

# Critical Ethnography as an Archival Tool A Case Study of the Afghan Diaspora in Canada

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Résumé de l'article

En raison des limites des théories et des méthodologies archivistiques existantes, il y a peu d'options évidentes permettant aux communautés sousreprésentées et marginalisées de se représenter de façon éthique, fidèle et responsable par le biais de leurs propres voix au sein des archives institutionnelles conventionnelles. De ce fait, bon nombre de ces communautés sont privées de connaissances et de ressources pédagogiques de base sur elles-mêmes et leur histoire au Canada. Basé sur les recherches effectuées au cours d'un programme de maîtrise d'un an, cet article utilise un cadre critique ethnographique et des entrevues d'histoire orale afin de comprendre les besoins archivistiques d'une portion de la diaspora afghane, établie depuis longtemps au Canada. Les Canadiens- Afghans participants s'accordent pour dire que les archives numériques offrent une solution à la rareté des connaissances et de matériel portant sur eux-mêmes – leur propres histoires et récits. La recherche démontre que le cadre critique ethnographique peut être un outil dans les archives pour comprendre les désirs, le processus de formation identitaire et les représentations des communautés marginalisées afin d'assurer une représentation fidèle dans les archives.

# Critical Ethnography as an Archival Tool

## A Case Study of the Afghan Diaspora in Canada

MOSKA ROKAY

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**ABSTRACT** Due to the limitations of existing archival theories and methodologies, there are few clear options that allow underrepresented and marginalized communities to represent themselves ethically, faithfully, and responsibly in their own voices in mainstream archival institutions. As a result, many of these communities lack knowledge and fundamental pedagogical resources about themselves and their history in Canada. Based on research from the author's one-year master's degree, this article uses a critical ethnographic framework and oral history interviews to understand the archival needs of a segment of the Afghan diaspora that has long been settled in Canada. The Afghan Canadian participants agreed that digital archives could provide a solution to the community's dearth of knowledge and material about itself – its own histories and stories. The research demonstrates that a critical ethnographic framework can be applied as an instrument in the archives in order to understand the desires, identity-formation processes, and representations of a marginalized community to ensure faithful archival representation.

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**RÉSUMÉ** En raison des limites des théories et des méthodologies archivistiques existantes, il y a peu d'options évidentes permettant aux communautés sous-représentées et marginalisées de se représenter de façon éthique, fidèle et responsable par le biais de leurs propres voix au sein des archives institutionnelles conventionnelles. De ce fait, bon nombre de ces communautés sont privées de connaissances et de ressources pédagogiques de base sur elles-mêmes et leur histoire au Canada. Basé sur les recherches effectuées au cours d'un programme de maîtrise d'un an, cet article utilise un cadre critique ethnographique et des entrevues d'histoire orale afin de comprendre les besoins archivistiques d'une portion de la diaspora afghane, établie depuis longtemps au Canada. Les Canadiens-Afghans participants s'accordent pour dire que les archives numériques offrent une solution à la rareté des connaissances et de matériel portant sur eux-mêmes – leur propres histoires et récits. La recherche démontre que le cadre critique ethnographique peut être un outil dans les archives pour comprendre les désirs, le processus de formation identitaire et les représentations des communautés marginalisées afin d'assurer une représentation fidèle dans les archives.

## Introduction

Archival theory, education, and practice broadly lack intervention from ethnographic and emergent methods, and especially from the field of anthropology. This article aims to illustrate how anthropological methods, specifically critical ethnography, can benefit archives, archival practice, and the archival representation of underrepresented communities. I argue that ethnography should be an essential methodological tool for adequate, collaborative archival representation of diverse minority communities. Therefore, this article is directed toward archivists, archival students and educators, and related archival professionals for whom anthropology may be an unfamiliar discipline. To substantiate my claim that archivists should develop critical ethnographic methodologies, I explore the efficacy of community archival initiatives and ethnographic approaches as solutions to the problem of inadequate representation of groups such as Afghan Canadians in mainstream archives. I explain how ethnographic engagement with members of the Afghan Canadian diaspora community demonstrated that standard archival practices leave fundamental archival gaps, which are increasingly being addressed through community archival practices.

This article draws from a larger body of work – my Master of Information thesis “Archiving Afghan Canadian Long-Time Settlement Experiences: Emergent Methods & Digital Design,” a critical ethnography of the Afghan Canadian community, settled in Canada for 10 or more years – to understand how members of the community engage with their “hyphenated” identities and media representations of themselves and to assess their digital archival needs – all while talking back to the negative stereotypes placed on the community as a whole. That research alerted me to the imperative for archivists to use critical ethnography as a tool to understand the knowledge-making and identity-forming practices of underrepresented communities in archival practice. The complexities of a marginalized or underrepresented community must be understood in order to do justice to its voice and representation in archival practice and, especially, to understand the group’s specific needs, wishes, or desires with relation to a community archives. My aim in this and forthcoming articles is to show how important it is for archivists to work to understand marginalized communities before they even consider approaching these communities for their documentary heritage. The article begins with an overview of recent studies on and about

Afghan Canadians, a literature review of ethnic archiving in North America, an explanation of my methodology, and finally, presents my findings.

## Studies about Afghan Canadians

Most studies on Afghan Canadians focus on the settlement practices of members of the Afghan diaspora in Canada, their experiences integrating into Canadian society in the first few years after their arrival, the immediate effects of a new culture and language on different generations, and the ways in which Canadian social service agencies are failing these newcomers.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, many of these studies adopt comparative approaches and methodologies by contrasting the settlement practices of two or more ethnic groups.<sup>2</sup> The comparative mindset of these researchers tends to focus too much on the past and does not allow Afghan participants to think deeply about their identities in the context of their present reality. As will become obvious, many of these studies are not intersectional; they do not consider the existence of diverse identities within the Afghan Canadian diaspora community. Without this awareness, their findings about the group are skewed, greatly affecting the generalizations they make about the community for policy makers – the predominant audience – and shaping representations of the Afghan Canadian community in Canadian society.

Afghan refugees and immigrants in Canada are resilient in the face of prejudice. In one study, Afghan participants revealed that the prejudice they faced led them to an increased awareness of their identity in Canada.<sup>3</sup> However, the scope of that study did not allow the researchers to delve deeper into the varying characteristics of Afghan identity and dominant forms of representation. Comparative studies of

1 Nazilla Khanlou, Jane G. Koh, and Catriona Mill, "Cultural Identity and Experiences of Prejudice and Discrimination of Afghan and Iranian Immigrant Youth," *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 6, no. 4 (2008): 494–513; Michaela Hynie, Sepali Guruge, and Yogendra B. Shakya, "Family Relationships of Afghan, Karen and Sudanese Refugee Youth," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 44, no. 3 (2013): 11–28; Shiva Nourpanah, "A Study of the Experiences of Integration and Settlement of Afghan Government-Assisted Refugees in Halifax, Canada," *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees* 30, no. 1 (2014): 57–66; Parin Dossa, "Creating Politicized Spaces: Afghan Immigrant Women's Stories of Migration and Displacement," *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work* 23, no. 1 (2008): 10–22.

2 Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya, "Family Relationships"; Khanlou, Koh, and Mill, "Cultural Identity."

3 Khanlou, Koh, and Mill, "Cultural Identity."

Afghan, Karen, and Sudanese refugee youths in Toronto explored whether acculturation gaps and role reversals led to family conflicts and distress.<sup>4</sup> Although this comparative study provided further proof of the strength and resilience of refugee groups, the breadth of analysis involved in comparing the settlement experiences of different ethnicities unfortunately precluded rigorous, in-depth investigations of the surrounding context, issues, and multiple identities within each group. Comparative studies tend to focus on the differences between groups and, as a result, are blind to the differences within groups, placing them into competitive relationships and asking which group “wins” at settlement in Canada. In other words, by not considering the variables, contexts, and diverse identities within individual ethnic groups, comparative ethnographic studies on settlement experiences often end up homogenizing the groups they study.

Given Canada’s military engagement in Afghanistan, it is perhaps not surprising that many studies, comparative or not, target policy makers and suggest changes to social service agencies by focusing on suffering and damage.<sup>5</sup> By fixating on a marginalized community’s misery in order to inspire changes in policy, such studies subsequently perpetuate and reinforce “damage-centred” representations of communities such as that of Afghan Canadians. Eve Tuck explains that “the danger in damage-centered research is that it is a pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community.”<sup>6</sup> Marginalized communities permit this kind of representation because it is the quickest and easiest way “for correcting oppression”<sup>7</sup> that communities face. One way to counter the damage-centred studies on Afghan Canadians is to employ Tuck’s research strategy of focusing on desire. As Tuck explains, while it is important to reveal the pain, it is equally critical to acknowledge the wisdom and hope prevalent in a community.<sup>8</sup> This ensures that the community is more wholly represented.

Some existing studies on Afghan Canadians do not take cultural protocols into account, usually because the researchers are not Afghan themselves.<sup>9</sup> Any

4 Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya, “Family Relationships.”

5 See, for example, Dossa, “Creating Politicized Spaces.”

6 Eve Tuck, “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities,” *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 414.

7 Tuck, “Suspending Damage,” 414.

8 Tuck, “Suspending Damage,” 414.

9 Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya, “Family Relationships”; Khanlou, Koh, and Mill, “Cultural Identity”; and Dossa, “Creating Politicized Spaces.”

resulting research ultimately rests on assumptions about Afghan immigrants in Canada without relying on any consultation with Afghan Canadian community members. For example, one study wanted to examine the settlement experiences and assimilation processes of Afghan government-assisted refugees (GARs) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, solely through large family interviews,<sup>10</sup> but the researcher's method reflected a range of assumptions and limited engagement with the community. For instance, it relied on a single translator, who worked with Afghan refugees but was not culturally or ethnically Afghan. Moreover, the researcher recruited participants at a mosque and a multicultural potluck while wearing full hijab, something she normally would not wear.<sup>11</sup> Because Afghanistan is an Islamic Republic and its official religion is Islam, she may have presumed that her potential participants were all practicing Muslims. Regardless of whether this were true, she had failed to account for the ways this practice might introduce selection bias in her study.

Another problem across the literature is the tendency to rely on settlement or social service agencies to find participants for research studies. This approach is likely due to the authors' interest in contributing to the development of policy in Ottawa. For example, one study targeted newly arrived Afghan refugees by contacting the International Centre of Winnipeg, a non-profit settlement agency, and subsequently implemented a snowballing strategy to find more participants.<sup>12</sup> Because such studies recruit participants from settlement agencies, they suffer from sample bias by focusing on the most recent Afghan refugees and immigrants in Canada.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, they automatically exclude any Afghan Canadians who have left the care and services of agencies or perhaps have never utilized a settlement agency in the first place. Only Hynie et al. and Lisa Quirke<sup>14</sup> studied participants who were diverse in terms of their citizenship status and

10 Nourpanah, "A Study of the Experiences of Integration and Settlement."

11 Nourpanah, 60.

12 Julie A.C. Stack and Yoshitaka Iwasaki, "The Role of Leisure Pursuits in Adaptation Processes among Afghan Refugees Who Have Immigrated to Winnipeg, Canada," *Leisure Studies* 28, no. 3 (2009): 239–59.

13 Nourpanah, "A Study of the Experiences of Integration and Settlement"; Khanlou, Koh, and Mill, "Cultural Identity"; and Stack and Iwasaki, "The Role of Leisure Pursuits in Adaptation Processes."

14 Hynie, Guruge, and Shakya, "Family Relationships"; Lisa Quirke, "Exploring the Settlement Experiences and Information Practices of Afghan Newcomer Youth in Toronto/Une exploration des expériences d'établissement et des pratiques informationnelles de jeunes Afghans récemment arrivés à Toronto," *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 35, no. 4 (2011): 345–53.

years in Canada. They were able to do so because their research did not rely strictly on settlement agencies for participant recruitment.

As I anticipated as an Afghan Canadian myself, most of the studies mentioned above concluded that the Afghan Canadian community was incredibly heterogeneous, with intersectional identities that were shocking to the authors, who discovered diversity along ethnic, linguistic, age, and socioeconomic lines.

## Ethnic Archiving

As my brief review of the literature demonstrates, Afghan Canadians have been poorly represented in policy studies; in archival institutions and programs, too, there has been insufficient consideration of the variety and diversity of identities within this community. Trends in archiving records from ethnic communities at major Canadian institutions and recent research about Afghan Canadians have not placed this underrepresented community at the forefront of archival practices or research processes.

As will be discussed below, mainstream archival institutions have historically employed a variety of methods when attempting to capture records of ethnic groups. When these methods were “successful,” the capturing of “other voices” was more often a by-product of shifting societal and immigration trends than the result of ongoing, proactive endeavours to fill glaring gaps in holdings or to rectify the blatant whiteness of acquisitions. There have been very few concerted, active efforts by major institutions to document ethnic groups that have been community facing, participatory, and on these groups’ own terms.

In relation to the archival landscape, grassroots, independent community archives, which are often underfunded and short-staffed, have emerged to fill this gap. The archival discipline and the aforementioned empirical studies about Afghan Canadians have struggled to utilize the capacities, benefits, and power of academia, research, and/or entrenched Canadian institutions (i.e., mainstream archives) to assist or understand the identity-formation processes of underrepresented communities such as that of Afghan Canadians. Without a critical ethnography focused on the diverse identities within an underrepresented community, it is difficult to ascertain how a community wishes to present itself and its stories, let alone to conduct any significant, truly representative research that will be useful for policy makers.



In a historical survey,<sup>15</sup> Dominique Daniel provides a thorough account of the history of ethnic archiving initiatives by mainstream archival institutions in North America. She divides her review into two parts to reflect major ethnic archiving trends: the “ethnicization” of archives and the later “archivization” of ethnicity. Similarly, Terry Cook identifies four critical paradigm shifts in archival theory, beginning at the end of the French Revolution.<sup>16</sup> The last three paradigms largely coincide with Daniel’s historical survey of ethnic archiving practices. The second paradigm, *memory*, works well to describe the rise of active collecting of archival materials from individuals, families, and associations of Western European descent in the 1960s and early 1970s – an expansion of earlier archival practices. The third paradigm, *identity*, coincides with Daniel’s explanation of the rise of community archival initiatives, which operated in opposition to mainstream institutions in the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, professional archivists began to understand the intersectional frameworks in society and attempted to address these concerns in their practices. This was also the time of a great wave of non-Western European immigration to North America.

According to Cook, we are currently in the fourth paradigm, which he labels the *community* paradigm. This latest archival paradigm shifts the focus onto participatory archiving, empowering identity-based archives and community consultation. It aligns with Daniel’s argument for the rise of participatory archiving, with both ethnic groups and archivists embracing intersectional, diverse identities.

Early theorists working within the current community paradigm warn that archival institutions usually treat ethnicity “as a subject area or ‘theme’”<sup>17</sup> instead of as provenance. This latter attitude would further encourage the idea of archival stewardship in ethnic archiving specifically because it would force archivists to treat archival material from an ethnic community “less as property and more as cultural asset, jointly held and invested in by the archive and the community of

15 Dominique Daniel, “Archival Representations of Immigration and Ethnicity in North American History: From the Ethnicization of Archives to the Archivization of Ethnicity,” *Archival Science* 14, no. 2 (2014): 169–203.

16 Terry Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community: Four Shifting Archival Paradigms,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 2–3 (2013): 95–120.

17 Joel Wurl, “Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience,” *Archival Issues* (2005): 69.

origin.”<sup>18</sup> Others further elucidate this concept: mainstream archival institutions can remedy their abysmal lack of records on marginalized communities and resist “creating archives *about* rather than *of* the communities”<sup>19</sup> by challenging traditional archival principles such as contextual knowledge, respect des fonds, and original order.

While archiving ethnicity has changed over time according to different waves of immigration and thanks to social justice movements, 21st-century archival theorists are still struggling to provide solutions for mainstream institutions. As suggested by Cook’s fourth paradigm, many ethnic and other identity-based communities do not feel that community consultation by major archival institutions or the broadening of traditional archival principles would be enough to accurately document their lived experiences. Institutional plans to acquire, preserve, and make accessible the records of minority groups have rarely resulted in coordinated and collaborative actions focused on reshaping narratives or purposefully giving visibility to minorities.

In contrast to these studies, which considered a participant pool of Afghans who had lived in Canada for only a short time, my research focuses on Afghan Canadian participants who were either born in Canada or had lived in Canada for 10 or more years. Furthermore, I decided against adopting an end goal in my interviews in order to differentiate my research from the majority of the studies that aimed specifically to address settlement agencies’ policies and practices and the Canadian government’s immigration and integration policies. The process of semi-structured, participant-influenced interviews I adopted allowed ideas and opinions to emerge and flow organically, which ultimately re-centred my participants as part of the audience for this research – no less a part than anyone else.

## Research Practices in Anthropology

Critical ethnography is a regularly employed approach to research in anthropology. Historically, ethnographic and anthropological research were based on colonial power structures and had little success in capturing underrepresented

18 Wurl, “Ethnicity as Provenance,” 72.

19 Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, “Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections,” *Archivaria* 63 (Spring 2007): 89. (emphasis in original)

communities. Ethnographic research practices were deeply colonial, and, to some extent, these colonial origins persist; they can be perceived, as Kimberly Christen explains, in ethnographic archives. According to Christen, “Archives are physical reminders of colonial practices that once promoted the exclusion of minority and subaltern voices”<sup>20</sup> because they were usually the storage places of colonial anthropological research. Anthropologists documented profusely and destructively and undertook very little consultation or collaboration with the researched group. Speaking in the context of Indigenous voices and today’s digital methods, Christen explains that even digital curation of archival materials “include academic research practices that have not been historically open to subaltern voices, and popular trends in digital curation do not suggest an ethical commitment to maintaining the integrity of collections or providing the familial or community-based links to and narratives of these items.”<sup>21</sup> With the exception of recent key projects that are implementing participatory practices with Indigenous communities,<sup>22</sup> academic research has generally followed settler ideas of knowledge-making, and its practices, therefore, have naturally made their way into our archives today. These practices were often created for the benefit of the researchers, catering to their traditional scientific and anthropological methods, and did not consider the knowledge-making practices of the researched group. They did not – and often still do not – bend to the needs and wishes of the participants, thus solidifying the power of the researcher over the participant.<sup>23</sup>

As an Afghan Canadian, I had no intention of reproducing the colonial practices of anthropological research that have favoured the power of the researcher over

20 Kimberly Christen, “Relationships, Not Records: Digital Heritage and the Ethics of Sharing Indigenous Knowledge Online,” in *The Routledge Companion to Media Studies and Digital Humanities* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 403.

21 Christen, “Relationships, Not Records,” 405.

22 Christen, “Relationships, Not Records,” 406–10.

23 A list of some wonderful BIPOC authors and their works, challenging traditional ethnographic research methodologies: Qwul’sih’yah’maht (Robina Anne Thomas), “Honouring the Oral Traditions of My Ancestors through Storytelling,” in *Research as Resistance: Revisiting Critical, Indigenous, and Anti-Oppressive Approaches*, ed. Susan Strega and Leslie Allison Brown (Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press, 2005), 237–54; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012); Orisanmi Burton, “Black Lives Matter: A Critique of Anthropology,” *Cultural Anthropology*, June 29, 2015, <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/black-lives-matter-a-critique-of-anthropology>; Himika Bhattacharya, “New Critical Collaborative Ethnography,” in *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy (New York: Guilford Press, 2008): 303–22.

the power of research subjects. Instead, in order to study a specific segment of the Afghan diaspora in Canada – long-settled Afghan Canadians who were born in Canada or had lived in Canada for 10 or more years – I devised a strategy that would allow me to create a reflexive, participant-driven, collaborative project. This strategy was based on critical ethnography and improvisation.

## Critical Ethnography and Improvisation: An Overview of My Research Process

According to D. Soyini Madison, a critical ethnographer “takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control.”<sup>24</sup> Critical ethnography can be defined as “the ‘doing’ – or, better, the performance – of critical theory.”<sup>25</sup> It is not afraid of being political: one of its main responsibilities is to acknowledge practices of “unfairness or injustice”<sup>26</sup> in a specific lived experience. As a result, the critical ethnographer creates space and a platform for the stories and voices of silenced and marginalized identities by using the researcher’s privilege, skills, and networks. Madison stresses that critical ethnographers must recognize that, when they consider their positionality, they are not just acknowledging subjectivity in their research but also

24 D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012), 5.

25 Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 14. Jim Thomas provides a great well-rounded explanation of critical theory:

The roots of critical thought spread from a long tradition of intellectual rebellion in which rigorous examination of ideas and discourse constituted political challenge. Social critique, by definition, is radical. It implies an evaluative judgment of meaning and method in research, policy, and human activity. Critical thinking implies freedom by recognizing that social existence, including our knowledge of it, is not simply composed of givens imposed on us by powerful and mysterious forces. This recognition leads to the possibility of transcending existing social conditions. The act of critique implies that by thinking about and acting upon the world, we are able to change both our subjective interpretations and objective conditions.

Jim Thomas, *Doing Critical Ethnography*, *Qualitative Research Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1993), 18.

26 Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 6.

recognizing their “subjectivity *in relation to others*”<sup>27</sup> – in this case, in relation to the research participants. We must always be aware of our existence with regard to the people around us and their own identities. “Dialogical performance,” a component of critical ethnography, can be a prime method for presenting ethnographic research in a way that pays respect to the liveliness, timelessness, and ever-changing elements of the interactions between researchers and participants.<sup>28</sup> In dialogical performance, the aim is not to present the lived experiences of a community in a fixed moment in time – “the ethnographic present” – but to allow dialogue to express the vivacity of the participants’ “voices, bodies, histories, and yearnings” – the “ethnographic presence.”<sup>29</sup> This manifests in my research through an emphasis on oral history interviews.

As a first step in implementing a critical ethnographic approach to my research, I created an advisory team of Afghan Canadians who could guide me throughout the study. Due to the limited scope of my one-year master’s thesis, I knew I would not be able to include the wide breadth of intersectional identities within the Afghan diaspora in Canada. I would need to focus on conducting a smaller scale study that could potentially inform a much broader and more rigorous in-depth study in the future. With this scope in mind, I chose the members of my advisory team from among my Afghan friends and acquaintances, which meant that my advisory team members were in their 20s, close to my own age. Drawing from my personal networks, I invited five advisory team members with various Afghan ethnic backgrounds and linguistic capabilities (primary in the Afghan languages of Farsi and Pashto) who had lived for various lengths of time in Canada. (All had lived here for 10 or more years or were born in Canada.) It was especially important for me to showcase the incredible ethnic, linguistic, religious, sexual, and regional diversity of the Afghan peoples, because past studies of this diaspora have often overlooked its diversity. Through my advisory team and a snowballing strategy, I identified six research participants.

The mechanics of my interactions with the participants in this research are best illustrated by applying improvisation theory, a theory from performance studies, which demonstrates how improvisational performance or curation can

27 Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 10 (emphasis in original).

28 Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 10–11.

29 Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 11.

be a useful framework in participant-driven research.<sup>30</sup> Deviating from traditional research practices, improvisation theory focuses on handing power over the curation – or in this case, the research process – to the performers, or participants, in order to observe how they engage with the scenario or research problem when given minimal direction. Amy Sehan explains that improvisational performance is never “pure spontaneity”<sup>31</sup> because “it is created within a set of goals and guidelines.”<sup>32</sup> One of my goals was to observe how a marginalized community engaged with research when the researcher–participant power dynamic shifted. Although I wanted to limit the amount of guidance participants received from me, I learned from improvisation theory that I had to give them some direction in order to receive an organic, improvised engagement with my research. Improvisation took shape in oral history interviews, which were directed or guided by a brief list of questions I designed.<sup>33</sup>

Each of my six participants inhabited a multiplicity of identities. They identified with various ethnic groups: Tajik, Pashtun, Uzbek, and Hazara. Four of them stated that Farsi was their main Afghan language, and two were Pashto speaking. Four identified as male and two as female. All had lived in Canada for more than 10 years, and some were born in Canada. All could trace their families’ heritage to different parts of Afghanistan, including Kabul and Takhar provinces and the cities of Ghazni, Kandahar, and Jalalabad. They were all also in their 20s. Three of the six participants decided to use their real names, and the other three chose to use pseudonyms and to alter their voices for the oral history recording. I recognize that both my advisory team and my participant pool have a number of limitations, especially in relation to age, as they exclude the viewpoints of Afghan Canadians over the age of 30. As mentioned earlier, this initial study’s purpose was to provide a small-scale example that could be completed within a one-year research timeframe. I intend to conduct more in-depth research for a more representative picture of the Afghan Canadian diaspora community in future studies.

30 For more on improvisational curation in performance studies, see T.L. Cowan, “‘A One-Shot Affair’: Cabaret as Improvised Curation,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 143, no. 1 (2010): 47–54.

31 Amy Sehan, “Play Fair: Feminist Tools for Teaching Improv,” in *Radical Acts: Theatre and Feminist Pedagogies of Change*, ed. Ann Elizabeth Armstrong and Kathleen Juhl (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 140.

32 Sehan, 139.

33 See Appendix 1 for the interview questions.

## The Role of Grounded Theory in My Research

I used grounded theory as the primary method of coding and analyzing the research data I collected through oral history interviews with participants. A grounded theory approach emphasizes two concepts that are important in critical ethnography: the reflexivity of the researcher and continuous consultation with participants. Kathy Charmaz explains that grounded theory is based on putting aside any preconceptions when undertaking research, while “using simultaneous data collection and analysis to inform each other”<sup>34</sup> and employing abductive reasoning; in this way, grounded theory is allowed to emerge from the accumulated data.

My research ultimately employed a blended method: my research preparation and my choice of method for data collection (oral histories) were guided by critical ethnography and improvisation theory, but my participant-driven approach and my research population demanded the application of a coding and analysis style that allowed theory to emerge from the data – a method that blended critical ethnography and grounded theory. Grounded theory also encourages researchers to critically assess their positionality at all stages of the research process. This is essential to the transparency of the researcher, as repeatedly emphasized by D. Soyini Madison.<sup>35</sup>

In practice, this reflexive and participant-driven approach involved an iterative process of data analysis. During each recorded oral history interview, I took short notes and memos, and once all six interviews were finished, I manually transcribed each interview. I sent each transcript and the corresponding oral history audio file via email to each respective participant and asked them to edit the transcript as they saw fit. I initially coded the participant-edited transcripts line by line, using gerunds as opposed to the regular method of scouring data for themes and topics.<sup>36</sup> As a result, I made dozens of codes as I went through each line of each interview transcript. With this list of initial codes, I continued my analysis by looking through my memos for ideas that recurred, and this allowed me to focus on similar codes and to create tentative themes or categories.

34 Kathy Charmaz, “Grounded Theory as an Emergent Method,” in Hesse-Biber and Leavy, *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, 155.

35 Madison, *Critical Ethnography*, 129.

36 Charmaz, “Grounded Theory as an Emergent Method,” 164.

Because grounded theory emphasizes continuous collection and analysis of data, it concentrates on creating theoretical categories after coding the notes and memos “rather than focusing solely on the results of inquiry.”<sup>37</sup> Grounded theory also includes a coding procedure called theoretical sampling, where the researcher obtains data, creates theoretical categories from analysis of the data, and then goes back into the field to test whether their analysis and categories are correct. Meeting with my advisory team enabled me to discuss, test, and work out a set of theoretical categories, which I initially considered.

## Community Archiving and Archival Pedagogy

After consulting with my advisory team, I identified three critically important theoretical categories or findings that emerged from the interviews: symbolic annihilation, archival and community pedagogy, and assimilation/integration. This article specifically elucidates the second of my major findings – the community’s desire for a pedagogical resource about itself. This particular finding is significant because it highlights the importance of a critical ethnographic framework in faithful archival representations and focuses specifically on how digital archives emerged from data analysis as a crucial resource that a community can use to learn about itself.

Many of my participants identified digital archives<sup>38</sup> as a crucial pedagogical resource that could allow Afghan Canadians to learn more about themselves and to teach future generations about the present-day diaspora. One concern that emerged from the interviews was the perceived lack of cultural and historical knowledge about the Afghan part of participants’ “hyphenated” Afghan Canadian identity and their desire to learn more. For example, Palwasha revealed the tedious process of scouring YouTube for current videos of different types of *attan* (a traditional Afghan dance) and ethnically diverse weddings, expressing the desire to have everything in one place for the education of the present generation:

37 Charmaz, “Grounded Theory as an Emergent Method,” 156.

38 As explained in Appendix 1, I asked a question about a potential digital archives for the Afghan Canadian community, and this is what is referred to throughout this article as “the digital archives.”



So – oh my God, if you could just sit down and watch different types of *attan* and learn from it, like, I would love that! Or weddings. Like, there's so many different traditions. I feel like, in Afghanistan itself that, like, it would be so cool. Rather than searching through YouTube and coming across, like, 2009 videos, I'd rather [watch] the updated ones.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Oybek thought the digital archives should also include a history of the diaspora and advocated for a space to provide a political history of the modern state of Afghanistan and the creation of the Afghan diaspora: “Maybe . . . an actual history, if it was able to be traced, from Afghanistan, in Afghanistan? You know what I mean? . . . So, like, the history of that region to date. Of why people are now leaving that region to a better life.”<sup>40</sup>

Frishta also suggested that a digital archives could have an educational use for future generations, envisioning that the stories of present Afghan diaspora members would be useful for Afghans in the future: “I would be so keen to put my poetry in there. Maybe a couple family photos and like, um, uh, stuff like maybe written like in grad school. Like that kind of stuff. Just to give future generations an idea of the experience first-gen Afghans had.”<sup>41</sup>

Rumi, another participant, talked about the benefits of including long-form conversations with Afghans – similar to podcasts – in the digital archives so that different Afghans could see and hear often-silenced aspects of their identities existing within the community. He believed that this would allow Afghan diaspora members whose identities are usually suppressed to embrace themselves:

But I think something like this, an interview, is also important. A voice – a conversation with another Afghan is also important because they can just listen to it and . . . just listen to it and see if they share any similarities with someone. . . . If another person listens to that online and they're like, “Oh, let me see what this guy is trying to say,” and they listen to it and then they're like, “Oh, this guy sees the world this way, and this person sees the world this way!” . . . I feel like it can open up

39 Palwasha Zerghune, oral history interview with author, February 10, 2019.

40 Oybek Makhasher, oral history interview with author, January 31, 2019.

41 Frishta Bastan, oral history interview with author, January 27, 2019.

the avenue for more Afghans to embrace who they are, embrace their identity, embrace their uniqueness, right?<sup>42</sup>

Rumi focused on the importance, to members of the Afghan community, of learning about themselves for their own mental well-being and mindfulness; if a diaspora member can see that they are not alone, they benefit from a sense of unity and community.

Zal struggled for much of the interview with envisioning what he would want to see in a digital archives. He admitted that he was less interested in stories about the Afghan diaspora today because he had easy access to those materials through social media: “And then here, it’s like, we’re talking about the Afghan Canadian experience. . . . Would that necessarily mean that the photos are, you know, people last week hanging out, having a good time? Bunch of Afghan Canadians? I guess, maybe that would be interesting for people in the future . . . but to me, it would be like, I could just open my Instagram. Stuff like that.”<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, aside from his lack of curiosity about how Afghans in the diaspora navigate their hyphenated identities, even Zal admitted that his interest lay in educational uses for a digital archives, through historical photographs with short captions and materials about different Afghan languages.

Participants in this research, Afghan Canadians who have lived in Canada for 10 or more years, identified the need for a pedagogical resource for their own diaspora community on one, common platform, and they were not completely satisfied with social media as a platform for documenting their experience. They recognized a gap in their own knowledge of the Afghan diaspora in Canada and, seeing nothing available in their school history curricula, determined that they needed a means to archive themselves – *for themselves* in the present and for future generations – in the form of a digital community archives.

### **Digital Archives as a Community Pedagogical Resource**

To understand how a digital community archives can become an essential pedagogical resource for the community it serves, we must first shift from understanding an archives as an extractive resource to seeing it as an ethnographic subject. Ann Laura Stoler uses a case study of Dutch East Indies archival

<sup>42</sup> Rumi, oral history interview with author, January 26, 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Zal, oral history interview with author, February 4, 2019.

documents to demonstrate how archives were used in the past as powerful tools in forming colonial states and state ethnography and upholding their authority; Stoler shows how anthropologists perpetuate these notions today by treating archives as extractive instead of ethnographic resources. She stresses that conceptualizing the archives as a place for knowledge retrieval, rather than as an object of study itself, does not allow researchers and students to be critical of the contexts of the archival materials they engage with.<sup>44</sup> Stoler argues that viewing archives instead as entities of knowledge production “signals a more sustained engagement with those archives as cultural artifacts of fact production, of taxonomies in the making, and of disparate notions of what made up colonial authority.”<sup>45</sup>

Once we make this conceptual shift from archives as source to archives as subject, or from knowledge retrieval to knowledge production, Stoler believes that we can envision the archives as an ethnographic subject. Typically, ethnographic subjects such as the participants of my research provide knowledge or information/data for a social science researcher through some sort of data collection method as the researcher attempts to understand an aspect of the subject population they are studying. Stoler explains that, as an ethnographic subject, the archives can provide “data” about its archival power when researchers look for its silences and “read for its regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake – *along the archival grain.*”<sup>46</sup>

However, how do we read “along the archival grain” if the archives is a blank canvas and does not exist yet? Carden et al. engage with the consequences of this conceptual shift to archives as ethnographic subject as they explore a critical archival pedagogy that developed during an undergraduate course, *Radical Lesbian Thought*, taught by the authors at Tufts University, through the Program in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. The authors employ Stoler’s concepts in their work and point out that “archives are defined not only by what they contain, but also by their dynamic processes of meaning

44 Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 90.

45 Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” 91.

46 Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” 100 (emphasis in original).

making.”<sup>47</sup> This critical concept can inform the creation of a digital archives for the Afghan Canadian community because it allows the diaspora community to engage in those “processes of meaning making” by contributing to the archives. As an ethnographic subject, the digital archives for my community is, in its current state, a blank canvas and unable to provide “data” about the community it represents. However, as the Afghan Canadian community makes decisions and contributes stories, artifacts, and lived experiences to the digital archives, community members are also engaged in making meaning about the community’s representation and identity(ies). The digital archives, as an ethnographic subject, becomes an organic entity because it continuously exists as an ever-shifting platform that presents the lived experiences and various identities of the Afghan Canadian community. The community creates meanings for the digital archives, and the latter, in turn, finally becomes able to provide community “data” as an ethnographic subject.

As the Afghan Canadian community engages with meaning making for itself through the digital archives, the community is simultaneously learning about itself and about its intersectionality. Because individual community members contribute what they deem important about themselves to the digital archives in a format of their choosing, they are collectively teaching each other about their individual identities and lived experiences. Instead of being taught about itself by someone or something outside the community, the community reveals its multiple identities organically through individual digital contributions. This is how the Afghan Canadian digital archives becomes a pedagogical resource for the community it was created to serve. The traditional notion of an organic archives can be traced back to 19th-century archival theorists who described archives as naturally or organically arising from activities.<sup>48</sup> One of the benefits of conceptualizing the digital archives as an ethnographic subject is that this notion allows the pedagogical resource – the representation of the stories and identities of the Afghan diaspora in Canada – to constantly change as the community itself changes. The digital archives becomes an organic entity.

47 Kailah R. Carden, Sabina E. Vaught, Arturo Muñoz, Vanessa Pinto, Cecilia Vaught, and Maya Zeigler, “A Critical Archival Pedagogy: The Lesbian Herstory Archives and a Course in Radical Lesbian Thought,” *Radical Teacher* 105 (Summer 2016): 27.

48 Reto Tschan, “A Comparison of Jenkinson and Schellenberg on Appraisal,” *American Archivist* 65, no. 2 (2002): 177, 179.

### Archival Pedagogy and Its Failures

Grassroots organizations that have identified gaps in mainstream archival institutions often attempt to create identity-based archives centred on a commonality in their identities; this is frequently referred to as community archiving. Identity-based community archiving as a method and a practice is mostly seen as beyond the scope of traditional archival pedagogy when, in fact, it should be at the forefront of archival classrooms, especially considering the increased diversity and multiculturalism in Canada. How will a newly trained, Canadian archival studies graduate grapple with the very Canadian issues of race and ethnicity in their profession if these subjects are not given priority in their educational curriculum?

When I refer to *archival pedagogy*, I mean the teaching of archival theory and practice to archival students in classrooms. In my experience as a student, practices applied in identity-based community archives, which are often based in critical race and feminist theory, were seldom presented in the classroom in ways that could meaningfully legitimize the radical work these practices have achieved. Rebecka Sheffield explains that the term *community archives* usually denotes initiatives that are outside of formal heritage networks and further states that “the upsurge in independent community archives has produced tensions among heritage professionals largely trained in European traditions concerned with the intellectual, legal, and physical control of records in formal archival networks.”<sup>49</sup> When community archives are not part of formal heritage networks and archival education considers only the professional skills needed for work in these networks, new graduates who end up in community archives might find themselves thrown into a world they must learn anew and for which their education did not prepare them.

Furthermore, if diversity is not prioritized in the archival classroom, archival studies graduates might enter the profession lacking the tools to address issues of diversity and inclusion at mainstream archival institutions, which already may be struggling with matters of race, ethnicity, and diversity. Thus, a cycle perpetuates itself, and some mainstream institutions are left continuously ill-equipped to think about these issues. When concepts of diversity, ethnicity, and race are not at the centre of archival decision-making at major archival institutions (for

<sup>49</sup> Rebecka Sheffield, “Community Archives,” in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, 2nd ed., ed. Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2017), 352.

instance, in relation to the acquisition of diverse community records), grassroots community archival initiatives necessarily emerge. Communities look elsewhere for their representation and often determine that they will need to carry out the labour themselves.

## Community Archiving as the Best Solution

Discussions on race, ethnicity, and diversity in the contexts of diaspora communities may not be the focus of archival classrooms in Canada, but they are certainly being addressed among archival scholars and studies in the UK and the United States. Anne Gilliland and Hariz Halilovich discuss the creation, pedagogical methods, and findings of a new course at the University of California, Los Angeles, which explores diaspora memory and identity in archival studies. They admit to the difficulty of gathering archival documentation of the lived experiences of migrant groups because migrants tend to move among different locations, are not always able to keep their records as they flee, and are often afraid of persecution if they reveal any documentation that might prove not to be genuine.<sup>50</sup> The authors reveal that traditional archival pedagogy had not addressed these issues until they created their own course, called *Migrating Memories: Diaspora, Archives and Human Rights*. They identify the importance of diaspora communities' ability to document their lived experiences and explain that the impact of this documentation is priceless for identity formation:

At the same time, especially over the longer term, memories and documentation of forced diaspora, both tangible and intangible, can play instrumental roles in identity formation in all the locations involved. They can be instrumental in individual and community recovery, trans-generational transfer of experiences and understandings of events, and the impulses to commemorate, document or forget.<sup>51</sup>

50 Anne J. Gilliland and Hariz Halilovich, "Migrating Memories: Transdisciplinary Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching about Diasporic Memory, Identity and Human Rights in Archival Studies," *Archival Science* 17, no. 1 (2017): 82.

51 Gilliland and Halilovich, 81.

While praising government initiatives in archiving the immigrant experience in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and the USA,<sup>52</sup> Gilliland and Halilovich maintain that mainstream archival institutions and community archives have so far not been successful in documenting the diaspora experience.<sup>53</sup>

In their 2016 article, Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez assess the impact of *community archives* – archival initiatives that are not in some way connected to mainstream institutions such as a university, government, or corporate archives – on the identity-based communities they serve.<sup>54</sup> They focus specifically on the South Asian American community and its members' reactions to seeing themselves existing in the histories and knowledge making of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). Confirming Gilliland and Halilovich's argument, the authors explain that this community sees great value in SAADA and its work in relation to identity formation. However, while these independent, community-based archival organizations provide the necessary labour to document the gaps they see in mainstream archival institutions, they receive far less financial support or legitimacy, particularly in the United States. While the government of the United Kingdom is arguably more supportive, the US federal government does not provide comparable funding for this important archival labour.<sup>55</sup> For their part, my Afghan Canadian participants clearly recognized that they have a right to know about themselves and that a digital archives could act as a pedagogical resource that could enable the community to discover its own nuances. Unfortunately, like other communities who take control of their own archives, they do not receive direct funding from the Canadian government but are instead required to acquire funding from public and private granting bodies.

## Conclusion

Whether through research studies focused primarily on settlement agency narratives or through archives that have refused to shift representational power over

52 Gilliland and Halilovich, 81.

53 Gilliland and Halilovich, 82.

54 Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 56–81, 62.

55 Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, 64.

to communities, the representation of marginalized, identity-based communities has been dictated by those outside these communities, with little to no consultation. My research participants recognized that, in the case of the Afghan Canadian diaspora community, a digital archives created by the community for the community could be an option for learning and for teaching each other as well as the rest of Canada about their heritage and history. Many participants in this research admitted to having insufficient knowledge of their community's histories, heritage, cultures, and lived experiences. A digital archives, with oral histories and digital artifacts created by Afghan diaspora members themselves, could become the desired resource.<sup>56</sup> Critical ethnographic methods could help to surface community knowledge and needs.

This research situates itself in the growing literature of studies conducted on and about Afghan Canadians. For the most part, because of their research approaches and participant pools, studies in the field wind up painting all Afghans with one brush in their findings. Instead of focusing on the settlement experiences of newly arrived Afghans in Canada or those currently using settlement agencies, my research attempted to raise awareness of the diverse identities within the Afghan diaspora in Canada. It stressed the importance of considering intersectionality when conducting research on and about Afghan Canadians.

A critical ethnography of an underrepresented identity-based community, such as the one undertaken here, is a crucial first step to understanding the community's archival needs and, thus, to being able to document its lived experiences ethically, faithfully, and responsibly. This approach transfers the power over representation from larger, mainstream Canadian institutions (i.e., mainstream media, major archival institutions, and so on) and archivists to the marginalized community as its members gain the opportunity to speak for themselves.

In this article, I have specifically shown how Afghan Canadians identified the need for a pedagogical resource to learn about themselves and how an organic, living digital archives can fill that need. In doing so, I hope to persuade an

56 Especially since this article attempts to show the complexity and diversity of diaspora communities, an area for further research would be understanding how community archiving can manage conflict and symbolic annihilation within the identity-based community it is attempting to document. While individuals in my specific research population may prefer a particular type of platform to address their identity-formation needs, this might not be the case if/when this study is further developed and considers a wider range of Afghan Canadians. In other words, one platform design may not fit the needs of all at every moment in time. I thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for pointing this out.



audience of archivists and researchers that reciprocity should always be at the forefront of any approach to an underrepresented community. Ultimately, archivists approaching marginalized communities must be mindful that they are privileged to hold space with the community and listen to their stories; recognizing this power shift is critical. Archival outreach practices can become more effective and less extractive when archivists actively acknowledge the powers and privileges of their institutions when engaging with underrepresented communities that may not have had positive experiences with such large institutions. Without committed, reflexive, and critical ethnographies that identify the community's desires, identity formation, and knowledge-making processes, archivists will not understand the intricate nuances and the diversity of identities within a specific identity-based community. Applying critical ethnography to archives and their practices will ensure that archives respond to communities' needs and centre reciprocity in their work. As my research demonstrates, members of the Afghan Canadian community *need* a pedagogical resource to learn more about themselves in Canada. My participants identified a digital archives as a way to fill this need and clearly expressed the desire to take the reins of representation into their own hands.

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**BIOGRAPHY** Moska Rokay is the Digital Humanities Research Fellow at the Institute of Islamic Studies (University of Toronto) tasked with coordinating the Muslims in Canada Archives (MiCA). As a refugee and immigrant settler on Turtle Island, she is actively involved in the Afghan Canadian diaspora community and is a co-founder of a Canadian non-profit organization called Afghans Reviving Culture and Heritage (ARCH). Moska's research interests lie in the interdisciplinary crossroads of archives, critical race and ethnicity studies, media studies, and identity formation in diaspora communities of war and trauma. She is an advocate for community-centred activist archives and archives of diaspora and migrant communities. In 2020, she was the recipient of the ACA New Professional Award as well as the *Archivaria* Gordon Dodds Student Paper Prize. She completed her Master of Information degree at the University of Toronto and defended her MI thesis in 2019.

**APPENDIX 1**<sup>57</sup>

1. What are your settlement<sup>58</sup> experiences in Canada?
2. What kinds of information resources were available to you at that time? Did you use online resources?
3. Are there any online communities that you connect to currently?
4. Do you look online to learn about the experiences of other Afghan Canadians?
5. Would an online archive of Afghan Canadian materials be appealing?

**57** Originally, I had intended to pose two open-ended, overarching questions to my participants in order to allow themes and ideas about their identities as Afghan Canadians to emerge as organically as possible through an emergent method called storytelling: "What are the stories you want Canadians to know about your experience in Canada?" and "What are your thoughts on the current representation of the Afghan diaspora in Canada?" However, the University of Toronto Research Ethics Board advised that I choose a more conventional social science data collection method that they were familiar with and that had low risk. For this reason, I chose oral histories and, as a result, was asked to increase the number of questions for the participants. As will become obvious from this list, rather than telling their life stories, which could indirectly inform the proof of concept, the participants now directly faced questions about their digital habits and the need for creating a digital archive or digital exhibition for the Afghan Canadian community.

**58** For Afghans born in Canada, I asked about "life experiences" instead. These participants, unlike their parents or older siblings who had been born in a different country, would not have settled in Canada.

6. What, if anything, are the materials you would like to see from other Afghan Canadians?
7. What, if anything, do you want the Afghan Canadian community to know about your settlement experiences in Canada?
8. What, if anything, do you want the public, all Canadians, to know about your settlement experiences?