Vol. 27, no. 2, Winter 2025

Reimagining Non-Compliant Bodies as Archives: A Feminist Decolonial Approach

Sumaiya Sarker Sharmin

Abstract: Epistemic racism and other forms of inequality dominate mainstream archival narratives. In contrast, community archives such as Moving Memories, recorded in SAADA (South Asian American Digital Archives), promote counternarratives, in opposition to the dominant archives. In my exploration of the contours of systemic inequalities that silence the transnational existence of non-normative brown people, I critically reflect on South Asian trans/queer voices and their embodied experiences. In this essay, I locate hope in community archival practices for a liberatory future.

Keywords: community archives, hope, queer migrants, memory, body, epistemic racism

Doi: 10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.2.23

This essay examines the South Asian American Digital Archive's (SAADA) *Moving Memories* exhibit to illustrate how community archives promote counternarratives that disrupt heteronormative archival epistemic racism and other forms of inequality. Extending Vox Jo Hsu's proposal of reimagining "body-mind" as an archive, in order to critically reflect on South Asian trans/queer voices and their embodied experiences, I explore the contours of systemic inequalities that silence the transnational existence of non-normative brown people. As acknowledged by scholars like K.J. Rawson and Jean Bessette among others, the absences of non-conforming bodies in institutional archives have obliterated their history and rendered their experiences invisible in the present, but these silenced voices can be traceable in the community archives such as SAADA.

Founded in 2008, SAADA was created in response to the dearth of archival materials that recorded the experiences of South Asian Americans. As explained by Michelle Caswell, the co-founder of SAADA, "no archival repository was systematically collecting materials related to South Asian American history. None even had South Asian American history as a collecting priority" (27). Broadly speaking, SAADA features a range of materials that document the lives of South Asian Americans, but the *Moving Memories* project specifically focuses on Bangladeshi brown trans/queer migrants in the USA. A collection of oral histories, the accounts included therein document how heteronormative bio-necro politics forced non-conforming bodies to migrate to the Global North, but as Queer/Trans People of Color (QTPOC) in the U.S.,

Sumaiya Sarker Sharmin is currently pursuing a PhD in Rhetoric and Composition at Washington State University. She teaches in the Department of English and WGSS at WSU. She has obtained an M.A. in TESOL from Central Michigan University where she taught English 101 College Composition and worked as a Writing Center consultant. After graduating from CMU, Sharmin worked as an intern at the Refugee Development Center in Lansing, Michigan. She also has a bachelor's degree in English and a master's degree in Applied Linguistics from the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. Her research interests include feminist rhetorics and the rhetoric of health and medicine.

their bodies carry an additional burden, making them vulnerable to the mechanisms of systemic oppression that elide marginalized/oppressed people.

Dominant archival narratives overlook transnational QTPOC migrants' history and memory by preferring Western culture. I emphasize that archives need intersectional and transnational theories and practices to combat archival imperialism and oppression. Archival accounts that only present Westernized notions and dominant ideologies cannot be objective (Bessette 25). More so, "archives aren't natural repositories but rather an ongoing set of complex processes of selection, interpretation, and even creative invention" (Bessette 25). Influenced by power relationships, can't we say that dominant Western archival narratives – be that historical, social, or cultural – decide whose story is important? Cheryl Glenn also mentioned that the stories in selected archives were ignoring the representation of others. Considering the exclusionary practices in official archives, community archives engage in the critical work of countering the power of archives in making immigrants, QTPOC folks, and other racial minorities invisible.

I argue that the archival formation of such prototypes can contribute to the liberation of non-compliant bodies. Inspired by Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, I am imagining QTPOC bodies as non-compliant bodies who counter normativity by their "wayward practices" against heteropatriarchal structure and the racialized oppressive system. In the process, the community archives also initiate the rupturing of the racialized appropriation of some trans/queer bodies in institutionalized archives. By representing the voices of brown queer migrants, I contend that digital community archives such as SAADA contribute to the dismantling of systemic inequalities.

I examine how *Moving Memories* exhibits in SAADA intervene in the racialized heteronormative logics by including a series of stories of Bangladeshi queer, migrants, and racial minorities, who are otherwise considered monolithic under a single normative racial frame as South Asian minority. Dwelling within an unsettling diasporic space, their stories reveal the entanglements of state-sanctioned violence, heteronormative racial logics, relationships, belonging, and "the sites of unbelonging" (Hsu 9). I employ Hsu's "diasporic listening" as a narrative methodology for understanding counter-stories embedded in the *Moving Memories* archive. According to Hsu, "Like Romeo García's 'community listening,' diasporic listening is 'imagining the possibilities of new stories in and with others'" (11). As I listen to their oral interviews, diasporic listening enables me to connect their individual embodied experiences to the historical patterns of treating QTPOC people as others in the US. The reason I consider the archival materials counter-stories is because careful rhetorical listening suggests that QTPOC migrants in *Moving Memories* are not subscribing to the normative notion of the West as a progressive queer-friendly space; rather, they complicate queer embodiments by invoking the challenges of migration, visibility, and social mobility.

By listening closely to their narratives, I find how the racialized colonial logics impinged into their personal spaces and rendered them invisible as QTPOC migrants in the US. Despite leaving their home country for a liberatory space for trans/queer people, a few interviewees in *Moving Memories* shared their

stories of "(un)belonging" in the US. In addition to carrying the traumas of violence against trans/queer people and minorities in Bangladesh, the stories reveal their bodies' carrying the experiences of racism, alienation, heteronormative oppressions, traumas of losing homes, absence of financial support for migrants, fear of deportation, and different forms of inequalities in the US. "I didn't want to be white, but I also didn't really know where I belonged," Nancy Haque, a second-generation Bangladeshi American, deplores to illustrate how racist experiences impinge on the QTPOC community in the USA (*Moving Memories*). Like Haque, several QTPOC migrant interlocutors in this community project critique US racialized structures, unsupportive migration policies, lack of economic support for transnational migrants, and other forms of vulnerabilities in their diasporic lives.

The identity of being a QTPOC in the US seemed more uncomfortable than coming out as gay in Bangladesh, as Faisal Misha in an interview regrets their migration to the USA. Like Misha, Rasel Ahmed questions his migration to the USA as a queer. Reminiscing fleeing Bangladesh after being targeted for killing for his queer activism, Ahmed juxtaposes mental health precarity as a migrant with his fear of being murdered in Bangladesh. Sharmin Hussain further shares the intricacies of growing up as a "dark-skinned Muslim girl" in New York where racialized heteronormative logics generated relationship traumas. After dealing with clinical depression and unemployment during their stay in the USA, Suhaila, a queer college student, eventually, found their home in Bangladesh. "When my father came to visit me, he said, 'why don't you come back to Bangladesh? You know, if you stay here, you have to earn your place in society from scratch. But in Bangladesh you have a home. You have your family. You have a friend circle. You can get a job'" (*Moving Memories*).

As I read and listened to their diasporic stories — following Hsu's proposition to "body-mind as archives" — I could identify experiences of oppression in QTPOC Bangladeshi American and migrant bodies in *Moving Memories*. What can be more authentic than listening to the embodied experiences of non-compliant bodies that point out existing inequalities through their survival and resistance? Listening closely to these stories could be our methodological sites for understanding borderless mechanisms of manifold oppression. In critically engaging with their embodied feelings, I also recognize "feelings can be the site of rebellion" (Ahmed 72). With their non-conformity in the face of obstacles, the bodies become the site of resistance. While racialized heteropatriarchal ethnic norms targeted their bodies for discipline and punishment both in Bangladesh and in the USA, the counternarratives elicit resistance to socially constructed bodily and behavioral norms in transnational spaces. Their counternarratives challenge the body politics of creating docile bodies.

As a springboard for documenting the consciousness-raising stories and memories of the everyday marginalized people, community archives, such as SAADA, play a significant role in queering the dominant archival expectations. However, even with documentation, there are several caveats that archives have in preserving information. Archives cannot represent all embodied experiences and memories. Many non-compliant bodies do not share their stories on a public forum. But their bodies store the scars, experiences, and

memories of generational traumas, heteronormative, gendered, racialized oppression, distorted nation-state perception, and many other forms of discrimination. According to Hsu, "The body, too, is an archive – that we carry with us our experiences and the stories we are given. We exceed them too, but these are the materials from which we build our worldviews" (149). The living bodies are always archiving information. Non-compliant bodies are storing the traces of systemic inequalities and oppressions against them: their bodies are archives.

I listen to more interviews. Initially, a sense of relief and happiness washed over Puja when she had finally arrived in the USA, as Puja was subjected to gendered and religious marginalization in Bangladesh. But the racialized nation-state discriminations against immigrants and migrants rattled Puja's sense of belonging in a newfound home: "Just trying to stay here has been a lot of work. I am now telling myself, 'No, I'm old. I'm old enough right now and have been in the U.S. for seven years. I'm just tired of being treated like this. Like shit all the time.'" Puja shares how she is perpetually treated as an "other" in White America. Like Puja, Huhu says "I was doing things that other white kids were doing but people were not mixing with me. I was used to being called a lesbo or whatever. But I hadn't expected that I'd be called that even there [in the USA]" (*Moving Memories*).

Their counternarratives offer us a glimpse of multilayered oppressions against marginalized communities. "What we see is not a progress narrative where society gets less racist over time culminating in a multiracial America, but a cyclical repetition of oppression in which a minoritized community is doomed to suffer the repeated consequences of white supremacist violence" (Caswell 5). Their experiences conform to what feminist and queer scholars have identified as systemic white supremacist violence. To add, the dominant approach of progressive narrativization of Western culture has consequences. It tends to normalize the dominance of Western culture while obscuring the structural inequalities, racism, sexism, and ableism embedded in the system. Thus, to create more presence of these absent/unrecognized stories, we focus on community-based archival knowledge production to generate future histories and memories of marginalized communities. *Moving Memories* also offers us a larger understanding of transnational experience across and within the borders of the nation-state (Hesford & Schell 466).

I should note that the history of Bangladeshi QTPOC marginalized groups is disproportionately absent in mainstream archival repositories. Hsu uses the term "perpetual foreigners" to suggest the racist placement of QTPOC's identities in the USA. I argue that the archival exclusion of Bangladeshi immigrants' histories marks their identities as invisible foreigners even within a continuum of "perpetual foreigners," as if Bangladeshi immigrants' history is unworthy of documentation. Archives are conduits of power: "They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance" (Schwartz and Cook 13). Traditional archives have always privileged Western bodies. A community-based digital archive that is freely accessible, such as *Moving Memories*, is then conducting the "liberatory memory work" to document Bangladeshi migrants' existence in the USA (Caswell 27).

The formation of community archives in this case acts as a tool to resist symbolic violence that occurs when some marginalized groups' history receives preferential treatment at the cost of many other minorities rendered invisible. At the same time, a community-based archival intervention fights Western hegemonic "memory institutions" that perpetuate white heterosexual dominance by obliterating the memories of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ folks with diverse "sexual and racial identities" (Caswell 33; Glenn 9). Community archives reveal the discriminatory master narratives that have been used to obstruct the empowerment of minorities. The revolutionary nature of community archives plants seeds of hope in the present by bringing forward the stories that are traditionally muted and disrupted by the majoritarian problematic narratives (Martinez).

Liberatory Hope

Hope is found in the non-normative stories that resist the normative oppressive structure with their queer desires projected transnationally. Drawing from Caswell's concept of "archival liberation," I locate hope, which is anchored in community archival theories and practices. They promote ground-up archival practices to dismantle imperial representation. "Archival liberation" ensures "both cultural recognition (through representational belonging, with the caveat that such recognition is self-recognition from minoritized communities) and a redistribution of resources (through material reparations)" (Caswell 94). We see hope in the visibility of migrant stories which also suggests the significance of community-based archives to promote cultural recognition and to challenge the dominance of Western culture.

By creating a space for "a counter-narrative, liberated from the judgment and classification that subjected" trans/queer people "to surveillance, arrest, punishment, and confinement," the community archives recognize the collective hope of archival revolution rooted in non-compliant bodies' stories that continue to guide us "how the world might be otherwise" (Hartman 3). Such practices in community archives create another kind of hope which I call radical hope**.** The inclusion of *Moving Memories* in the SAADA archive is therefore a significant example of highlighting the multifarious experiences of migrants and South Asian American queer bodies in the US. Moreover, the voices complicate Bangladesh's homophobic social environment by documenting racism, traumas of migration, QTPOC's vulnerabilities, and the challenges that stem from invisibility in the United States. These non-compliant stories create a space of hope as they offer a vision for charting our collective activism.

Beyond institutionalized archives, informed by feminist and decolonial scholars, including Jacqueline Jones Royster, Gesa Kirsch, Cheryl Glenn, Aja Y. Martinez, Michelle Caswell and beyond, I emphasize that focusing on community archives can disrupt archival epistemic racism and other forms of inequalities. Since exclusionary practices in the archives are foundational to epistemic racism, creating repositories such as *Moving Memories*, as in the community archives, is an engagement in the critical work of unsettling epistemic violence by representing marginalized QTPOC history and memory.

To intervene in archival exclusion, intersectional and transnational feminist approaches and queer

theory in conjunction can disrupt heteronormative archival epistemic racism and other forms of inequality in archives. Not only does *Moving Memories*' queer approaches circulate consciousness about systemic inequalities against QTPOC, but the community archive itself works as a mode to say yes to different identities, desires, people, and lifestyles (Rhodes and Alexander). At the same time, community archive "offers ways to disidentify with hegemonic rhetoric, with the dominant rhetorical histories, theories, and practices articulated in Western culture" (Glenn 4). In *Moving Memories*, the communities document their own stories that highlight feminist and queer ethics of working toward dismantling archival power structures. In the process, community archives contribute to dislocating archival master narratives that have long been used to obliterate minority history and memory by providing access to the stories of marginalized people. *Moving Memories* disrupt mainstream QTPOC narrative expectations by sharing their disidentification with Western progress narratives. Thus, community archives represent liberatory hope for marginalized communities.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, 2004.

Bessette, Jean. "Unsettling the 'Archive Story.'" *Unsettling Archival Research*, edited by Gesa E. Kirsch et al., Southern Illinois University Press, 2023, pp. 25–34. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.9669312.6. Accessed 30 June 2024.

Caswell, Michelle. "Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation." *The Public Historian*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2014, pp. 26–37, https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.26.

Caswell, Michelle. *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. 1 ed., Routledge, 2021.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2020.

Hsu, V. Jo. *Constellating Home: Trans and Queer Asian American Rhetorics*. The Ohio State University Press, 2022.

Hesford, Wendy S., and Eileen E. Schell. "Introduction: Configurations of Transnationality: Locating Feminist Rhetorics." *College English*, vol. 70, no. 5, 2008, pp. 461–70, https://doi.org/10.58680/ce20086360.

Kirsch, Gesa, et al. *Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives*. Southern Illinois University Press, 2023.

Glenn, Cheryl. *Rhetorical Feminism and This Thing Called Hope.* 1st ed., Southern Illinois University Press, 2018.

Glenn, Cheryl. "Truth, Lies, and Method: Revisiting Feminist Historiography." *College English*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2000, pp. 387–89, https://doi.org/10.2307/378937.

Martinez, Aja Y. *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory*. Conference on College Composition and Communication, National Council of Teachers of English, 2020.

Rawson, K. J. "The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description: Classifying Images of Gender Transgression." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2018, pp. 327–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2017.1347951.

Rhodes, Jacqueline, and Jonathan Alexander, editors. *The Routledge Handbook of Queer Rhetoric*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022.

SAADA, "Moving Memories," https://www.saada.org/movingmemories/exhibit

Schwartz, Joan M., and Terry Cook. "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory." *Archival Science*, vol. 2, no. 1–2, 2002, pp. 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435628.