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Cluster Conversation: (Re)Writing our Histories, (Re)Building Feminist Worlds: Working Toward Hope in the Archives

Introduction

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> *"Hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. […] Hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency." —Rebecca Solnit*

In 2018, Cheryl Glenn wrote, "The work of feminist rhetorical historiography is far from done; in fact, it has just begun–and it is anchored in hope." Following Glenn, we explore hope in this cluster as a methodological imperative in the archives. Informed by theorists Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Rebecca Solnit, and Cornel West, the writers in this Cluster Conversation envision hope as a radical orientation toward building new worlds and a willingness to do the work to make those worlds possible. Following the models of Jacqueline Jones Royster, Charles Morris, Terese Guinsatao Monberg, and others, we see archives and archival methods as a particularly valuable part of doing such work. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues in *Decolonizing Methodologies,* "To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges. The pedagogical implication of this access to alternative knowledges is that they can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things" (36). Archives and archival methods are vital to creating such alternative histories and knowledges.

> *"Cause-and-effect assumes history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension." – Rebecca Solnit*

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Hope explodes temporality–in other words, hope exists outside of linear or simplistic notions of time. And so do archives, as they carry echoes of the past to the present and future, and then back again as we re-orient our understandings of identity and categorization. In this cluster, we look to the past for reminders of resistance and survival–road maps from Black creators like Pauli Murray, who, as Coretta Pittman demonstrates, carefully maintained a personal archive of letters and diary entries as a testament to her "abiding hope and faith in the living word." Pittman ponders who will tell the stories of African American women, especially those, like Murray, whose contributions have been historically overlooked. We also have scholar-teachers grounded in the present reflecting on the past, such as Kaylee Laakso leveraging her positionality and decolonial methods when researching Indian Removal rhetorics in federal archives. Megan Heise documents recent archiving among young people living in the Ritsona refugee camp, exercising their agency to share their voices beyond the walls/confines of the camp to a world that needed–and continues to need–to hear them. Their work says, we are here, we are human, we create. These narratives remind us that hope exists outside of linear timelines–so our own introduction does the same.

> *By reimagining archival practices [...], hope emerges in the form of restorative justice—acknowledging the vital contributions of indigenous women, resisting the erasure of their knowledge, and fostering a future where scientific inquiry and cultural heritage coexist with mutual respect and recognition.* – Rachel O'Donnell

Present: It feels like a strange time to write about hope. As we write in early 2025, natural and human catastrophes are occurring across the planet, from climate change-fueled wildfires to humanitarian crises to genocide. Pain and fear permeate. Seismic shifts are occurring politically and carrying academia along with them (sometimes with the silent complicity of members of the academy). What originated as politically coordinated attacks on Critical Race Theory (CRT) have become sweeping indictments of diversity and inclusion, framing these concepts and their related efforts toward progress as the inverse of merit. We live in a time of anti-Black, anti-trans, anti-immigrant, and anti-science legislation, book bans, laws barring access to reproductive care, a disabling pandemic, and the continued and purposeful divestment from education at every level. The world is burning both literally and metaphorically. We cannot deny these realities. Things are bad, and there's every reason to believe that they will continue to worsen. As we are writing this, tomorrow seems less and less certain. Between climate despair and war, between the relentless attempts to erase the very existence of trans people, undocumented immigrants, and disabled people, the future is not guaranteed for so many of us and our loved ones. Is there, then, any hope left to be found? There is, the contributors to this conversation say. And we affirm that deep belief: despite this violence, people are still capturing the movements, moments, and creations of survival so that future generations can understand–we were here, we are here, and we will be here.

> *"Always incomplete, the archive still holds traces of lives ignored that scholars can reanimate, providing hope for glimpsing what once was forgotten. Such hope, of course, does not right the wrongs of denying care to Black Americans - rather, it can help us sort the remnants and traces of what remains so that we can better understand and honor those whose memories live among the lexical and visual absences within archives."* –Julie Homchick Crowe and Ryan Mitchell

These home truths about the current state of the world make hope more necessary and important because hope is not a passive feeling but an ongoing commitment, an action. It's a practice and a responsibility and a necessity. We recognize hope as a subversive choice in the face of so much harm and pain. Hope doesn't replace our (reasonable) fear about the present and the future, but it does give us a way to live with the fear as active agents in the world and as members of communities for whom and to whom we are responsible. Speaking to the dangers of tokenization and the many voices, stories, and experiences who have been excluded from white feminist spaces and conversations, Audre Lorde reminds us, "Without community, there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression." Being in community, making art, and telling stories are all acts of hope in the face of a dehumanizing present. And at its heart (as the contributors to this Cluster Conversation make clear), the kind of feminist archival work explored throughout this Conversation is about telling stories in, among, and for communities. The versions of feminist archival research represented in these pages require us to be responsible for and to others. They say to us all, "More voices! More people! More humanity!" These are acts of hope.

> *"And herein lies the hope—that in reconsidering the potential of the archives, we might resist prevailing myths and, instead, listen to community members' stories to guide our way."* – Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Jessica A. Rose

We see the practice of feminist historiography and archival work as inherently hopeful because these methodologies center stories, people, and communities who have been excluded, ignored, overlooked, hidden, buried, and denied. **Telling these stories matters because the people who tell the stories and the people whose stories are told matter**. Much of the work offered in this Cluster Conversation attends to stories that were actively ignored, buried beneath totalizing narratives. By archiving familial artifacts, Vyshali Manivannan leverages "parable, rumor, and memory" to resist the erasure of state-sponsored genocide and ongoing oppression of Tamils in Sri Lanka's North-East–and to document embodied diasporic disabled lives through culturally specific forms, interrogating what becomes "archivable" after violent ethnic biblioclasm. The work of feminist historiographers and archivists makes new space that allows these stories to breathe. They expand our sense of the past and offer new visions of the future. The hope embedded in this kind of archival work is that it reminds us all that other stories exist, other histories exist, and if other histories exist, perhaps other presents and futures are possible, too.

> "Hope is not the same thing as optimism. Never confuse or conflate hope with optimism. Hope cuts against the grain. Hope is participatory. It's an agent in the world. Optimism looks at the evidence to see whether it allows us to infer that we can do 'x' or 'y.' Hope says 'I don't give a damn, I'm gon do it anyway…'" – Cornel West

Past: Feminist historiography and archival methodologies are approaches that allow us to better understand the perspectives of those who have been marginalized. They make room for important voices that show us that there are many ways to be human, and that no dominant power structure gets to determine who is worthy of a seat at the table. We all have value. These approaches allow us to make visible our experience. Our stories affirm that even when deliberately silenced, purposefully overlooked, or strategically buried, we are here. We exist. And we have existed. Non-compliant bodies archive the stories of survival, as Sumaiya Sarker Sharmin's decolonial approach to the South Asian American Digital Archives reminds us. Feminist historiography and archival work both preserves and resurrects our stories as evidence of our existence. Studying the archives reminds us that people have always been resisting the silences, shouting for our society to see the totality of our shared humanity.

> "The feelings, lives, and identities we document, our personal pasts, our traumas, our bodily autonomy, our hubris and our anxiety: can the order of archives turn this anxiety into hope? Yes! To nurture hope, you must allow yourself to heal. To heal, you must make sense of what came before." –Andre Perez, Mary Escobar, and Wendy Hayden

Our histories, accounts, and artifacts are records of our undeniable truths, even as efforts attempt to erase or silence history. As Teresa Romero points out in her archival work on Chicana in Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional, "I have inherited these stories to keep our cultural history alive." Kat Gray offers case studies from Virginia Tech University that provide an approach to better understand historical archives as a way to articulate feminist and queer orientations to research today. Gray's work also interrogates the role and positionality of the archival researcher. Her work prompts us to consider responsibilities and consequences that emerge in attempting to "replace progress narratives with richer, more complex understandings of institutional culture and history." Similarly, Jessie Male also asks us to think critically about how archiving allows us to revise uncomfortable and violent historical narratives via her discussion of Grace Talusan's memoir as a site of "radical deconstruction and narrative reorientation." Histories, these contributors remind us, are never gone, and these histories are all we have to build our futures on. What we need, their work says, are as many histories, as many voices, as many people as we can manage to bring with us into whatever futures we can build.

Future: Even as children, we seem to understand the importance of the impulse to preserve the present in order to speak to the future: we compile and bury time capsules, perhaps, or write letters to our future selves. Unspoken in many of these activities: in ten years, there will be a grown me to read this letter– in fifty years, there will be new gangs of children, roaming the land hungry for the glimpse into the past.

> "In inventing an archive that records remembrance, resistance, resilience, and adaptability from the ephemera of Eelam Tamil diasporic life and being-disabled in the U.S., I resist (in some small way) the violent erasure and rewriting of Eelam Tamil history and culture and of my disabled self-knowledge and oracular instinct; I help myself reconcile my experiences of chronic pain and intergenerational trauma. In creating and reinscribing archives of the painfully specific and universal lies hope." Vyshali Manivannan

To hope today is to believe there can be a tomorrow, as Alexandra Gunnells' article on archiving as a hopeful pedagogical practice shows. Working with University of Texas - Austin students, Gunnells discusses how digital archiving makes visible "hidden or absented aspects of student life" for "future generations" of Longhorns. Similarly, Kerri Hauman and Emily Goodman see teaching with archives as an act of hope. By inviting students to update Wikipedia with the hidden histories of queer Kentucky, "we are writing/righting the historical record so that the future is not about erasure but about the sharing of these histories so they are openly available to future generations of Kentuckians." Like the time capsules from our childhoods, teaching archives allows our students to speak to the past and the future.

When we wrote this CFP, which stemmed from a CCCC panel, we were prepared to read many drafts of people researching and teaching with archives, seeking out messages of hope from the past. What we did not anticipate was the number of pieces we'd receive that spoke to the urgency of archiving *this* moment. Theodora Danylevich's "Crip Pandemic Archiving and/as Hope" documents their experience co-curating a tapestry of disabled odes to survival in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, a time when disabled people were seen as experts of surviving an apocalypse and at the same time utterly disposable. In their efforts to make a "reparative and accessible archive," Danylevich's archive acts as a space of resonant encounter, a crip kinship across time and space. Danylevich's crip pandemic archiving praxis orients itself to future disabled creators, who will always be under attack. Their archives remind *now-us* and *future-us* that with community, with love, with care, we can survive and grow together.

We believe that feminist archival research can help us learn how to do the work of hope in a time of despair. That hope is not based on a credulous belief that archives offer unmediated access to histories and experience. Feminist writer Rebecca Solnit explains, hope is "an ax you break down doors with in an emergency [...]. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope." A hopeful orientation to archival research, then, is not built on naïveté, but rather, requires that researchers open themselves to conversations from the past as they also interrogate the social construct of the archive and thoughtfully consider how silence(s) (Jones and Williams) and erasure (Garcia; Sano-Franchini) function in archives.

So, we choose hope, as do the contributors to this Cluster Conversation. We choose to believe better futures are possible and that telling as many stories as possible will help us build those better futures.

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