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Author

Caswell, ML

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Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada

Edited by Dominique Daniel
and Amalia S. Levi

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Inventing New Archival Imaginaries: Theoretical Foundations for Identity-Based Community Archives

Michelle Caswell

University of California Los Angeles

Abstract

This paper will delineate the theoretical foundations for building identity-based community archives, using the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) (<http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/>) as its primary research site. This paper proposes three major theoretical concepts undergirding the formation of identity-based community archives based on the author's experience as a co-founder and board member of SAADA: strategic essentialism, memoryscape, and archival imaginaries. First, postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism is key to understanding how complex and contested communities can come together to form seemingly cohesive archival organizations based on contingent ethnic identities. Secondly, building on the work of Arjun Appadurai, this chapter discusses the concept of memoryscape, and argues that community-based digitization practices create transnational sites where memory is shared, contested, and reconstructed on a global scale. Finally, this chapter applies Appadurai's notion of the imaginary to the archival realm and argues that community archives create liberatory archival imaginaries that re-envision future trajectories of the past for social justice aims, changing our notion of what archives and archival work make possible.

Index Terms: theory, postcolonial theory, globalization, strategic essentialism, memoryscape, archival imaginaries, identity

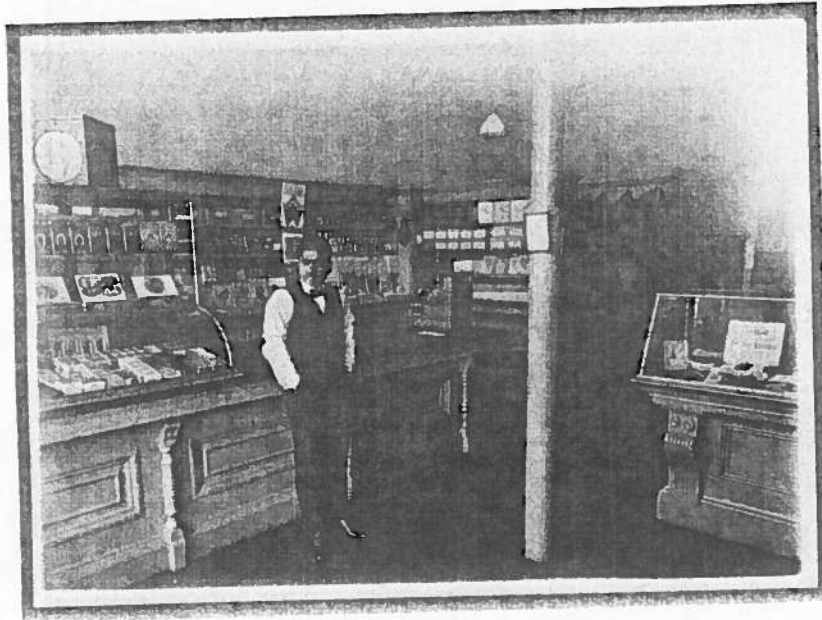


Photo of Vaishno Das Bagai in his store, *Bagai's Bazaar*, at Filmore Street, San Francisco, 1923.

Courtesy of Rani Bagai and the South Asian American Digital Archive.

"...Archival turns inevitably cohere around a temporally ordered seduction of access, a movement that stretches from the evidentiary promise of the past into the narrative possibilities of the future."¹

—Anjali Arondekar

In 1928, Vaishno Das Bagai, one of the first known Indian immigrants to the U.S., checked into a hotel in San Jose, turned on the gas oven, and killed himself. Bagai was a founding member of the Ghadar Party, a political organization advocating for an end to British colonial rule in India. Bagai had become naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 1921—his published suicide note said “we all made ourselves as much Americanized as possible”—but a 1923 Supreme Court case, *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, revoked his citizenship, as well as that of other Indian immigrants, based on racial grounds.² The Court’s decision would have a profound impact on America’s once-burgeoning Indian community, as thousands of immi-

grants, now barred from voting and owning property, returned to India.³ “I came to America thinking, dreaming, and hoping to make this land my home,” Bagai wrote. “Now, what am I? What have I made of myself and my children?... Humility and insults, who is responsible for all this?”⁴ In the private suicide note he left behind to his wife, Bagai explained that he could not envision a future as a British subject after he had worked so hard to escape his past as one.

In 2012, Bagai’s granddaughter, Rani Bagai, contacted the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) (<http://www.saadigitalarchive.org>), an identity-based community archives⁵ that I co-founded and on whose board I sit, about digitizing her grandfather’s extensive collection of rare political and religious pamphlets, ephemera, photographs, and correspondence. These materials situate South Asians as a century-old community in the U.S., document the largely untold story of the Indian American anti-colonial struggle, and counter dominant narratives of South Asians as successful, apolitical recent immigrants who exemplify “model minority” ideals. In response to Ms. Bagai’s call, I organized a group of volunteers to digitize Vaishno Das Bagai’s materials (as well as those of other of Ms. Bagai’s ancestors), to archivally describe them using culturally appropriate terminology, and to make them freely accessible online via SAADA’s website, where they are linked to related materials on early South Asian American immigration and political involvement from other archival collections.⁶ Taken together, these materials are changing the way community members and scholars conceive of the South Asian American past.

As this example illustrates, independent, community-based archives are collecting materials long-overlooked by mainstream repositories. Such archival efforts, this chapter argues by way of theoretical investigation, are not only about creating a more representative record of the past, but about changing what we envision is possible for the future. This chapter examines how three theoretical constructs—strategic essentialism, memoryscapes, and imaginaries—inform the construction of identity-based community archives and argues that such collecting efforts re-envision future trajectories of the past. In so doing, it argues that identity-based community archives are crucial not only to recuperating a lost history, but to creating a more just future.⁷ In the particular case of SAADA, efforts to digitize, describe, and provide access to records overlooked by mainstream repositories are not just about documenting a shared colonial past, but about forging a common postcolonial future as South Asian Americans. In this way, this chapter shifts the focus of theorizing community archives from the reconstruction of what happened to the creation of what will be possible.

This chapter constructs theory rooted in lived experience. As such, it switches back and forth between two different methods: theory-building and participant observation. As Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemish describe, theory-building is a research method in which “the logic that is used to build the theory is made explicit and accessible to the user of the resulting theory.”⁸ This chapter develops

theory about identity-based community archives by making explicit their foundation in critical theory and creating new ways of seeing such organizations in abstract and generalized terms. At the same time, the theory generated by this chapter is firmly based on my own experiences as a practicing archivist in an identity-based community archives. In this way, this chapter also includes my observations as a participant in the phenomena I am describing. Participant observation is a method of ethnographic fieldwork in which researchers become active members of the communities they study over an extended period of time in order to develop an insider's view of the culture being studied. I have been involved with SAADA for six years as a community archives practitioner, long before I began this research or conceived of SAADA as a research site; I will remain involved with SAADA long after this particular investigation ends. I am also an assistant professor in an academic department of information studies and an archival studies scholar. As an insider to identity-based community archival practice, I have intimate knowledge of such communities based on lived experience from which I readily draw in order to instantiate my theoretical claims (even though I am an outsider to the South Asian American community). By combining two seemingly disparate methods, I hope to show practicing archivists the real and lived implications of theoretical conceptualizations for community-based archival practice.

Before my theoretical investigation gets underway, it is necessary to provide some background information on my primary research site. SAADA is a U.S.-based online community archival repository that I co-founded in 2008 with my colleague Samip Mallick. In our respective positions as South Asia Community Outreach Coordinator and Assistant Bibliographer for Southern Asia at the University of Chicago, Samip and I did an assessment of archival materials related to South Asian American history and found that no single repository was systematically collecting these materials. None even had South Asian American history as a collecting priority. We sensed an urgent need; with many of the South Asians who came after American immigration policy opened up in 1965 aging, and many of the early community websites from the 1990s disappearing, we felt that much of this history would be lost had someone not intervened. Furthermore, we felt a real need for these materials to remain under community control and not be subsumed under larger institutional repositories, where they could be undervalued, get lost in the shuffle, or misinterpreted. We also knew that we didn't have the financial resources or stability to create a physical space where the materials could be housed permanently.

So what do a librarian and community organizer do when faced with this dilemma? We pitched in \$100 each, bought some server space, incorporated as a nongovernmental organization, and created SAADA as an independent online-only community-based repository. Six years later, SAADA remains the only non-profit organization dedicated to documenting, preserving and providing access to the rich history of South Asians in the United States. We have a particular

emphasis on collecting materials related to early South Asian immigration to the U.S., to anti-South Asian race riots, to labor, student, and religious organizations, to political involvement, and to artists and intellectuals. We collect materials that are not just celebratory in nature, but reflect the diverse range of South Asian American experiences, from pamphlets created by Punjabi laborers organizing against British rule in the 1910s to webzines created by devout Muslim punk bands in the 2010s. We see ourselves not just as archivists, but activists. We are radically focused on access and have no physical location; instead we digitize historic materials and collect born-digital sources, archivally describe them in a culturally appropriate manner, link them to related materials in the archives, and make them freely accessible online to anyone in the world with an internet connection. After digitization, the physical materials remain with the individual, family, organization, or repository from which they originated.

SAADA is governed by a five-member board; I am the only board member who is not of South Asian descent. We also work with a group of volunteers nationwide who help us track down, digitize, and describe materials, as well as *pro bono* lawyers who helped us fill out the incorporation paperwork, craft our deed of gift, and address copyright issues. We currently have no paid fulltime staff, though we are in the middle of a fundraising campaign that aims to raise enough money to hire Mallick as our Executive Director on a full time basis. Although we have received some grant funding and individual gifts, fundraising is our biggest challenge, and, like many community organizations, we are trying to find the balance between independence and sustainability.⁹ We have a blog, a Facebook page, a Twitter account, an email list, and a fundraising site on Razoo.com. SAADA board members have spoken at dozens of community forums across the U.S. in which we solicit input on what our collection priorities should be and address any concerns or questions community members might have.

Although SAADA is a unique organization dealing with the particularities of one diverse community's history, it shares much in common with other identity-based community archives, including an emphasis on administrative and fiscal independence, efforts to involve community members in archival appraisal and description, and a commitment to social justice aims. As such, it serves as a fitting practical example with which to illustrate this chapter's theoretical claims. By grounding theory in my experience as a co-founder, board member, and practicing archivist for one identity-based community-based archives, I hope to illuminate how concepts rooted in postcolonial and globalization theory have very practical implications for how we conceive of the function of community archives, how we manage their daily operations, and how we visualize their future.

Strategic Essentialism

Having delineated the research site, this chapter now turns to the theoretical basis for such identity-based community archives. In particular, this section argues that the concept of strategic essentialism is key to understanding why identity-based community archives are created and why they are proliferating even as mainstream repositories have become more inclusive. Towards this end, this section introduces the concept of strategic essentialism, describes its relationship to identity-based community archives, and roots this theory in a practical example based on SAADA's collection priorities. This section ultimately builds a theoretical defense of the community archives movement in response to those critics who claim it further fractures, alienates, and provincializes minoritized histories. In so doing, this section provides the first building block in this paper's larger theoretical argument that communities build archives along identity-lines as a means to forge a new politics of the future.

First introduced in detail by postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, strategic essentialism is the deployment of essentialist identity categories by marginalized groups in order to organize for political empowerment. Strategic essentialism simultaneously acknowledges the social construction of identity categories and builds solidarity among individuals who identify with such categories. Spivak developed this idea while commenting on the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, a loose affiliation of historians attempting to uncover subaltern¹⁰ (in this case peasant) voices in the struggle for Indian independence. She describes the construction and deployment of the subaltern as a category as "a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest"; that is, scholars attempting to write history from a subaltern perspective invoke categories based on social class to uncover marginalized voices even while acknowledging that such categories are not reflective of any essential truths.¹¹ She continues, "Class' is not, after all, an inalienable description of human reality. Class-consciousness on the *descriptive* level is itself a strategic and artificial rallying awareness which, on the *transformative* level, seeks to destroy the mechanics which come to construct the outlines of the very class of which a collective consciousness has been situationally developed."¹² Here, in a precursor to what classification scholars Bowker and Star later assert, Spivak argues that the categories in which we sort the world and interpret our own place in it are not representations of "the inalienable and final truth of things," but rather, they are fictions whose constructions are inexorably influenced by the specificities of history, culture, economics, and politics.¹³ Yet while our categories (of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) are fluid, contingent, and ultimately fictitious (even as we base our identities, subjectivities and communities on them), we can still put these constructed categories to use, deploying them as points of solidarity based on common experiences on which to center political action.

There is a danger here, as Spivak asserts. By organizing around identity-based categories we run the risk of reifying the categories themselves, forgetting that they are contingent and that very often they have been constructed and imposed by the powerful. It is the ultimate paradox, a "double take," that our deployment of these categories for discrete political goals must ultimately seek their dismantling.¹⁴ Because of this complication, Spivak later abandoned the notion of strategic essentialism, bemoaning its common misinterpretation.¹⁵

Despite its demand for nuance, the notion of strategic essentialism has much to offer identity-based community archives. Strategic essentialism explains how we, as community archives practitioners, can simultaneously build archives around identity categories *and* collect materials that denaturalize the categories themselves. Through strategic essentialism, we can both acknowledge that identity categories are often socially constructed by the powerful in order to marginalize those who are perceived to fit within those categories, and at the same time, leverage those constructed categories to organize for common goals. Strategic essentialism reminds us to always be wary of categories that have become naturalized and normalized even as we deploy them in our collection policies. And finally, strategic essentialism allows us to mobilize for political change through identity-based archival collecting while at the same time engaging in nuanced critiques of our archival interventions, utilizing critical theory as a source of inspiration rather than paralysis.

By grounding community-based archival practice in strategic essentialism, we can question pre-established categories through creative and community-centric descriptive practices; we can complicate the founding myths of our communities by highlighting the documentation of multiplicity and dissent in our collection policies; and we can foreground the intimacy between knowledge and power by being as transparent as possible about our own archival choices and their consequences. In this light, it becomes clear that the goal of community-based archival efforts should not just be to document a more representative view of history, nor just to recuperate a forgotten past as filtered through the identity categories of the present, but to mobilize traces of the past – however painful, however unnerving – to build a more socially just future.¹⁶

SAADA's use of the category "South Asian American" provides a practical example of strategic essentialism. In SAADA's case, we have strategically employed the constructed category of "South Asian American" in order to build connections between diverse groups, while at the same time documenting differences between those groups in a way that ultimately denaturalizes South Asian American as a category. There is nothing natural or essential about "South Asia" as a basis for identity. South Asia is a geographic location, but dividing up the globe in that manner has its historic roots in the formulation of area studies for U.S. defense purposes in the wake of World War II.¹⁷ By SAADA's formulation, South Asia encompasses the former British colonies now divided into the mod-

ern nation-states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives.¹⁸ As many of these countries have been engaged in armed conflict with each other since their 1947 independence from the U.K., their grouping together under a single rubric may seem arbitrary, contrived, and meaningless.¹⁹ Furthermore, even within each of these nation-states, an astounding number of religious, regional, linguistic, and caste categories divide people in arguably more meaningful ways than the boundaries of nation might indicate. A Muslim from Hyderabad might feel more affinity with his co-religionists in Dacca or with his fellow native Urdu speakers in Lahore than with his Bengali-speaking Hindu countrymen in Calcutta; or he might not. Nowhere are the overlapping categories and fluid boundaries of identity more nuanced than in South Asia, and the politics of exclusion and inclusion are evident in the many manifestations of this transnational term. Furthermore, neither the Muslim from Hyderabad, nor the Bangladeshi, nor the Bengali-speaking Hindu would likely identify as South Asian. Indeed, it is a category that only fully comes into fruition in diaspora; one might become South Asian in the U.S. (or in other diasporic communities around the world), where one was an Indian, or a Muslim, or a Bengali speaker before.²⁰

Built on this shaky foundation, there is also nothing inherently meaningful about applying the category of South Asian to immigrant groups to the U.S. to form the term "South Asian American." Many who might fit under the rubric of this category, like historian Vinay Lal, have dismissed it outright in favor of national designations like Indian American.²¹ Others have suggested the more culturally specific "desi," which roughly translates as local, or from one's own place, as a possible unifying, culturally appropriate transnational term.²² While immigrants from South Asia may see themselves in light of particular national or regional identities, the second generation is more likely to identify with transnational diasporic categories such as "South Asian American."²³ Recently, in response to the wave of hate crimes targeted at South Asian Americans of all religious backgrounds in the wake of September 11, 2001, the term has taken on renewed significance, uniting diverse groups through the shared experience of racial profiling, harassment and violence.

It is within this identity context that SAADA was formed. SAADA's founders consciously chose the term South Asian American to both appeal to as broad an audience as possible and to reflect the historical realities of a shared colonial past. We strive to collect materials that reflect as wide a range of South Asian American experiences as possible. More importantly from a theoretical standpoint, we invoked the term South Asian American to underscore the common colonial and immigration histories shared by different national, linguistic, or religious communities. It seems awkward, inaccurate, and anachronistic, for example, to refer to an immigrant who came to San Francisco from Lahore in 1907 as Pakistani, when such a nation-state did not yet exist at the time. Furthermore, despite ongoing tension between now-rival nations, the vast majority of

the people included under the umbrella term 'South Asian American' share a common past rooted in centuries of British colonialism and prolonged resistance to it. As SAADA's collection policy reveals, SAADA board members consciously made documenting this anti-colonial struggle one of the organization's strongest priorities. In this way, SAADA's founders decided to use the term South Asian American as a way to build transnational solidarity based on this shared colonial past. Furthermore, in the wake of September 11, 2001, asserting a transnational interfaith South Asian American identity consciously builds solidarity between groups senselessly targeted for hate crimes; rather than reflecting a politics of division that might assert "don't hate me, I'm *not* a Muslim," SAADA's board invokes South Asian American solidarity in the face of pervasive Islamophobia, while at the same time creating an archives that strives to reflect all of the diversity and divisions among South Asian Americans. SAADA's board strategically employs an essentialist identity category—South Asian American—while simultaneously undoing the logic that asserts the naturalness of that very category. As an organization, we chose to thrive in this nuance, to be inspired by what Spivak would call our "double take," and to use this complicated relationship to identity as a way to organize politically.

As the SAADA example illustrates, identity-based community archives can strategically use essentialism to further intertwining archival and political goals. In this assertion, I wish to counter the critics of community archives who claim that such independent grassroots collecting efforts undermine the integration of "ethnic" history into mainstream American history, are built on rigid and outdated essentialist identity categories, and jeopardize the sustainability of the materials they seek to preserve because of their inherent fiscal and organizational instability. Cristine Paschild's recent article in *The American Archivist* typifies these concerns. Discussing Elizabeth Kaplan's article on the formation of American Jewish archives, Paschild writes, "undertheorized concepts of identity perpetuate essentialized categorizations of communities, facilitating misguided assumptions of authenticity that clide genuine internal diversity and re-inscribe segregating boundaries."²⁴ As this chapter has argued, it is false to assume that the identity categories around which community archival efforts are based are under-theorized; on the contrary, as my discussion of SAADA's use of strategic essentialism has shown, identity-based community archives can be built on complexly layered theoretical foundations and acknowledge fluidity, multiplicity and tension within heterogeneous communities. However, even more troublesome than the assumption of theoretical simplicity is the assertion that community archives that use ethnic identity as a guiding collection principle further essentialize and thus marginalize the communities they represent. Writing about the documentation of Japanese American history by the Japanese American National Museum, she writes:

This history, just like the community of its origin, is not inherently separate from, independent of, or marginal to the broader history of the United States... If community archives and projects continue to be the default example for the subjective and discursive, their marginalization is only prolonged and retrenched. Rich and relevant historical records are reduced to undifferentiated ahistorical symbols of identity and the role of discursive space trumps the successful management of physical space and materials. By insisting that the application of postmodern-influenced theory is the most pressing need of community archives rather [than] the implementation of sound, sustainable policies and practices, archivists detract from their own professional expertise.²⁵

As my description of SAADA's use of strategic essentialism has argued, independent community archives can simultaneously advocate for greater awareness of identity-based histories and assert the importance of such histories to mainstream narratives about the past. This is not a simplistic, limiting, either/or endeavor, but a both/and proposition; South Asian American history is community history *and* American history, as SAADA's collection priorities assert. As this chapter has argued thus far, through the lens of strategic essentialism we can simultaneously reclaim minoritized histories *and* denaturalize, contextualize, and historicize the categories on which they are reclaimed. Furthermore, rather than assume a model that puts participatory community-centric institutions and mainstream university or government repositories at odds with each other, we can build collaborative projects that leverage resources and knowledge from both types of institutions to create culturally sensitive and sustainable digital assets. For example, SAADA has ongoing relationships with several university repositories to digitize materials in their collections relating to South Asian immigrants. Both types of institutions benefit from this partnership, as do our users. And finally, contrary to Paschild's assertion, identity-based community archives do not have to choose between community values and archival expertise. On the contrary, our archival education programs should teach cultural competency, skillful navigation between various stakeholders, and – above all – creativity, competencies that are not separate from our professional expertise as archivists, but absolutely integral to it. Community-based archival projects are flourishing regardless of the involvement of professionally-trained archivists. The sooner archivists as a profession embrace community-centric practice, the sooner we can work together towards the shared goal of preserving traces of the past for future use.

As this section has argued, identity-based community archives can strategically employ categories based on ethnicity to further archival goals, while at the same time fulfilling the larger political agenda of denaturalizing such categories. By embracing this paradox, identity-based community archives practitioners simultaneously work towards documenting a more diverse past and forging a more just future.

Memoryscapes

"Memory... requires imagination, but it rethinks the future in alliance with recasting the past."²⁶

– Aledia Assmann and Sebastian Conrad

Having rooted identity-based archival practice in strategic essentialism, this chapter now introduces the concept of *memoryscape* to discuss digital archives as globalized sites of contestation. In his influential book *Modernity at Large*, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai positions globalization as the complex and rapid interaction of cultures as enabled by five intertwining trajectories: ethnicity, media, technology, finance, ideas. Each of these components of "global cultural flow" is marked in space and time through the notion of landscape, forming five platforms of exchange: ethnoscapescapes, mediascapescapes, technospaces, financescapescapes, and ideoscapes.²⁷ For Appadurai, these networks, while geographically located, are globally situated.

More recently, Kendall R. Phillips and G. Mitchell Reyes have adapted Appadurai's idea of global cultural "scapes" to the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of memory studies, proposing the new term, "memoryscape," to describe "a complex landscape upon which memories and memory practices move, come into contact, are contested by, and contest other forms of remembrance." They point out that "older ways of conceptualizing the past – largely framed in terms of national and local perspectives – are unsettled by the dynamic movements of globalization and new memories and new practices of remembrance emerge."²⁸ Our collective memories, like our communities, are now global in reach; we can no longer confine memory to the silos of locally embedded practice when so much of our society is based on interconnected networks of ethnicity, media, technology, finance, and ideas. Memory becomes another crucial mode through which the global is negotiated.

While archives as physical locations at the nexus of knowledge and power have always formed crucial sites for the negotiation of collective memory, digital archives are now providing unprecedented opportunity for individuals to communicate memories, for communities to forge collective memories, and for individuals and communities to contest those collective memories once forged. Web 2.0 technologies in particular provide a crucial interactive platform on which archives can shape the memoryscape. Increased ease of access, potential for more participatory models of appraisal and description, and unauthorized downstream uses of digital archival materials are just a few examples of how new technologies are facilitating reinterpretations of the past on a global scale.



The United States of India, February 1924 issue (vol. 1, no. 7).

In this issue, the monthly review published from the headquarters of the Pacific Coast Hindustani Association at No. 5 Wood Street, San Francisco, featured an article titled "How History Suggests the Remedy for Injustice," which concludes: "In the light of history who will blame the Hindoos if they, tomorrow, forced by the injustice done to them by the English Government, produce their own Washington to avenge the wrongs done to them?"

Courtesy of the South Asian American Digital Archive.

While mainstream repositories have not yet fully embraced this new potential, community-based endeavors can be on the vanguard of archival practice by serving as focal points of community formation within the global memoryscape. Unlike mainstream repositories which serve broad-based constituencies and whose funding structures often enforce the status quo, identity-based community archives – that have never suffered from the same illusion of neutrality – can become sites where globalized communities undertake the messy business of contesting, renegotiating and redefining collective memory of the past. In light of this notion of memoryscape, our attempts to recuperate previously lost histories and build more just futures through identity-based community archives become both more politically urgent and inherently global in significance.

But, despite this excitement about this new digital memoryscape, we should be cautioned that technologies have also had an immense impact on forgetting.

Like any community, online communities shape new memories as means of forgetting others. Digital divides have also prevented many communities and individuals from participating in this new interactive process of forging memory. We should not forget that for many people – the poor, the global South, the elderly – digital technologies can exacerbate archival silences. Furthermore, the rapid obsolescence of digital formats has rendered certain recent traces already inaccessible. Forgetting, need we be reminded, is a crucial component (and not the opposite) of the shaping of collective memory regardless of format.

Again, SAADA provides a fruitful instantiation of this theoretical construction in its ongoing role in constructing new and contested memoryscapes of South Asian American involvement in global anti-colonial struggles. One of SAADA's primary priorities is to collect materials related to the Ghadar Party, a U.S.-based anti-colonial organization founded by a group of Indian migrant laborers and students in San Francisco in 1913.²⁹ As historian Maia Ramnath has described in great detail, the organization was extremely decentralized, consisting of a loose affiliation of Hindu nationalists, Sikh Marxists, and Pan-Islamicists whose immediate goal was the overthrow of British colonial rule in India by any means necessary but whose anti-colonial ambitions were global in scope.³⁰

While the University of California Berkeley's archives hold considerable collections related to the Ghadar Party, until recently these materials were virtually unknown to South Asian American communities. SAADA is working to change this by digitizing hundreds of items in university archives, government repositories and the private collections of the descendants of Ghadar Party members, as mentioned in the introduction. Access to these records is transforming both how South Asian Americans conceive of their own histories and how South Asians are conceiving of the importance of American emigrants to the anti-colonial struggle. For example, on August 14, 2012 (coinciding with Indian and Pakistani Independence Days) *The New York Times* ran a story entitled, "American Roots of the Indian Independence Movement." Written by a Mumbai-based journalist, the story featured an interview with SAADA co-founder Mallick and noted that the Ghadar Party "is garnering increased attention."³¹ Additionally, articles that publicize SAADA's efforts to digitize Ghadar Party materials have been published in the South Asian American newspaper *DesiTalk* and the Indian newspaper *The Sunday Guardian*.³² Interestingly, SAADA's users are almost evenly divided between the U.S. and South Asia; web statistics from December 2011 to November 2012 show 19,965 visits from people in the U.S., 18,828 from India, 4,362 from Pakistan, 1,680 from Sri Lanka, 641 visits from Bangladesh, and 241 visits from Nepal. While it is hard to quantify the exact impact of SAADA on South Asian and South Asian American conceptualizations of the past, it is clear through publicity and traffic patterns that SAADA's efforts have increased awareness of this history among people in both the U.S. and South Asia.

Returning to theory, this example illustrates that SAADA is transforming the South Asian American memoryscape. Indeed, by digitizing Ghadar Party records, particularly those that were never-before publically available, SAADA is changing the prevailing notion of South Asian American history from a simple, apolitical post-1965 success story to a complexly layered century-old transnational narrative deeply marked by global political unrest, local racism, and anti-colonial commitments. In short, SAADA is contesting the old version of this community's history, supplanting it with a different narrative, and offering up this new narrative online, where it can be discussed, contested, and changed. In so doing, SAADA is inviting broad participation in the ongoing process of making sense of the past through digital technologies. In Appadurai's terms, this participatory exchange is both global and local, as people in South Asia learn about the influence of South Asian Americans on national independence movements and South Asian American communities rethink their own roles in American history.

Imaginarities

"The imagination is now central to all forms of agency."³³

– Arjun Appadurai

Building on the concepts of strategic essentialism and memoryscapes, a third concept – that of the imaginary – undergirds this chapter's investigation of identity-based community archives. After a brief discussion of Appadurai's notion of the imaginary, this section argues that, through the lens of the archival imaginary, our efforts to build independent identity-based archives are not just attempts to reconceive of the past, but to reimagine the future.³⁴ This is not just theoretical speculation, but a practical strategy, as the SAADA example illustrates.

Building on his work on globalized networks of exchange, Appadurai posits that imagination has spread from the realms of the personal and private to that of the public and shared. Our imaginations – how we envision that which is not currently true, but ultimately possible – are socially constructed. Appadurai writes: "...imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility."³⁵ The individual and the community meet in this shared vision of the future; together, we create a shared imaginary, or "a constructed landscape of collective aspirations" in Appadurai's words.³⁶ Thus community-based archivists are forging not just memories of the past through collecting (as the concept of memoryscape articulates), but visions of the future. By creating independent identity-based ar-

chives, we are not just articulating our prior collective accomplishment and failures, but our collective ambitions as well.

As Appadurai reminds us, our shared imaginaries are global in reach. Building on Benedict Anderson's work on how nations form imagined communities through print culture, Appadurai argues that collective imagination creates "imagined worlds, that is, the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread across the globe."³⁷ These imagined worlds – forged by global exchanges – depend on inextricably linked visions of both what came before and what will be. How we as members of local and global communities remember the past is wholly bound up with how we imagine what is possible in the future. In this light, archivists are not just memory activists, but visionaries whose work reconceives imagined worlds through space and time.

This view of archival collecting as a way to envision the future owes much to recent work in memory studies that has called into question the commonly held idea that memory is fundamentally about the past. Yifat Gutman, Amy Sodaro and Adam D. Brown, in their important introduction to *Memory and the Future*, note the absence of conceptual discussions of the future in memory studies and assert that "the study and practice of memory are ultimately about and for the present and the future."³⁸ They write, "In order for memory studies scholars to develop a full understanding of how individuals and societies remember, they must consider... the influence of the future—as imagined and desired by individuals and groups—on how the past is remembered, interpreted and dealt with and vice versa."³⁹

Like Gutman, Sodaro and Brown's suggestion about memory studies, this chapter argues that archival studies must renegotiate its traditional orientation to the past, particularly as we build theory around community-based archival practice. Applying Appadurai's notion of imaginaries in the archival realm, we can construct a conception of community-centered archival work that is based not just on reimagining the past, but on envisioning the future. In this light, the archival imaginary is the dynamic way in which communities creatively and collectively reenvision the future through archival interventions in representations of the shared past. Through the archival imaginary, the past becomes a lens to the future; the future is rooted in that which preceded it. Through the archival imaginary, the future can be conceived through the seeds of what was possible in the past.

This notion of archival imaginary explains why the work of independent, identity-based community-based archives is so important; it is not just about documenting a more diverse version of the past based on the identities of the present, but rather, by uncovering previously untold, ignored, or misinterpreted histories, communities can imagine and reimagine different trajectories for the future. Efforts to recuperate marginalized pasts are not just about collecting materials that document people who look like us (where "us" is based on ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, geographic location, or socio-economic status) but about finding precedence in the past for how we move forward.

SAADA's efforts to digitize Vaishno Das Bagai's Ghadar Party materials are illustrative. Look, these materials tell us, there is precedent for coalition-building across region and religion, there is precedent for grassroots resistance against colonialism and racism, there is precedent for South Asians *as* Americans shaping global politics, culture, and society. In turn, we are able to envision a future marked by solidarity, resistance, and activism. These materials inspire new and liberatory archival imaginaries. While the past placed South Asians in colonial subjugation, they did not silently yield power, as these Ghadar Party materials confirm; they actively revolted, and in such acts of resistance we can find inspiration for our current activism against racial profiling, Islamophobia, and war. In collecting archival traces of struggle and rebellion, we forge new narratives of resistance and solidarity that feed the activism of the present and fundamentally alter our vision of what will be possible. Through the lens of the archival imaginary, we can redeploy archival records – even those documenting atrocity or injustice, even those created by the powerful as tools of subjugation and oppression – as tools for empowerment.

This is not to say that the archival imaginary only works through independent community archives. Indeed, the archival imaginary has always been active through the work of mainstream repositories, which too often and too predictably, forge future trajectories that maintain the status quo, that invoke the past to limit the future rather than expand its possibilities. For example, the near absence of traces of South Asian American communities in mainstream repositories has resulted in a future trajectory that is as void of South Asian American voices as dominant narratives of the past were. Since such marginalized communities have not historically been seen as collection priorities, there is no incentive (in this age of budget cuts, doing more with less, and minimal processing) to make these communities collection priorities now, resulting in a limited record preserved for a monolithic future.

By contrast, SAADA's vision of the future is one in which the struggles of the past inspire a more just future. Through archival collecting, SAADA's board hopes to situate South Asian American memory in a shared past rooted in resistance to colonialism in order to cultivate a postcolonial future rooted in activism across boundaries of nation, religion, region, and caste. In turn, our imagination of the future – how we envision possibilities for transnational South Asian activism – shapes our view of the past as rooted in the common colonial experience. Through each of our archival interventions on traces of the past – appraisal, digitization, description, outreach – we work towards a radically reoriented vision of the future. Conversely, through each of our archival interventions in imagining the future – as community-centered, transnational, postcolonial – we work towards radically reorienting memory of the past. The past and the future are inextricably bound through our archival work.

Conclusion: Building Liberatory Archival Imaginaries

"... The past is invented, shaped, and reconstructed in a dialogical relationship with the present, past constraints and future possibilities."⁴⁰

– Yifat Gutman, Amy Sodaro and Adam D. Brown

This chapter has explicated three key theoretical concepts – strategic essentialism, memoryscapes, and imaginaries – and addressed how these concepts undergird community archival practice based on my experiences as a founder and board member of one such organization. First, this chapter has explored Spivak's concept of strategic essentialism and claimed that community archives can strategically employ essentialist identity categories for political gains while at the same time denaturalizing the categories on which such identities are based. Next, building on the work of Appadurai, this chapter discussed the concept of memoryscape, arguing that community-based digitization practices create transnational sites where memory is shared, contested, and reconstructed on a global scale. Finally, this chapter applied Appadurai's notion of the imaginary to the archival realm, and argued that identity-based community archives build new archival imaginaries that allow us to re-envision the future even as we reimagine the past.

In conclusion, this chapter advocates that as community-based archival practitioners, we harness our power as archival activists to build liberatory archival imaginaries (in the same vein that Wendy Duff and Verne Harris call for liberatory description).⁴¹ In order to construct liberatory archival imaginaries, we must use traces of the past not just to recuperate marginalized histories, but to build more just and more equitable futures. Liberatory archival imaginaries place the work of uncovering what happened in the past in service of building socially just futures. Like social justice itself, liberatory archival imaginaries are always forthcoming, always located in some far away future, and always an unattainable, constantly shifting goal.⁴² While liberatory archival imaginaries are always context dependent, our efforts to generate them are united by the creative use of our power as archivists in the present to bind what happened to what will be possible. Through the lens of liberatory archival imaginaries, our work as community-based archivists does not end with the limits of our collection policies (that is, with the exposure of previously silenced histories), but rather, it is an ongoing process of conceptualizing what we want the future to look like. As we forge our vision of the future, so too will our memory of the past be forged.

Envisioning liberatory archival imaginaries will require us, as archivists, to be inventive. It will demand that we let go of some of our professional authority even as it underscores our commitment to the archival endeavor. It will ask us to interrogate many of the assumptions of mainstream Western archival practice in light

of community-specific, culturally appropriate, political goals. It will challenge us to continually question our categories, motivations and assumptions, rethink the boundaries of our archives and our communities, and own up to the ways in which power is implicated in our practices. It will be difficult to live up to the challenges posed by these new archival imaginaries, but the legacy of Vaishno Das Bagai – if we tell his story, how we tell his story – demands that we imagine a more just future rooted in the struggles of the past.

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Endnotes

1. Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 5.
2. Vaishno Das Bagai, "Here's a Letter to the World From Suicide," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 17, 1928.
3. Vinay Lal, *The Other Indians: A Political and Cultural History of South Asians in America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2007), 40. As Lal notes, the citizenship of the American wives of these Indian immigrants was also revoked. It would not be until the 1965 National Origins Act that South Asians began migrating to the U.S. again in any sizeable numbers.
4. Bagai, "Here's a Letter."
5. I have chosen the term "identity-based community archives" over the less nuanced "ethnic archives" for two reasons. First, all archives are ethnic archives because they contain materials related to people with ethnicities, i.e. everyone; white people do not display an absence of ethnicity any more than men display an absence of gender. Secondly, archives like SAADA, though organized around ethnicity, share more in common with other independent identity-based archives (like those documenting LGBTQ communities), than with more mainstream repositories that include local ethnic groups in their collection priorities.
6. The volunteers for this project were UCLA Master's in Library and Information Studies students Carolyn Lee and Emily McNish and an alumna of that program, Amanda Hogg.
7. The notion of recuperating lost histories builds on the work of Anjali Arondekar. Anjali Arondekar, "The Aporia of Exemplarity: Sexuality, Archives, South Asia," colloquium talk delivered at UCLA Department of Information Studies, November 15, 2012. See also Arondekar, *For the Record*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
8. Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemmish, "Building an Infrastructure for Archival Research," *Archival Science* no. 4 (2004): 155.
9. Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose Memories. Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* no. 9 (2009): 80.
10. While subaltern originally meant a junior officer in the British Army, it has come to signify working class people whose histories are marginalized from the elite.
11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, eds. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 13.
12. *Ibid.*, 14.

13. Ibid., 16. Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
14. Spivak, "Subaltern Studies," 12.
15. Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Boundary 2* 20, no. 2 (1993).
16. The assertion draws on an ongoing conversation in archival studies about social justice. See: Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007); David Wallace, "Locating Agency: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Professional Ethics and Archival Morality," *Journal of Information Ethics* 19 no.1 (2010): 172-189; and Michelle Caswell, Giso Broman, Jennifer Kirmer, Laura Martin, and Nathan Sowry, "Implementing a Social Justice Framework on an Introduction to Archives Course: Lessons from Both Sides of the Classroom," *Interactions* 8 no.2 (2012), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2jx083hr>.
17. Lal, *The Other Indians*, xii-xiii.
18. There are some notable exceptions; Goa was a Portuguese colony until 1961 and Pondicherry was under French control until 1954. Goa and Pondicherry are now both part of India.
19. Lal, *The Other Indians*, xii.
20. This puts a transnational take on Peter van der Veer's assertion that "those who do not think of themselves as Indians before migration become Indians in the diaspora." Peter van der Veer, *Nation and Migration* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 7.
21. Lal, *The Other Indians*, xiv.
22. Sunaina Marr Maira, *Desis in the House* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).
23. This type of identification is reflected in the names of several organizations whose membership consists primarily of second generation South Asians, including: the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association, the South Asian Journalist Association, South Asian Americans Leading Together, and the South Asia Network. This is in contrast to organizations who primarily serve first generation immigrants such as the Indo-American Heritage Center (Chicago) and the Pakistani American Culture Center (Milpitas, CA).
24. Cristine N. Paschild, "Community Archives and the Limitations of Identity: Considering Discursive Impact on Material Needs," *American Archivist* 75 no.1 (2012): 132-133.
25. Ibid., 141.
26. Aleida Assman and Sebastian Conrad, "Introduction," in *Memory in a Global Age*, eds. Aleida Assman and Sebastian Conrad (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1.

27. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 33.
28. Kendall R. Phillips and G. Mitchell Reyes, "Surveying Global Memoryscapes: The Shifting Terrain of Public Memory Studies," in *Global Memoryscapes*, eds. Kendall R. Phillips and G. Mitchell Reyes (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 13-14.
29. "Ghadar" is Urdu for revolt.
30. Maia Rammath, *Haj to Utopia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).
31. Ibid.
32. Sunthar Visuvalingam, "Digitizing the History of Desi Immigrants for Posterity," *DesiTalk* October 26, 2012, <http://chicagodesitalk.com/Desitalk/26Oct2012/Normal/page12.htm>; Ragini Bhuyan, "Sepia Shades of Immigrant History," *The Sunday Guardian*, July 8, 2012.
33. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31.
34. This is not the first use of the term "archival imaginary" in archival studies literature. Jennifer Meehan and Mark Matienzo have used the term, but their definitions depart from mine. See Jennifer Meehan, "The Archival Nexus: Rethinking the Interplay of Archival Ideas about the Nature, Value, and Use of Records," *Archival Science* no. 9 (2009): 157-164 and Mark Matienzo, "Canonization, Archivalization, and the 'Archival Imaginary,'" Paper presented at Archive Favour/Archive Further: Literature, Archives, and Literary Archives, Aberystwyth, Wales, July 9-11, 2008. Available at <http://arizona.openrepository.com/arizona/handle/10150/216929>.
35. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31.
36. Ibid., 31.
37. Ibid., 33.
38. Yifat Gutman, Amy Sodaro and Adam D. Brown, "Introduction: Memory and the Future: Why a Change of Focus Is Necessary," in *Memory and the Future*, eds. Yifat Gutman, Adam D. Brown, and Amy Sodaro (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 1.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 22.
41. Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* no. 2 (2002): 263-285.
42. Harris, *Archives and Justice*.