

# Chapter 9. Counter, Contradictory, and Contingent Digital-Storytelling through Minimal Computing and Community-Praxis

Bibhushana Poudyal  
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings, and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual, and even incommensurable?

- Bhabha 2

Through philosophical and methodological discussions of minimal computing and community-praxis, the chapter offers possible methods and methodologies of a counter, contradictory, and contingent storytelling through digital archives with epistemically, epistemologically and structurally marginalized, excluded, and absented voices. My chapter emphasizes the ethics of digital-storytelling and theorizes ethics through dialectical relationship-building, availability of dialogic room for the Other, and deconstructive approaches (Spivak *The Spivak Reader*; Spivak “Translator’s Preface”). The chapter also critically discourses precarities and affordances of digital archiving with and from “radical exteriority, that is, thinking *from* and *with* the living configurations and excluded lineages and histories of those considered peripheral” (Vallega 6). To exemplify, I will present theories, praxes, and ethics of the two methods involved in my critical digital archiving project titled, *Rethinking South Asia from the Borderland via Critical Digital A(na)rchiving*.

In my project, I am building a digital archive of my street photography that I had taken in 2017 in Nepal on a CMS platform Omeka through participatory design frameworks with Nepali communities. My open access archive is available at <http://cassacda.com>. In this project, I am building, documenting, and theorizing a journey of building a digital archive as a Nepali doctoral student from the location of the Mexico-US borderland university, The University of Texas at El Paso, with a determination of exploring and sharing ways of combating colonial-patriarchal gaze and epistemic injustices. And I cannot begin do so without acknowledging the “unceded Indigenous land” I am building

Nepal's digital archive and writing this chapter from:

[I] would like to recognize and pay my respects to the Indigenous people with long ties to the immediate region: Lipan Apache, Mescalero Apache, Piro, Manso, Suma, Jumano, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, Piro/Manso/Tiwa Indian Tribe of the Pueblo of San Juan de Guadalupe, and Tortugas Pueblo. [I] also acknowledge the nations whose territories include present day Texas: the Carrizo and Comecrudo, Coahuiltecan, Caddo, Tonkawa, Comanche, Alabama-Coushatta, Kickapoo, and the peoples of Chihuahua and northern Mexico from whom most/many of [UTEP's] students descend, such as the Rarámuri, Tepehuan, Wixarika and Nahuatlaca peoples. ("College of Liberal Arts Land Acknowledgement Statement")



Figure 9.1. Image of Kathmandu Streets in 2017.<sup>1</sup>

1. The images woven in the chapter are taken from my digital archive, <http://cassacda.com>. Their existence in this chapter is not always meant to validate or represent the texts they accompany but their existence here is the rhetorical choice I am making to constantly connect the chapter to Kathmandu streets, from where this journey began and is continuing. I invite the readers to allow these images to function not as a representation of Kathmandu but as an invitation and provocation to deconstruct any such representation. My digital archive and the photographs are not disruptive in themselves, but the disruption depends on what we do with them.

Besides my situatedness as a doctoral candidate in UTEP's rhetoric and composition program, I am also honored to be serving as an executive member of an indigenous student organization, Academic Revival of Indigenous Studies and Education (ARISE), a community which has taught me a lot about how our knowledge systems and meaning-making must be accountable to the land, people, and their knowledge systems. I am an international student in this land and learning from this community to listen to and be humble toward the voices and experiences that might not be my own but are excessively crucial to all of us if we are to transform our vision of a justice-oriented future into lived experiences. The experiences with ARISE also gradually started informing how I understand, interpret, and envision digital archives. To me, the ethical and justice-driven archive-building performance did not seem possible without meaningful participation of Nepali communities. As a way to begin the journey toward archival justice, I started conducting UX research since the beginning of the project to co-design and co-curate the archive and find ways of listening to the communities whose voices and experiences are not only different than my own but challenge my research pre-concepts and hypotheses as well. At the same time, I am working on this archive from a space which currently does not have any infrastructural support for digital projects merging humanities and humanistic social sciences. As I go deeper into the chapter, my positionality and the situatedness of this project will continue leaking more as they directly inform how I understand, interpret, and practice minimal computing and community-praxis.

By introducing some grounded examples from the project, I will discuss how the philosophy and practice of minimal computing and community-praxis become both necessity and choice in the projects which frustratingly suffer from the lack of necessary resources and yet stubbornly insist on subverting privileged structures' discourses and gaze through digital-archival storytelling. This chapter is written from the intervening interstices of the following conflicting scenario: on the one hand, digital writing and research infrastructures, initiatives, and programs are becoming more popular in many (well-funded) academic institutions in the Global North and on the other hand, many spaces and communities with interest in digital projects lack access to not only resources, capacity, and institutional support for their work but are excluded from the definitions of digitality, digital archives, and digital methods and methodologies. We must notice two aspects of this scenario: first, minoritized and marginalized voices, in the first place, have limited to no access to the resources required to participate in digital storytelling against power centers' essentializing metanarratives and gaze. And this continuing (infra)structural inequity, uneven development of DH<sup>2</sup> "centers"

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2. While I am using the terminologies digital humanities (DH) in this chapter, I use it both to talk about the field which is very much invested in archival works and to indicate the research or an epistemological performance conducted by using, reflecting upon, and/or developing digital tools and methods to engage in dialogues emerging from human-

and digital writing and research “labs,” and thus, exclusion of voices continues to impact the documented lack of inclusion and sustainability for minoritized communities (Earhart and Taylor; Risam; Callaway et al.).

Inequitable distribution of voices in digital narrativization directly translates into a terrifying absence of participation of (intersectionally) disadvantaged communities in online and digital spaces in knowledge-making and meaning-making performances, which I will refer to as epistemological performances. But no less disturbing is the second one: the projects and stories that already suffer from (infra)structural inequity not only do not have sufficient resources to translate their narratives digitally but even when they write with digital tools, new media, and multimedia, with whatever means available, they are not recognized as digital praxis. And the consequence is further silencing of these narratives and knowledge systems while the power centers’ gaze continues being amplified. In short, within computers and writing studies, digital writing, and computing-related fields, there is still a lack of minoritized and marginalized voices, limiting diversity in demographic, geographical, discursive, definitional, philosophical, theoretical, methodological, political, and ethical terms.

As “[d]igital spaces are increasingly becoming the ones where human knowledge is produced, disseminated, and amplified” (Risam 139), the continuation of these inequities perpetuates the dominance of privileged socio-symbolic order and its law and language and further subalternizes the voices of minoritized and marginalized groups of people. And it only postpones all the possible digital initiatives to anti-imperialize, anti-colonize and de-patriarchalize ontological categories and epistemological performances on local and global levels. In this context, with a profound frustration intricately woven with bits of hope, this chapter is written through an embodied knowledge of what minoritized students and researchers face while trying to digitalize counter-narratives from the spaces with little to no support for digital works. And with that knowledge, I explore what theories, praxes, initiatives, and alliances look like while trying to work digitally, ethically, and critically toward “epistémico-epistemological transformations” (Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education* 41) from and with Othered spaces.

When the representations (and distortions) of the Other—both globally and regionally between and within the “Global South” and the “Global North”—have been ported over the digital realm, it is necessary not only to study that transportation but also what it looks like when the Other writes their stories digitally as resistance against digital gaze. This chapter is mostly about the latter. Though my archival project is focused on the geographic location of Nepal and South Asia, the goal of my project is anything but to portray or build “true” knowledge about

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ities and humanistic social sciences. In this chapter, I understand DH in the following two senses: i) humanities and social sciences’ epistemic practices conducted using digital methods/tools and ii) as a discipline that intersects with rhetoric and composition, technical communication, digital storytelling, and digital archival studies.

Nepal or South Asia. It is neither to offer a manifesto on the “correct” way—I doubt if that even exists—of building, for instance, anticolonial, antiracist, and feminist digital archives. What I am hoping to do is explore possible methods and theories that can be incorporated, adapted, or experimented with while building digital archives about, for, with, and as the Other. Before moving ahead, I would like to present what I mean by the Other in the context of my research and this chapter:

The Other can have layered and multiple meanings... [T]he Other is the other of the imperial, colonial, capitalist, neo-liberal, heteropatriarchal Self. The Other is an object of inquiry, exploration, and discovery of hegemonic discourses of socio-symbolic order... The Other is archived to serve the interest and match the limited imagination of the Self. In those archives, the Other is discoursed, constructed, constituted, distorted, absented, represented, portrayed, or even ‘benevolently’ spoken for, but is absent/ed from the dialogues that would challenge the knowledge, imagination, and comfort of the Self. (Poudyal, “The “Nature” of Ethics” 179-80)

I offer this brief definition as an invitation to contemplate upon the Other with all complexities and heterogeneities it embodies. Each of us is an inter/play of both the Self and the Other. Here, what we must understand is that how-much-of-what varies in each individual, community, and individual situation, and that dissimilitude makes a lot of difference. This chapter continues with that recognition and with an invitation to recognize that.

## Contextual Overview: When Precarities Become Exigencies

As a researcher and teacher whose epistemological performances are rigorously and self-reflectively committed to interfering with the top-down model of representing (“portraying” and “speaking for”) the Other, the thought about working on a critical digital archiving project, not only on a theoretical level but also by building my own digital archive, is genuinely a distressing act. This archive-building performance is enveloped in a profound ethical dilemma that when I decided to build one, almost a culprit-like feeling started creeping in. As Mathew Kurtz notes, “[T]he archive . . . is a literal re-centring of material for the construction and contestation of knowledge, whereas postcolonialism often works toward a figurative decentring of that same material” (25). By building a digital archive, I was knowingly putting myself in the most uncomfortable state. In this journey, I am problematizing and deconstructing everything the moment I (plan to) perform it. Here, I request the readers to take a moment to meditate upon this state to truly understand this dilemma I am talking about. Amidst this dilemma, the only thing that keeps me going is by openly talking about it and the problems in



my project and by inviting others to deconstruct this archival performance alongside. Therefore, writing this chapter is crucial. It is an extended part of my project. It is another way of inviting and provoking extended audiences to deconstruct my project—or any digital archival project for that matter—and to imagine narratives and ontologies beyond what is present and visible.

On top of everything else, another issue I was dealing with has largely to do with the locations that I am building the digital archive about and from. I am building a digital archive about one of those locations (Nepal) whose non/digital portrayals are often infused with simplistic generalizations, linear narratives, and epistemic injustices. And I am building this archive from one of those locations (the US) that produces or has the power to produce such problematic portrayals, disseminate, and amplify them. This sense of precarity is critical and inexpressible because of the long history of various forms of oppressions that have carved the relationships between West and non-West. But if I try to translate these precarities into words, the questions I face include: What if I end up being a native informant? What if I begin this journey and reach nowhere? What if I end up harming and hurting while my intention is of healing? What if justice and ethics get suffocated by these definitional, material, infrastructural, and historical conditions and “will-to-knowledge and will-to-power” (Poudyal, “The “Nature” of Ethics” 180)? After all, how can we expect the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house?

Since the beginning of this project, the overlapping precarities—ethical, infrastructural, definitional, and locational—have always made me nervous in undertaking the project of building a digital archive of street photography in Kathmandu. And, ironically, the same precarities became strong reasons for me to undertake this work. The narration, documentation, and theorization of these precarities are necessary to demonstrate the problems strongly and explicitly in the mainstream narratives of digital archiving, digitalism, design, knowledge, and information. Building an archive and documenting the process is not enough as the constant theorization of every aspect of this process is a crucial part of my project. Or how else to know the situatedness and purpose of the methods and methodologies?

In the rest of the chapter, I will attempt to demonstrate what the methods of an academic with years of contemplative engagement with anti-heterosexist, anti-racist, and anticolonial criticisms through deconstructive approach look like while building a digital archive about Nepal from the location of the US without infra/structural backing. My methodological discussion will revolve around the following two questions:

1. Given the historical and contemporary infra/structural inequities between and within the “Global North” and “Global South”, (how) can digital archives still be a dialectical space to deconstruct representation of the Other?

2. What can be the possible theories, methods, methodologies, strategies, and alliances, to build a digital archive ethically and critically with and about underrepresented communities and from under-funded and under-resourced spaces?

While addressing these questions, this chapter emerges from the intersections of the fields and subfields of rhetoric and writing studies, international technical communication, critical archival studies, and critical digital humanities. In the following sections, I discuss the theoretical-practical aspects of minimal computing and community-praxis to convey what I mean by these two methodologies and how I am working with these methodologies for my research on critical digital archival studies. After doing the ethical, theoretical, and methodological discussions of my project and analyzing the findings, I conclude the chapter by inviting readers to listen to the call of justice through radical initiatives in digital praxis and radical humbleness toward community-voices.

## Minimal Computing as Bricoleur Activity of the Other



*Figure 9.2. Images of Kathmandu Streets in 2017*

As I am insisting in this chapter, discussing definitions of tools, methods, and methodologies are important while practicing them. Very often, as definitions powerfully exist to keep humanity from imagining and participating in a justice-oriented future, we cannot allow ourselves to ignore the rhetoric of their definitions. That's why I am beginning with the definitional aspect of minimal

computing. There are multiple definitions of what minimal computing is or what it is not, which also points to who has the privilege and access to choose, define, and make it more inaccessible or accessible. To make digital theory-praxis more accessible and ethical, I strategically exploit the following statement: "In general, we can say that minimal computing is the application of *minimalist applications to computing*. In reality, though, minimal computing is in the eye of the beholder" (Gil and Ortega 28). When I am talking about minimal computing, it can be anything that allows a researcher to compose and conduct research digitally without having to rely on institutional and infrastructural assistance that is not available. One must understand the exploitation of the statement, "minimal computing is in the eye of the beholder," as a strategic method of the Other to punch a hole on the digital frontier and the practice of gatekeeping in the fields related to computing and digital writing and research. One must approach methods and methodologies by rupturing the theory-practice binary. How one practices methods heavily depends on how one defines it or which definition one adopts. And without redefining and retheorizing the method, practicing it differently is not possible. Without revisiting our digital praxis, subverting gatekeeping culture is not possible either. Hence, when I began my digital archiving project without "sufficient" computing-related skills, training, and resources, I had to constantly push and pull at the definitional frontiers of digital methods. When tools are not available, I must, at least, make definitions available to myself so that the privileged definitions of digitality, design, and digital storytelling do not keep me from embarking on this journey.

I prefer to define minimal computing as bricoleur activity, which means doing what is needed to be done with whatever is available (see Derrida's *Writing and Difference* to further understand my approach to bricoleur activity). If we go by this definition, even the tools, definitions, or the power to develop and control those tools and definitions ab/used by the privileged structure are also bricoleur activity. But the only difference is that this structure has more resources available to establish itself as a seamless absolute structure whose definitions are considered unimpeachable. I am connecting minimal computing to bricoleur activity to stress that as the privileged structure is using whatever is available to them to impose and perpetuate different forms of injustices, the margin should not be afraid or hesitate to engage in bricoleur activity to turn the things around and to write our stories. It is apt remembering some of the crucial and provoking questions posed by Matthew Applegate while discoursing minimal computing:

What must I give up and what must I ignore in the effort to meet my needs? How do I meet my needs without reproducing the antinomies I oppose? If the master's tools are the only tools available, am I willing to wield them against the contemporary political economy of their use? Any response to these questions is radically contingent-dependent on the context of minimal



computing's employ—and extend to feminist, decolonial, and Marxist iterations of the task. (146)

I connect these questions to the question that prompted this chapter: What can be the possible theories, methods, methodologies, strategies, alliances, and tools to ethically and critically build counter, contradictory, and contingent storytelling (under-funded and under-resourced) digital archives? Because those stories cannot be told or heard by remaining obedient to the tools of masters. Hence, it is not only about what it is being told but also about how it is told. Does it mean counter-stories cannot use larger-scale tools, resources, and funds? It definitely does not mean that. What it actually means is such binary definitions should not decide the course of these stories. The use of “right,” “correct,” and “accepted” methods, tools, vocabularies, and definitions to whatever is available is our digital theory-praxis of counter-storytelling. And the first step for me was to overcome the burden of rhetoric such as imparted by Stephen Ramsay at the 2011 annual Modern Language Association convention when he declared, “If you are not making anything, you are not . . . a digital humanist” (qtd. in Gold x). Overthrowing this burden was (and still is) difficult. Even after deciding to work on a critical digital archiving project, it took me months to actually start building one. I was intimidated by my “reality” of not having “sufficient” technical and computing skills or infrastructural support to do such projects. Even if I was planning on problematizing dominant narratives, I could not escape the privileged definition of digitalism, design, and digital archive myself.

Eventually, the insurgent dreams and desires started becoming more powerful than lack (of confidence, courage, and materiality). The questions such as “What do we need?” (Gil and Ortega) and “What don’t we need? . . . What do we want? . . . What don’t we want?” (Sayers “Minimal Definitions (tl;dr version)”) became more important than what is not available to me and what I cannot do. For that reason, my digital praxis entails “learning how to produce, disseminate and preserve digital scholarship ourselves, *without the help we can’t get*” (Gil). It involves experiments and necessary messiness.

When I finally mustered some courage to begin a building performance by hosting my own website, I started working on the Content Management System (CMS) platform I was much familiar with, i.e., WordPress (WP). After starting to work on WP, the first dilemma that stared right at me was related to the decisions concerning the selection of photographs. In 2017, I had taken thousands of photographs of the Kathmandu streets, which, I would say, is still not close enough to tell many stories about this city and its streets. Worse still, I had to select from that already limited collection to accommodate photographs in the lowest of the paid storage plans available there, an inescapable compromise that comes with the financial condition of a full-time international graduate student. So, the multidimensional stories that I was committed to bringing in my archive already felt compromised. It does not mean the flood of money, resources, and “expertise” would have made my archive less compromised. Digital or not, archives are al-

ways conditioned and compromised by their multiple ecologies. Through the discussion of my project, I am only trying to make it evident.

After gaining relatively a little more confidence to play in digital spaces, I started conducting a landscape analysis of other digital archives. A landscape analysis is an overview of specific products, services, or platforms currently available to facilitate a specific activity. In this case, I conducted a landscape analysis to learn about available platforms for digital archiving, tracing their affordances and constraints. The other reason for exploring available CMSs was caused by my dissatisfaction regarding how my pages were looking on WP. The pages were too linear for my purpose, and I did not have the “coding literacy” to change the way it looked. I was just creating long pages of texts and photographs without the interactivity I was envisioning for my project.<sup>3</sup> Even though I like the way those texts and photographs were appearing on the WP pages, and I am planning to continue working on it, I wanted my archiving to be more non-linear and interactive. In the meantime, I was regularly in touch with Professor Scott Kleinman, the director of the Center for the Digital Humanities at the California State University, Northridge. I had met him in Nepal while participating in his DH seminar-workshop (#DHNepal2017) in 2017. When I expressed my frustration and told him about my plans, he recommended the CMS platform Omeka. Then, I visited the archives built on this platform and found them to be like digital archives I had come across while doing landscape analysis. They were relatively non-linear and interactive with plugins that could somehow facilitate in materializing my vision. And I bought a domain name in Omeka through the web hosting company Reclaim Hosting (where I already had my WP website).

But right after creating a domain on Omeka in July 2018, there was another problem waiting for me. I would upload photographs, but I could not make them visible on the archive. When I contacted the technology helpdesk at my university, everyone responded that they do not know anyone familiar with Omeka. It took me more than 10-15 days to make an image appear in my archive due to some technical issues in the ImageMagick Directory Path. After multiple correspondences with Scott, Omeka Forum, and Reclaim Hosting, I finally figured out the problem and the way to fix it. It's just one of the tiny obstacles I came across in this archive-building journey. And not to forget about the lack of confidence such encounters without any immediate infra/structural help can cause. So, when I borrowed the phrase radical exteriority from Alejandro Vallega at the beginning of this chapter, I am happy to assume that it might make one romanticize a revolution from the margin, but I am here also to be honest about the moments when I just wanted to give up. For instance, when some participants, during my first UX research, pointed out the usability concerns regarding the multiple clicks they had to do to reach the pages with photographs, I neither had skills that could fix it nor access to the resources that could help me fix it. It took a lot of time, so many how-

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3. For a reference, the pages are available at <http://bibhushanapoudyal.com/kathmandu-and-its-streets/> and <http://bibhushanapoudyal.com/shivaratri-pashupatinath-temple/>.

to-do Google searches, some coding lessons, and a lot of those episodes when I just wanted to change my research project. This journey of digital archiving from the margin is very non-linear and fraught with all sorts of emotions. The only thing that is keeping me going is my conviction that what is needed to be done has to be done. If the Other does not disturb the frontiers that keep justice away, who will? For any research and academic “center” to be an ethical, critical, and justice-driven space, it needs to listen to, collaborate with, and be deconstructed by the *margins*. In the ethos and methods of minimal computing, especially in the way it is theorized by some of the scholars mentioned above, I could envision the glimpse of an understanding and acknowledgment of this necessity.

Among many perspectives that Sayers highlights concerning minimal computing, I would like to move ahead with one of its visions, and that is maximum justice. Minimal computing, as per Sayers, “[r]educe[s] the use of technological, cultural, social, and economic barriers to increase entry, access, participation, and self-representation in computing and to also build systems/projects premised on social justice and difference, not white supremacy and settler colonialism” (“Minimal Definitions” tldr version). When digitality, design, and digital writing are freed from the clutch of power centers (one may call it utopia, but utopia is what we must demand), it will change the top-down model of power centers representing diversity. Maximum accessibility, both definitional and methodological, can ensure a path toward maximum justice creating spaces for diverse problem solvers.

At this point, I want to bring my experience of working with diverse community members in Nepal from my capacity as an Honorary DH consultant at the Center for Advanced Studies in South Asia (CASSA) since 2017. When I started planning my digital archive project, I started sharing my ideas and plans with students, researchers, and educators in Nepal. I also started sharing information about the resources that were available to me. I recognized early on that in my individual project, however successful (or unsuccessful) it becomes, the anti-oppressive struggle is not as powerful unless it is done collectively with the community with the sense of solidarity (I am remembering Sara Ahmed’s interpretation of solidarity here). My project may succeed in telling something, but without initiating this movement as a community, the anti-oppressive agenda could not be envisioned. And therefore, I started inviting diverse voices and experiences to not wait for infrastructural support and power center’s validation to start writing their narratives digitally. Matthew Applegate sees the very possibility of agonistic work in these acts of cooperation and writes, “Minimal computing manifests in and through our shared capacities to think and produce in common [and it] asks that we maintain a diversity of tactics for producing these shared capacities. . . to surpass dichotomous thinking (theory/practice, hack/yack, virtual/real)” (146). The reason why I adopted the values of minimal computing while working on my project and with Nepali communities is due to the possibility of a justice-driven goal of “meeting needs, collectively articulated and collectively made” (Applegate 146). A bricoleur activity in solidarity with the community for a justice-driven present and future!

Some of the other definitions, features, and ethos of minimal computing are as follows: maximum access, maximum accessibility, maximum negotiation, minimalist design, minimalist dependencies, minimal maintenance, minimal internet, minimal connectivity, minimal space, and minimal technical language (for more on this, see Sayers “Minimal Definitions” tldr version). This list should make minimal computing and thus, the theories, definitions, and methods of digital engagement for research and writing more accessible to under-funded and under-resourced institutions, communities, and individuals. Similarly, GO::DH defines minimal computing as “computing done under some set of significant constraints of hardware, software, education, network capacity, power, or other factors.” Minimal Computing also “takes a different approach to ‘innovation’ in digital humanities projects and practices for low-income and low-bandwidth environments” (Risam 43). As many Nepali researchers’ and my projects are situated in similar ecologies, we need to not only tackle this material lack but also with exclusionary rhetoric of digital praxis. Therefore, in this context, the ethos of minimal computing demystifies the assumptions that digital praxis needs to be large-scale tools, teams, resources, funds, and projects. As emphasized earlier, it is about using whatever is available to make social justice initiatives with and from marginalized spaces and voices. This ethos invites researchers, educators, and scholars around the world to make their contributions to digital praxis from where they are and what they have.

In a tentative nutshell, starting with what we have to solve problems and to create space for diverse problem solvers is what needs to be done. Learning to work with communities with what we have should be digital archivists’ perseverance. Learning to listen and be humble toward the stories that could not be *spoken* and *heard* should be an unconditional persistence. Only then, we will be able to tell stories in a manner that threatens the colonial mechanism and its metanarratives. And the reason I chose to talk about minimal computing with structurally marginalized communities (that I am part of) is not to create another definitional or methodological frontier. It is to tell; let’s use whatever is available to us such as free or affordable digital platforms and softwares, CMS digital archival platforms (such as Omeka and Mukurtu), static site generators (such as Jekyll and its theme ED for minimal editions), other digital platforms, analog platforms, etcetera. Let’s share our skills, tools, theories, philosophies, methods, and methodologies across regional, geographical, institutional boundaries. Let’s extend alliances. Let’s make it easier to seek alliances. Let’s build these alliances to rupture digital frontiers and power mechanisms that perpetuate social injustices.

## Community Praxis Through Participatory Design Approaches

Regarding community-based participatory design, Rebecca Walton et al. write, “well-designed, well-conducted community-based research encounters unex-

pected challenges and serendipitous surprises because power is not centralized with researchers and because complex, dynamic local contexts are informing the work” (64). Well-designed, well-conducted community-based research is research where relationship building *with* the community is prioritized over knowledge building *about* the community. And when I say relationship building, I mean a relationship where dialogues are possible. Many times, while glorifying relationship-building uncritically, we let the power dynamic and hierarchy in that relationship go unexamined. Without the possibility of counter, contradictory, and contingent dialogues, the relationships can be hierarchical and end up becoming a dangerous perpetuation of violence. It is even more dangerous because hierarchy, power dynamics, and domination are masked under the pretense or impression of relationship and social justice. Deconstructing relationship-building while conducting research, Gesa E. Kirsch observes, “Indeed, the more successful I was at forming good relationships with interviewees, the more I felt like a voyeur” (xi). Therefore, when I say relationship, I want to insist on a dialectical relationship as opposed to a voyeuristic gaze in the name of relationship-building. And those dialogues emerging through dialectical relationship-building are not always necessarily harmonious, cordial, commensurable, or compatible. They can be very contingent, conflicting, and contradictory, resisting every risk of essentialization of diversity. In the following paragraphs, I will present some grounded examples of how I am practicing community-based participatory design frameworks in my project.



Figure 9.3. Image of Kathmandu Streets in 2017.



While working on this archive, I am drawing on methods within UX research such as discover, decide, make, and validate frameworks of 18F Methods. Since a very preliminary stage of building the archive, I started conducting UX research with South Asian communities largely consisting of Nepalis. Some of the methods I used are usability testing, visual preference testing, dot voting, affinity mapping, landscape analysis, and user interview. The tentative ways of working with these tools are available at <https://methods.18f.gov>.

In this section, I will present the results of two of the methods I used during my three UX research projects since 2018: dot voting and user interview. In the dot voting study, the participants were given dots of three different colors to put on the back of the printed photo: green if they wanted the photo to be uploaded in the archive, yellow if they weren't sure, and red if they didn't think the photo should be uploaded. For each of their answers, they would also stick a note with the reason written on it. The first UX research was conducted virtually with the participants of CASSA conference held in Nepal in 2018. The second was conducted in-person in 2019 with the participants of the workshop-seminar, "Critical Digital Humanities and Participatory Design," that I was co-conductor and coordinator of. And the third UX research took place virtually (also due to the pandemic) with the Nepali academics in the US. The participants consist of academics and other professionals. Some of the questions asked to the participants were: Would you like this photograph to be in the archive, and why? What kinds of photographs would you recommend me uploading, and why? Which photographs should remain in the archive, and which should be removed, and why? The questions were drafted to give enough space for the participants to critique my work. The conversations, which will be partly manifested in this section, were so intriguing and important that as a next step in my project, I am planning to invite willing Nepali collaborators to fill out metadata spaces the way they like. With the help of the results of these methods, this section focuses on harmonious and not-so-harmonious dialogues and conversations that took place during my UX research when we attempted co-designing and co-curating the archive.

Even before I started the UX research, I knew that there would not be consistent answers among participants. Yet, each time I started the UX research and conversations with Nepali communities, I was hoping these conversations would help me in making multiple archival decisions. But the moment conversations around photographs through archival perspective started taking place, it became evident that these conversations are not going to help me find a uniform answer which would linearly result in making those specific decisions regarding my archive. The UX research helped me rethink design decisions more than making these decisions. Rather, the impossibility of building a "harmonious" and "organized" archive started becoming more evident. For example, the images where women are making and selling tea and other food items attracted various conflicting responses (for instance, Figure 9.3). While some

saw stereotypical gender roles (cooking) assigned to these women in these images, others saw professional women who were using traditional gender roles to do something that is not so traditional, i.e., earning money. In the same way, while some said the images of a jumble of unruly matted wires hanging above the Kathmandu streets or the roads in poor condition and lacking basic safety features should go in the archive, other participants voted them out saying they would portray Kathmandu in a negative light. Some of the participants wanted my archive to capture Kathmandu streets in their rawness and without any censorship steered by certain ideology or philosophy, others wanted me to be extremely cautious while selecting photos so that the archival photographs do not end up inviting a colonial mindset to stereotype us any further. Some participants criticized uploading the images of religious spaces and sculptures, others emphasized there must be more photographs of the art spaces related to goddess culture. Some participants critiqued the photographs of narrow alleys of old towns or the photographs that show old, antique, dilapidated, dirty, disorganized, and religious aspects of Kathmandu. Other participants, during the conversations that followed the dot voting method in the 2019 in-person UX research, countered with something like: “Why on the earth do we have to keep on looking at ourselves through the eyes of the West and build our archive thinking about them? Can’t we, for once, do it for ourselves?” Some participants remain indecisive. During a virtual user interview in 2018, one of the participants had made a very crucial point that many of us could relate to:

You as a Nepali should be able to relate to the experience (and postures) in the photographs, unlike the western photography that religiously selects experiences and postures which are not intrinsic to Nepali sentiments, but used to ridicule or exoticize Nepal or what is Nepali. (Examples: Photographs of delousing, snots running down noses of little children. They may tell a story of poverty, but usually is an incomplete one.) Such photographs tend to stereotype, perhaps negatively.

Through these conversations, what was becoming evident was as South Asians and our shared concerns and experiences in terms of colonialism, neocolonialism, and cultural imperialism, we also share the fear of representation, especially as my digital archive is being built from the location of the US. We share our fear situated in the historical and structural violence and exclusion caused by colonialism, neocolonialism, and cultural imperialism. We also share our excitement when we saw a ray of hope that maybe we have an agency to make a postcolonial dent in this scenario and to find a decolonial option in digital archives. But that does not mean we share some essential features that define our desires, our politics, our ethics, and our aesthetics. The conflicting responses that I was getting were “rupturing the essentialist foundation of identity construction” and we were witnessing “multidimensional, contingent, and contradictory narratives of

South Asia and the deconstruction of identities categories right there” (Poudyal “Digital Activism”). And this moment was also corroborating one thing that the events and episodes like these are “the proof that the moment one tries to identify South Asians and/or Non-Westerners, they dismantle the stability of that identity right away. Because identity is always already dismantled” (Poudyal “Digital Activism”). So, an ethical way of building digital archives should begin with a determination to *anarchive* any identity constructions and such *anarchiving* cannot always be cordial, harmonious, structured, ordered, and organized. “Harmonious archives” are built on an exclusion that remains unacknowledged. Archival harmony can only be possible through the violent exclusion of the Other voices, narratives, politics, and ethics. Such archives are possible only when conflicting stories are crushed.

“Harmonious archives” tend to bulldoze over complexities and heterogeneities and end up essentializing diversity. Essentializing diversity means portraying diverse groups by implying in such a way that individuals within that community share certain essential features that define them all. Even if the intentions are, otherwise, this kind of rhetoric of diversity will reduce the existence of the Other to some essential modifiers and can run the risk of not only postponing the translation of our social justice dreams into lived experiences but rather perpetuating epistemic violence in the name of justice. Elsewhere, I have defined epistemic violence in the context of digital archiving in the following manner:

When the pluralities and heterogeneities of the Other and their epistemologies and ontologies are reduced to some single narrative to serve the interest and match the limited imagination of the privileged structure, I am calling it epistemic violence. When will-to-knowledge about the Other becomes the driving force instead of dialogues, love, care, embrace, reciprocity, and respect towards the Other, that is epistemic violence. When there is no space for dialogue or no attempt to create a dialectical space while designing technology and building archives, there is a danger of committing this epistemic violence. (Poudyal “Building Digital Archive” 2)

Therefore, digital-archiving and digital-narrativization about diverse communities are not enough. Assuming all Non-Westerners are bound by a certain essential feature that defines them all will only support oppressive rhetoric. Assuming everyone’s insurgent dreams are similar is not only insufficient but unethical too. While building digital archives to create a space for counter-texts that tell narratives about diverse communities, digital storytellers must learn to pay attention to the heterogeneities within that diversity. Because we cannot forget that almost all forms of structural violence are inflicted and justified based on hermetically sealed identity constructions. If our digital archival

resistance “relies on the same essentialist epistemology and ontology, which is the tool of violence,” we will end up “persisting the same tool of violence confirming that even if the violence is not right, the foundation of violence is” (Poudyal “Digital Activism”). As Diane Davis says in *Breaking Up [at] Totality*, we need to venture into the zones of the abstract and provoke a radical rupture. I is possible only when we learn to really listen to all kinds of narratives, ideas, philosophies, ethics, and politics that come from those Othered spaces. To be committed to this ethics of listening, while uploading various kinds of street photography in my digital archive, as my next step, I am planning to collaborate with other Nepali participants to populate the metadata spaces in my digital archive with pluriversal dialogues and conversations so that no photograph, collection, or exhibit tell a single narrative and the linear, unapologetic representation and categorizations of Nepalis and South Asians are shredded into pieces. I have invited willing Nepali participants to collaborate with me and populate metadata spaces in my archive the way they want so that we move toward, as Ellen Cushman et al. would say, “*imagining pluriversal possibilities*” (3). Only then, digital archives can provoke one to imagine plural realities and heterogeneous narratives of the communities that are essentialized, silenced, and absented by privileged structure. And these community-based participatory research frameworks enable researchers to examine “the hermeneutics of ‘lived realities’ and ask not ‘what does it mean’ but ‘what can we do’” (Jones et al. 241; see Saukko 343). The participatory design frameworks (such as 18F Methods) allow designers to journey toward an equitable relationship with communities (Rose and Cardinal; Agboka; Walton et al.) and to really listen and engage in a relentless dialogue with humans and contexts to build a digital archive that is ethical and critically responsible. These frameworks enable digital archivists to learn to work with and learn from minoritized and underrepresented spaces so that digital archives can be, not exactly a repository for historically, culturally and evidentiary valuable and rare artifacts for permanent or long-term preservation (after all, the question that must be asked is, who gets to decide what’s rare and valuable artifacts that get to participate in the future world), but a space of dialogues, possibilities, heterogeneities, pluralities, complexities, surprises, contradictions, counter-narratives, and contingencies.

## Conclusion: A Call of Justice

This chapter’s theoretical and methodological discussions of digital archives and digital storytelling is a humble and stubborn attempt to imagine the possibility of transforming digital archives into an inviting, safe, and hospitable space for historically and structurally marginalized, disadvantaged, absented voices, and experiences. The way I approached, theorized, and practiced minimal computing and community-praxis in my project and this chapter is a genuine attempt to transform digital-archival justice into lived experiences of the Other. Such trans-

formation demands radical initiatives and radical humbleness from digital archivists and storytellers.

Radical initiatives call for not only making digital tools, methods, and methodologies accessible to the Other but also rupturing definitional frontiers. Only that will allow digital praxis and digital archives to create space for the Other to participate as problem-solvers and storytellers rather than only privileged structure solving problems for and constructing narratives about the Other. And radical humbleness means digital archivists remaining true to “the call of justice—which comes from outside of ‘the record,’ outside of any archival or recordmaking theory” and this call “is a calling more important than any other calling” (Harris 248). Only it will enable digital archivists to remain humble toward and strive for “impossible archival imaginaries” (Gilliland and Caswell). As per Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell, these imaginary archival imaginaries may work in situations where “the archive and its hoped-for contents are absent or forever unattainable” and “can provide a trajectory to the future out of a particular perspective on the past and may build upon either actual or imagined documentation and narratives” and “to instantiate the possibility of a justice that has not yet arrived” (61-65). While trying to build a dialogic room for counter-stories and counter-texts, digital archivists should also strive to imagine the stories that could not make it this time. Because these stories are not always locatable, recordable, writable, and knowable. They are either inaccessible (because no stories are completely accessible) or made inaccessible (by matrix of oppression).



Figure 9.4. Image of Kathmandu Streets [Source: <http://cassacda.com>]



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