

approve of a fan including a consensus record, his first marriage license, or photos of the house and street where he grew up in a scrapbook. For a scrapbook, I found the inclusion of those records to be an invasion of his privacy. In spite of Owen's attempts to provide a comprehensive overview of Lon Chaney's life, the scrapbook, like most archival records, will only ever be a sliver of the social reality and documentary record (Harris, 2002, p. 64). Ultimately, the scrapbook, and by extension the shrine, is not just about Lon Chaney, but about how Lon Chaney made A.Y. Owen and I feel. It is our affective relationship to his memory that is on display.

Uncomfortable Discoveries in the Archives

Sometimes, we find things we do not like during archival research. While looking at the scrapbook, I had to come to terms with depictions of early-twentieth century racism and ableism. In 1929, Lon Chaney wrote the first Encyclopedia Britannica article on motion picture makeup. While groundbreaking, he describes in the character makeup section how to do yellow face and black face. He has also portrayed Chinese immigrants in films, most notably in *Shadows* (1922) and *Mr. Wu* (1927). Furthermore, ableist language was predominantly used by writers of the time to describe his characters' appearances and disabilities. As a mixed-race person from a diverse Southeast Asian family, I felt disappointed. It made me reflect on the years of Asian caricatures perpetuated by Hollywood and the connection between media racial stereotypes and experiences of racism by members of my family. The Encyclopedia Britannica (1929) article and Chinese movie characters contribute to the history of *symbolic annihilation* of Asian Americans in the U.S. The notion of symbolic annihilation derives from Feminist Media Studies to describe how marginalized groups are trivialized, misrepresented, or are absent in various media platforms (Caswell, 2014, p. 58). In *Archival Studies*, Michelle Caswell (2014) adapts the term to describe the same kind of misrepresentation and absence within the archival record and the impact that it has on marginalized communities (p. 27). It was ironic to see how Lon Chaney's characters made certain

kinds of “others” visible and sympathetic while further marginalizing other groups.

When I made these discoveries, I had to make a decision about how I would handle these representations for my art project. I found it best to take a nuanced point of view that acknowledged the historical context they were created in. I neither wanted to excuse the racial misrepresentations nor sanitize the historical reality by ignoring it either. In the shrine, I included a few collages of various characters with Mr. Wu included. In one collage, Lon Chaney demonstrates the facial characterizations of four characters without any makeup on. They are amazing examples of his skill, but he is pulling back his eyes in an impression of Mr. Wu. I love the three-character portrayals, but I hate the Mr. Wu’s portrayal. I kept these photos in the shrine, because I wanted to portray the complexity of Lon Chaney’s career by not separating the good from the bad. It was also my attempt to question the way we remember people, especially the way the media sanitizes historical figures for mass consumption.

Conclusion

The most important lesson I learned is about the affective nature of archival research. We bring our whole selves to the archives. As we work in them, we can develop emotionally resonant relationships with the physical archival record, the record subject, its creator, and even with the archivists in attendance. This relationship is, of course, context dependent. Because I was looking for something to make art with, my approach was more affectively-motivated. As a result, my shrine became more personal and complex than I expected as I began to identify with different aspects of Lon Chaney and his characters. My shrine to Lon Chaney embodies my love affair with weird, dark, and unusual characters. In the end, the shrine is not only for Chaney, but to the ghosts of his characters that haunt us, the outcasts who love and want to be loved.

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