The "Nature" of Ethics while (Digitally) Archiving the Other

Bibhushana Poudyal, The University of Texas at El Paso

Abstract: The article begins with an introduction to my digital archival project, the deconstructive approach in it, and the questions that are guiding both the project and the article. Then, I present the ethical dilemmas I encountered after I decided to build a digital archive. I connect these dilemmas with the—witting or otherwise—orientalist pattern behind two of the West-based digital archival projects about Nepal and South Asia. I also introduce the metaphor of pharmakon and argue for the need to interrogate archival performances through the questions of ethics. Through the discussion of my project, I attempt to offer, not a manifesto on ethical digital archives, but a possibility of making digital archives hospitable to the Other by building a dialectical relationship with the communities. My project, Rethinking South Asia from the Borderlands via Critical Digital A(na)rchiving, is a Nepali researcher's humble, stubborn, and sincere effort/experiment of building a digital archive by bringing together community-praxis and deconstructive approaches. I aim to see if a dialogic room in digital archives can be built for and with the Other. I use the discussion of my project to raise some of the hardest questions and to offer a glimpse at the "nature" of ethics that archivists must unconditionally pursue while (digitally) archiving the Other.

[Impossible archival imaginaries] explain[] how archival imaginaries may work in situations where the archive and its hoped-for contents are absent or forever unattainable.

—Anne Gilliland & Michelle Caswell, "Records and Their Imaginaries: Imagining the Impossible, Making Possible the Imagined"

Figure 1: Image of Commuters in a public vehicle in Kathmandu Streets[1]

Yes, the archive is an instrument of power. It is a technology of rule. A set of apparatuses producing and reproducing dominant narratives. An omnipotence-other. But it is also a subversive space. It is about a feigning and a fomentation, a resisting. It is a domain hospitable to resistance.

— Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*

[T]he question that needs to be raised is whether in the process of digitizing archives, we are losing out on a close look at the people—the subalterns—whose voice and agency are being traced and mapped…Is being consigned to a dataset doing justice to subaltern history? What of the subaltern citizens themselves?

— Radhika Gajjala, "Caring Archives of Subalternity?"

An Exploration of Possibilities in the Impossible

This critical digital archiving project, Rethinking South Asia from the Borderlands via Critical Digital A(na)rchiving, is my study on how the "Global South" and the Other are represented under the digital-academic-institutional gaze of the "Global North" and by power elites on both global and regional levels. While making this inquiry, I explore how community-praxis and the deconstructive approach can enable digital archivists and storytellers from the margin to subvert power centers' top-down model of gazing upon, scrutinizing, and signifying the Other. To make this exploration,

Figure 2: Image of Asan Chowk, one of the traditional market, residential, and ceremonial squares of Kathmandu

I not only study the already-existing digital archives about South Asia and Nepal from a critical distance, but also interact with the archive-building process from within by building, documenting, and theorizing a digital archive of my street photography in Nepal. The purpose is to reveal "how the [archival] meanings that are being constructed are already under erasure or already deconstructed" (Poudyal, 2018, p. 3). I relate this very approach with what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak said about deconstruction in one of her interviews: "That's what de-construction is about, right? It's not just destruction. It's also construction. It's critical intimacy, not critical distance. So you actually speak from inside. That's deconstruction" (as cited in Paulson, 2016). From this approach of critical intimacy, I attempt to listen to the call of justice. I call my project critical digital archiving to suggest my intention to embrace deconstructionist self-reflexivity and to invite and provoke my audiences and collaborators to problematize any self-congratulatory state if I ever dare to dwell in there. Through this project, I am also hoping to participate in the movement of, as the editors of *Critical Archival Studies* put it, "disrupt[ing] the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the humanities" and "transforming archival practice and society writ large" (Caswell, Punzalan, & Sangwand, 2017, p. 4, 2).

When for the first time I recognized that I wanted to study theories and practices of critical digital archiving not only on a theoretical level but by building my own digital archive of the 2017 street photography I did in Kathmandu, I had already started dreading that one day I would actually have to embark on this impossible journey. As a teacher, student, and researcher continuing to train in deconstructive epistemological performances, the act of building archives, digital or not, appeared to be a formidable and forbidding task involving a range of dilemmas. While "the 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" (Kurtz, 2006, p. 25), my dilemma, hesitations, and fear looked like this:

What if I end up limiting even further the already limited imaginations about Kathmandu and Nepal, rather than challenging or creating havoc in constrained and naïve imaginations produced, disseminated, and stimulated by power locations? What if an inevitable archival gap keeps me from resisting epistemic injustices and I end up becoming an accomplice? After all, as Abraham Acosta (2012) puts it, there is always "an irreducible narratological gap between signification and meaning through which any and all claims to identity and knowledge are forced to disavow" (p. 120). This is also why I am avoiding explaining the photographs in this article and rather choosing to invite *impossible archival imaginaries* through these photographs.

In June 2018, right after I started building a digital archive of my street photography in Nepal, I saw that the best of my intentions were not enough to build an archive that ethically "represents" what I am archiving. It did not take too long to see that an archival presence and inclusion of some narratives is possible only through an archival absence and exclusion of Others. There is always some Other who is not included. I came to realize early on in my project that the best intentions are not going to save me from that inevitable impossibility of presence. The existence of archives is possible only due to its archival gap, and it is unescapable. There are always some Others whose narratives and epistemologies will keep on haunting us from lacunae, as they should, about our failure. But does the failure mean we do not even try? Can we afford not to even try? What does trying look like when the failure is unpreventable? Hence, in this context of inevitable archival-narratological gap, what does archival ethics mean and what is the "nature" of ethics while archiving the Other? This article revolves around the questions raised by these impossibilities and proposes an acknowledgement of the impossible and an exploration of the possibilities in that impossible as a possible archival ethics. As Acosta (2012) has said about Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, this digital archival project is "the necessarily impossible venture" (p. 110).

At this juncture, I invite the readers to understand archives and ethics through the metaphor of pharmakon. Pharmakon can be understood as a double bind of medicine and poison (Spivak "Responsibility," 1994, p. 34; see Derrida, 1981). Whether an archive's medicinal or poisonous aspect becomes dominant depends on how one is performing it. Archives can be, if I were to borrow Derrida's words, "self-protecting and self-destroying, at once remedy and poison" (as cited in Borradori, 2003, p. 124). Archives are double bind of medicine and poison with no definite distinction between these two aspects. And that's why while archiving the Other, a cure can anytime turn into a curse if not performed with immense care and interrogated with the questions of ethics. Furthermore, archival ethics, cure, and healing are impossible without responsibly acknowledging the profoundly excruciating weight of structural, systematic, and epistemic injustices and the "disquieting use…of archival records to establish, document, and perpetuate the influence of power elites" (Jimerson, 2007, p. 254). With this acknowledgment, one should ask: Can archives still be envisaged as a space for "the re-construction and the restitution of silenced histories, repressed subjectivities, subalternized knowledges and languages" that "bring[] to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economies, other politics, other ethics" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 451, 453)?[2] Can archives, "at once an instrument of oppressive power," also be "a potential weapon of liberatory struggle" (Harris, 2021, p. 2)? With these questions, my project emerges from intervening interstices between, on the one hand, unbearable memories of different forms of violence executed through archival practices/records and, on the other hand, a desire to imagine the possibility of transforming archives into a hospitable space for historically and structurally marginalized, excluded, absented, and oppressed voices and experiences. And with that accountability, acknowledgment, desire, and imagination, I engage in theoretical and methodological discussions of "the problem of representation and constitution of the subject" (Harasym, 1990, p. vii) while digitally archiving the Other.

The Other can have layered and multiple meanings. In this article, the 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 (Mohanty 1984; Said, 1978 & 1997; Fabian, 2006; Baca, 2009). 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 (see Spivak, 1988; Vázquez, 2011). Though in the case of my digital archival project, I am also the part of that Other world that I am building an archive about, from, and with, the question of ethics is still as important. I cannot take for granted my standpoint as an "insider" to let me remain in a self-congratulatory mode and to convince myself or others that just because I am an "insider," my performance is ethical and leading to archival justice. That is not how ethics and justice work. I am making an exploration of questions of ethics and issues of justice through a desire to learn if digital archives can be built through dialectical relationships with underrepresented communities that are founded on possibilities of un/comfortable, im/possible, un/imaginable dialogues instead of will-to-knowledge and will-to-power. And my project emerges from a hope that digital archives can be a home for contradictory, contingent, counter-narratives emerging from oppressed, marginalized, and intersectionally disadvantaged groups of people (Harris, 2007, 2017; Cushman, 2013; Gilliland & Caswell, 2016; Punzalan & Caswell, 2016; Caswell, 2016; Ghaddar and Caswell, 2019; Cushman et al, 2019).

The rest of the article will begin by touching upon the context and the initial phase of this project to offer a look at why I am approaching questions of ethics through the frameworks of dialectical relationship-building *with* the community instead of centering knowledge building *about* the community. Then, I will discuss my digital archival project, which I am performing through community-praxis, attempting to exemplify my goal of envisioning digital archives, not exactly as a repository for historically, culturally, and evidentiarily valuable and rare artifacts for permanent or long-term preservation, but as a space of dialogues, possibilities, heterogeneities, pluralities, complexities, surprises, contradictions, counter-narratives, and contingencies. I conclude the article by inviting (digital) archivists to listen to the calls of justice and ethics by challenging themselves to demand, desire, and strive for impossible ethics.

Why Critical Digital Archiving?

There are several phenomena that triggered my decision to do a critical archival studies project on both theoretical and practical levels. As the time and space of the article will not allow me to go into all the details here, I will briefly touch upon two of them. During my research, I witnessed that most of the projects that are labeled as digital archives about Nepal are built by Westerners and housed at West-based institutions and organizations. For instance, the *Digital Archaeology Foundation-Nepal*, which was founded after the 2015 earthquake in Nepal to collect data "for research, heritage preservation, heritage appreciation, reconstruction planning, educational programs and 3D replication to aid in rebuilding and restoration work" and the collected data are "sent to the IDA [Institute for Digital Archaeology] in Oxford for referencing and preservation" (*Digital Archaeology Foundation*). The tagline of the archive reads, "preserving the past and present for future" (*Digital Archaeology Foundation*). And as Eric Ketelaar (2001) paraphrases Derrida's *Archival Fever,* the archive "is not just a sheltering of the past: it is an anticipation of the future" (p. 138). So, which and whose version of Nepal and South Asia are being preserved for the future in the *Digital Archaeology Foundation*? And for whose future? What is the ideology behind the kind of future that is being envisioned? And what kind of future can be anticipated through unexamined and uninterrogated online-digital archival performances which are driven by will-to-knowledge instead of creating a space for reciprocity, accountability, and dialogue with communities and their pluralities and heterogeneities?

The second digital archival project is the *Digital Himalaya*. As accessed through the database of the University of Cambridge, it defines itself as a project undertaken "to develop digital collection, storage and *distribution strategies* for multimedia *anthropological* information from the Himalayan region" and is "designed by Alan Macfarlane and Mark Turin as a strategy for archiving and *making available ethnographic materials* from the Himalayan region" (*Digital Himalaya*, emphasis added). The project was established in 2000 and based at the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. From 2002 to

2005, the archive moved to the Department of Anthropology at Cornell University and began its collaboration with the University of Virginia. And then, from July 2014, the project has relocated to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, and is engaged in a long-term collaboration with Sichuan University in Chengdu, Sichuan, China (*Digital Himalaya*). Now, just a simple question: *Making available ethnographic materials* from the Himalayan region by whom, with whose willingness and participation, to whom, and for what purpose?

On individual levels, all of these archival collections, and thus representations, might appear innocent and innocuous. And due to this apparent innocence and innocuousness, we often let them go unexamined and take for granted the power imbalance between who is archiving and who is being archived. Once, when I tried to discuss the problems of these archival practices with someone working in the field of technology, diaspora, and education in the US, the person asked me disapprovingly, "What do you want digital archives about South Asia to represent, if not South Asia?" For me, this particular question driven by a failure to acknowledge or a resistance to acknowledging that archival rendering and recording of the Global South by the Global North is not an apolitical gaze and cannot be separated from the matrix of power and domination, which was rather disconcerting. But what was more troubling is the reality that this failure and resistance to conceding the problems embedded in "the imperial archive's penchant for collecting, classifying, and isolating…and preserving artifacts from othered traditions" (Cushman, 2013, p. 116, 118) is not an isolable phenomenon. While we are interpreting archival records, we often tend to de-politicize and naturalize them as, an English historian Vivian Hunter Galbraith once metaphorically called them, "the secretions of an organism" (1948, p. 3). And we tend to avoid the fact that "[a]rchives—as records—wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies" (Schwartz & Cook, 2002, p. 2). That is why not taking for granted such questions as "What do you want digital archives about South Asia to represent, if not South Asia?" is crucial. Such questions tend to work through the truth versus lie binary and miss the whole point regarding the tendency of a "great collective appropriation of one country by another" (Said, 1978, p. 84) in such archival projects. They also fail to put these archival projects against the larger context of colonialism, orientalism, and cultural imperialism, to take into account their semantic geneology (Ketelaar, 2001), and to do contrapuntal re-reading of archives (Ghaddar & Caswell, 2019; see Said, 1994). Such uninterrogated rhetorical questions can easily run the risk of letting archival epistemic violence against the Other go unnoticed and justified.

When the Other is structurally, systematically, and systemically unpermitted to complete their speech act but are only portrayed and spoken about and for, that is epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988; see J. L. Austin's speech act theory, 1962). When pluralities and heterogeneities of the Other and their epistemologies and ontologies are reduced to match some flattened narrative constructed by the privileged structure, that is epistemic violence. When there is no reciprocity, no availability of a dialogic room for the Other to speak, and no acknowledgment of the narratological gap and impossibility of knowing and archiving the Other in their entirety, that is epistemic violence. Here, I would like to quote Qwo-Li Driskill to further highlight the instance of archival epistemic violence. The Cherokee scholar and poet says, "The archival project was not created *for* Indians. It was created to consolidate knowledge *about* Indians. And yet, here I am, an Indian *in* the archive" (as cited in Powell,[3] 2008, p. 117, emphasis added). Hence, my concern is beyond the binary of a true versus false representation. It is about the construction, constitution, and distortion of the Other through biased, violent, and simplistic interpretation where the archived ones are neither concerned nor consulted in a meaningful manner. As Derrida (1995) says in *Archive Fever*, archivists as archons are also "accorded the hermeneutic right and competence" and "have the power to interpret the archives" (pp. 9-10). And whether archives perform a medicinal role or a poisonous one depends on how archivists embrace their responsibilities concerning the right, competence, and power they have to become an agent of change in the interests of accountability, social justice, and diversity (Jimerson, 2007; Gutenson & Robinson, 2016).

Therefore, my question is about the nature and reason of archival representation instead of whether the representation is true or false. As Elizabeth Yakel expounds, "the term 'archival representation' more precisely captures the actual work of the archivist in (re)ordering, interpreting, creating surrogates, and designing architectures for representational systems" (2003, p. 2). In these representational systems, Non-Western communities feel like just another research project conducted through the colonial mentality and methodologies of museumization where the Other becomes knowable and graspable through the already existing epistemological lens and the preset ontological compartments. The Other are to be recorded and preserved for the future that does not belong to them.

Sadly, but not surprisingly, these two archival projects about Nepal are just a glimpse at how the Other appears under the (digital) gaze of the West. The study of a pattern behind these projects demonstrates the most repeated depiction of 'third' worlds as either damage-based (as is also evident in another archival project, *2015 Nepal Earthquake*) or as stuck in some fixed past to be preserved for the dynamic future that belongs not to the archived Others but to the intellectual, scientific inquirers and explorers representing the power-centers. This pattern parallels "[the] imperialist agenda of preservation of cultural tradition as hermetically sealed, contained, and unchanging" (Cushman, 2013, p. 117). The worlds of the Other are often represented with a dimension of the damage, exoticization, past, and museumization and are backed up by 'big' institutions and large funding. Here, I am remembering Johan Galtung's (1967; see Lewis, 1973; Diamond, 1964; Levi-Strauss, 1966; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1999; Lidchi 2013) words regarding scientific colonialism: "a process whereby the center of gravity for the acquisition of knowledge about the nation is located outside the nation itself" (p. 300). These archival projects, which I am also calling digital orientalism, are different than classical imperialism only because they are "extraction of surplus-value without extra-economic coercion" (Spivak, 1988, p. 290), a process of "information retrieval" (Spivak, 1990, p. 59). As I have mentioned before, even if many of these discussions might not look pertinent to my project as I am also a part of the community, space, and place I am archiving, they still are equally relevant so as to not become an assistant in a perpetuation of epistemic violence.

My struggle was how not to be an "insider" driven by will-to-knowledge and will-to-power, retrieving information from a "third" world home country as a way to secure my career in the West. I could no longer archive but only a(na)archive, interrogate the structure of archival structurality[4], play with it, experiment with it, expose the inevitable problems embedded in it, and hope at least not to repeat archival performances that turn to the Others just to retrieve information for the consumption of power centers. For me, the only way to do it was through rigorous self-reflexivity and deconstructive community-praxis. And with this contemplation and determination, my journey of building a digital archive and dialectical relationship began through "radical empathy" (Caswell & Cifor, 2016, pp. 24-25) and critical imagination, which Kirsch and Royster (2010) describe as a dialectical and dialogical analytical tool "to look back from a distance" (p. 651). For me, without that, archival social justice impact (Duff & Caswell, 2020) could not even begin to be realized in the lived experiences of marginalized and intersectionally disadvantaged groups of people. Hence, while working on this project, my concern was not about how I can avoid archival representations, but rather openly acknowledging the parts I would play in it and taking responsibility for it ethically.

Journey of Building Digital Archive and Dialectical Relationship

In June 2018, amidst ethical dilemmas, I started building an online-only archive of my 2017 street photography on a CMS platform Omeka, which is available at http://cassacda.com/. I found it fascinating to do a digital archiving project with this genre of photography as it messes with how archives are often defined as the preservation of contexts and of historically, culturally, and evidentiarily 'valuable' artifacts. Archiving street photography literally and metaphorically disobeys such a hierarchy of what is more or less valuable, and it also disturbs the idea of preserving a context as contexts of these

Figure 3: Image of Kathmandu Streets

photographs are radically fluid. Street photography captures mundane and dynamic everydayisms of people and phenomena as opposed to an archive being a space to preserve those artifacts of historical and/or rare value that are referred to as special collections. In this context, I want to recall how beautifully Ashis Nandy (2002) describes his book, *Time Warps*: "[It] is a book on distinctiveness and an attempt to, as Ziauddin Sardar may put it, 'rescue all our futures' by celebrating the ordinariness…created by a different kind of clash of civilizations" (p. 6). The critical digital archiving of my street photography is my strategic, experimental, and metaphorical trial of taking a very tiny and humble step toward 'rescuing' all our futures by attempting to non-hierarchically celebrate dynamic ordinariness instead of being caught in the hierarchy of what is valuable to be preserved for the future and what is not valuable enough to participate in an anticipation of the future. And the beautiful thing about building this digital archive with street photography and doing community-based UX research is that the participants could relate to these photographs in one way or another, without sharing the same relationship, equation, and experience with these streets.

While working on this digital 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 have been conducting IRB-approved UX research with South Asian communities. Some of the UX methods I am using are usability testing, visual preference testing, dot voting, affinity mapping, landscape analysis, and user interviewing. Altogether, there were 20-25 participants. While conducting UX research, I am designing my questions in such a way that enables the participants to critique, question, and deconstruct my archival performance and photography selection. These participatory design frameworks allow me to journey toward understanding from within what it means to build a dialogic relationship with communities while making and rethinking archival design decisions.

Why am I emphasizing the *dialectical* relationship-building? I will begin answering this question by quoting Gesa E. Kirsch, who observes, "Indeed, the more successful I was at forming good relationships with interviewees, the more I felt like a voyeur" (1999, p. xi; see Middleton, 1993; Sunstein, 1996). Even the relationship-building cannot be taken for granted and it must be deconstructed to subvert that—witting or unwitting—voyeuristic gaze of a researcher. That is why I am using the modifier dialectical to emphasize

the kind of relationship where there are possibilities of dialogues between a researcher and participants, which will challenge the preconceived stance and stand of a researcher about the research and participants. Even the relationship-building must not be accepted uncritically because even it has every possibility of turning into will-to-knowledge and will-to-power (I would like to remind us of the metaphor of pharmakon once again). Instead of allowing a chance for dialogues manifesting heterogeneous narratives and plural realities about the underrepresented communities, the archival performances based on the uncritical relationship-building can also end up giving these communities a flat dimension, with contingencies being entirely bulldozed.

My vision of community-praxis was focused on the dialectical relationship-building with the community. But as Kirsch (1999) talks about in terms of the gap that can emerge between researchers' intent and reality, there is no smooth relationship between my vision and its situatedness. While I am not going into details, I just want to draw attention to the continuing struggle involved in inviting community members to participate given their busy schedules and the constraints of transnational UX research and participatory design due to spatial and time difference. And not to mention again about my ethical dilemma: what am I giving back to the community after "using" their voices and time for this project? As an effort toward reciprocity, from my capacity as an independent researcher and honorary digital humanities consultant of the Center for Advanced Studies in South Asia (CASSA), I have been working with various individuals and research teams in Nepal whose works are situated in minimal digital infrastructures and sharing with them research methods, strategies, and ideas so that they can develop their own digital projects without having to rely on institutional and infrastructural support that is not available. In 2019, I also co-conducted an extensive workshop-seminar "Critical Digital Humanities and Participatory Design" in Nepal at an invitation of the South Asian Foundation for Academic Research (SAFAR). And some of the participants and collaborators of my project consist of the individuals and teams I have been working with.

So, going back to my UX research, amidst lack of resources and infrastructural support combined with an ethical dilemma and the gap between my intent and my reality, I began my UX research in October 2018. I wanted to collaborate with Nepali communities since the beginning of the building process with the purpose of helping me make design decisions vis-à-vis photography selection, the nature of metadata, header image, footer text, and layout. Though I knew from the beginning that this decision-making was not going to be easy, after I began UX research, "it became even more evident that making such decisions is never easy and perhaps, they should not be easy either" (Poudyal, 2019). There was hardly any common ground where we could stand and build a digital archive "harmoniously." We were caught between desires to build an archive for ourselves and a fear of the Western gaze. The journey was filled with complex and intricate dialogues: anger and irritation ("why on the earth do we have to think about the West while building our archive?"), frustration ("but they will have access to this archive and can use it to serve their vested interest"), and hope ("maybe we will find some ways to build it for ourselves and also fight against Western gaze"). And the way we were trying to build the digital archive from this uneasy state was full of contingencies and conflicts.

Figure 4: Image of Boudhanath Stupa on Losar, 2017

Figure 5: Image of Pashupatinath Temple in the night of Shivaratri, 2017

Some participants wanted me to include more images that would portray, as emphasized by one of the participants, "art spaces related with goddess culture," but others thought these photographs focusing on religious sculptures and spaces (for instance, Figure 4 and Figure 5) will only function as an invitation to further exoticize Nepal. While for some participants, the jumble of unruly matted wires hanging above the Kathmandu streets, poor road conditions, and the 2015 earthquake-hit construction sites were the reality of our streets and must be uploaded in the archive, other participants critiqued saying such images would portray Kathmandu in a negative light. Some participants wanted the archive to capture streets in their rawness without any ideological filters as they opined that any kind of such censorship will do injustice to the everyday narratives that are emerging and leaking from the streets. Other participants cautioned me against this and recommended me to be aware of the Western gaze while uploading the images, which can be sensed in the following words of one participant:

> 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. For 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.

Each of us had our own worries, our own concerns, stories, desires, and emphases. And the answers emerging from those conversations were so incompatible, incommensurable, and inconsistent that building an archive based on those answers started becoming very difficult. The archive building process started slowing down, perhaps necessarily so. Instead of just building an archive, building a dialectical relationship started becoming an unconditional priority of the project. It is important to realize that there are no linearly traceable or representable versions of Kathmandu streets and stories (or any time and space, for that matter). And it is not only because I do not have enough photographs to capture the stories of Kathmandu streets, but rather because not all stories are traceable or locatable by any archival texts. The failure to find unified and harmonious answers and the frustrations caused by this very failure was making it evident that, although as Nepalis and South Asians we might share many experiences, no essential feature defines us all. During my three IRB-approved UX research projects, it became clear that "we also share the fear of representation, especially as my digital archive is being built from the location of the US. But the ways we experience these photographs and archive varied depending on our sense of aesthetics, our ways of ethics, and our political imperatives" (Poudyal, 2019, para. 4). The design decisions that we were discussing were training me to practice active listening and share authorial positions and performance with the community members. My community-based UX research became a very crucial moment in my project as it forced me to get out of my comfort zone and to think through the following questions raised by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) in *The Location of Culture*:

> 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? (p. 2)

As the next step in my project, I am inviting some willing Nepalis to collaborate with me in populating metadata spaces of this digital archive with the stories they want to tell and the experiences and knowledge they want to share. I am hoping this collaboration will decentralize any authorial control; create spaces for dialogues that can be odd, uncomfortable, complex, and contradictory; and challenge the privileged notion of metadata description. The collaborators will fill out these spaces the way they like with the stories they want to tell. One photograph does not mean the same to all participants. One street is not experienced the same way by all collaborators. Each photograph and each street are leading each individual to talk about different realities of local politics, body politics, geopolitics; South Asian philosophies, literatures, arts, music, languages; indigenous feminism, Dalit feminism, more privileged feminism; coffee houses, the hippie trail, subcultures; women in the streets, body shaming, masculinities; corruption; hopes; education; frustrations; and resistances.

What I am learning from this project is that digital archives must prioritize dialectical relationships with the community where the presence of incongruous, intricate, and irreconcilable dialogues is possible, and archivists should not be afraid to let these dialogues slow down the archival process. There must be a humble awareness that archival presence for some realities and records means an absence and exclusion of the others. Archival inclusion of all is impossible, and that impossibility is what archivists must strive for. This struggle toward the impossible is "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, 2007, p. 248). For this call of justice, archivists must endeavor for impossible archival imaginaries. As per Gilliland and Caswell (2016), these archival imaginaries "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" (pp. 61, 65). If I could not find a compatible archival answer among only 20-25 participants, we need to understand what "answers" would look like if we imagine a community beyond that participatory design table. What about the ones who are photographed? What would they say? What about the ones who are not photographed? Again,

what would they say? What about the participants who might never have access to participate in any such dialogic rooms? Is it ever possible to ethically address and include all the Others? These are the toughest questions that will rupture any final ethical claims. From here, archivists should slowly, patiently, humbly, and stubbornly move toward impossible archival imaginaries.

Ethics of Demanding and Desiring Impossible Ethics: Outro

Digital archivists must ask themselves the hardest of the questions, the ones that are impossible to answer. And they must walk toward the impossible. That's the ethics. Impossible ethics. Let's call it, as Christen and Andersons (2019) would say, ethics of staying with the trouble. Citing Donna Haraway, they ask archivists to "*stay with the trouble*," continuing "to be open to 'unexpected collaborations and combinations' [and] to see the colonial troubles—

Figure 4: Image of graffiti in the Kathmandu Street, 2017

the structures and logics that drive our collection, curation, and circulation practices and processes" (p. 99). Staying with the trouble also means, to borrow Spivak's (1993) words, "arrest[ing] the understandable need to fix and diagnose the identity of the most deserving marginal" and "suspend[ing] the mood of self-congratulation as saviors of marginality" (p. 61). There must be a strong sense of commitment to self-interrogation, which will protect digital archivists from falling into a self-congratulatory snare that traps every possibility of further evolution, transformation, and archival social justice. Failure to do so will make even a well-intentioned project an accomplice of epistemic violence. While digitally archiving the Other, archivists cannot deny the pharmakon-like characteristics of archives where medicine/cure can always be in danger of turning into poison/curse if archivists do not recognize, acknowledge, demand, desire, and strive for the impossible ethics.

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Notes

[1] The images woven in this article are from my digital archive (http://cassacda.com/), and they do not always directly interact with the words they accompany. It is a rhetorical choice I am making to open-endedly invite readers to engage with these writerly visual texts and take a journey in Kathmandu streets. These photographs serve not as a representation of Kathmandu but as an invitation to ceaselessly provoke the imaginations for impossible archival imaginaries.

[2] Mignolo observes this in the context of coloniality, modernity, post-modernity, and *desprenderse*, a de-colonial delinking and an epistemic shift to other-universality and pluri-versality.

[3] Cited from Qwo-Li Driskill's unpublished paper "Indian in the Archive."

[4] I am employing Derrida's (1978) interrogation of "structurality of structure" (p. 352) to deconstruct an archival structure.

Contact Information:

Bibhushana Poudyal
PhD Candidate
The University of Texas at El Paso
Email: bpoudyal@miners.utep.edu

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