

# Introduction: Living Archives and Decolonial Potentialities – Re/Animating the Subjects of History

Aditi Chandra and Sanjukta Sunderason

## In medias res

A creole tongue alive with *mishearing and mistranslation* of Tamil and French percolates quotidian Pondicherry in poetic surprises of unplanned encounters of languages...

Stories of twentieth-century decolonial resistance art gain and lose artists and authorship as they refract across erratic networks of *assimilation and alienation*...

In the United States, an immigrant mother's recurring answers to her daughter's daily telephone calls asking how she is doing, come in *habitual reflexes* of a repertoire of nostalgic songs of a home long lost...

A historian of performative cultures of colonial Punjab seeks (home for) *elusive traces* of performance in a world of notation-driven archives of music and dance...

A Sri Lankan Tamil artist installs on the floor of the Sharjah biennale a series of uniform wooden chests of drawers, each carrying an archival document and a sheet of paper with the index number/name/details/additional records on the document. The *artistic installation* invites gallery visitors to open the drawers and explore the contents...

A historian of Islamic architecture considers how the human body and the monument body can be containers of knowledge, and wonders how blood, limbs, aspirations, desires, bricks, stones, plants, and land bear *embodied traces* of actions and events both past and in the ever-inhabited present...

A curator and researcher in Bangladesh seeks out crumbling, dilapidated ruins of once majestic buildings; therein she stages residential art exchange programmes, in labours of *reinscribing sites*, both along material and genealogical lines...

A documentary filmmaker sieves through *unfilmed excesses* of recorded footage from his five-year-long collaboration with an immigrant family in the United States; he ponders over the untamed, untampered, unboxed elements that exceed words...

An individual from remote villages of the Hindu Kush mountains spanning Pakistan and Afghanistan tries time and again to send oral history recordings to a digital archive of South Asian partition; an *infrastructural anxiety* of corrupted files and online fraud stagger the transfer before its final arrival to the digital repository of partition memories...

A budding anthropologist travels to Nepal for her doctoral fieldwork; her fieldnotes on a fellow Nepali veteran woman artist makes her wonder what meanings to make out of *archival encounters*...

A curator in metropolitan New Delhi muses via the poetry of lost lands, if material archives, too, are partial vestiges that need *repair and renewal*, to resonate into newer futures...

The sense of flux that you feel in these vignettes is an unrest that we invite you stay with as we approach, via some familiar and well-oiled conceptual and disciplinary understandings of the archive, a foundational question shaping this collection: what does it mean to insist that the past – that the archive in a traditional sense is meant to hold (selectively) and activate (via re/inventions and re/inscriptions) – is *lived* in the organicity of lived, material or intangible traces? And to insist, too, that such traces do not necessarily find home in an archival rationality committed to written/indexed/institutional/collational modalities of archiving? Our opening vignettes are fragments from the interventions the interlocutors make in this collection, as we grapple with this question. We speak from a host of disciplines and practices (history, anthropology, performance studies, literary studies, art history, filmmaking, curation, archiving), and the flux of material that we explore here is constitutive of propositions we hope to make, around the *living archive*: its material and intangible textures, analytical vocabularies, its role as evidence, and methodological horizons.

Amidst our opening vignettes, a plural world of this living archive can already be sensed: creolised languages, circulating artworks, habitual reflexes, performative and embodied traces, narrative excess and visual absences, human interactions, inhabited ruins, anxieties, repairs and renewals of material collections – all provoke an animated materiality that denies fixity, containment, stability, and even tangibility. A *present-ness* marks these ways of being, its pressing temporality forcing its act on the materials, remains, concerns of the *past*. It is as though a *being* (in the present/quotidian) *and becoming* (the present into a future) overtakes any stable invocation or assignment of the past; the agency of the subject of history itself seems to be deflected in the ways in which we as interlocutors find ourselves amidst our research field/works. What is at stake in dwelling with this dynamic animation of being and becoming? What is gained by calling this the *living archive*, as we do in this collection?

If the term ‘archive’ with its roots in the Greek *arkheion* (domicile of the *archon*, the keeper of public records) suggests place for records (texts, transactions, traces), what happens when we encounter absence, erosion, excess, ephemerality – all that resists or escapes place? Traditionally understood to be a building with old and dusty files, the archive has been rethought by Michel Foucault as a ‘system that governs the appearance of statements’,<sup>1</sup> and by Jacques Derrida as a

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language*, A M Sheridan Smith, trans, Vintage Books, New York, 2010/1972, p 130

site of power that moulds knowledge and is controlled by those in authority.<sup>2</sup> While these approaches already take the archive out of the physical building and dusty files into the level of discourse, both suggest, however, ordering, containing or structuring – a ‘domiciliation’ and a ‘house arrest’ as noted by Derrida, that irrespective of a fixed (and growing) physical place, does indeed connote power and a stabilising impulse.<sup>3</sup> What happens when we place ourselves at the vantage points of what remains unstable, fluid, ephemeral or transitory? How can these dynamic and elusive forms of being and becoming get collected, codified, written? How can the archive become living and how can we, as scholars, be at ease with this mutable archive? What value might we create by considering these living archives, described above – the body, the trace, the fragmented, the in-flux – as the vernacular that challenges the institutional archive as a hegemonic site of authority? Can there be a decentring of voice and expression; a rethinking of how the historian reads evidence or even how certain items are marked as evidence and others not? This foray is a demand for legitimacy for other mutable ways of holding, carrying, shaping, transmitting information – of considering even absence as evidence, for example. The living archive that we discuss here is thus a methodology of how we identify and shape evidence, typically left on the margins.

‘Archives hold no origins, and origins are not what historians search for in them’, historian Carolyn Steedman has noted; ‘Rather, they hold everything *in medias res*, the account caught halfway through, most of it missing, with no end ever in sight. Nothing starts in the Archive, nothing, ever at all, although things certainly end up there.’<sup>4</sup> This idea of *in medias res*, that is, in the midst of things and in the undulation of fragments that our vignettes reveal – that the materiality and potentiality of living archives, as we argue here, finds place.

## Living Archives as Agents of History

A historian’s task, writes Carolyn Steedman via her thoughts on the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet, is to find meaning for the dead’s brief existences, by raising the ‘spirits of the dead: ... I have exhumed them for a second life... They live now among we who feel ourselves to be their parents, their friends. Thus, is made a family, a city community of the living and the dead.’<sup>5</sup> The archive is that place where the historian encounters not only the ‘past’ but the lives that mark its presence in the archive itself but remain hidden nonetheless – what Steedman beautifully describes as labour, leather, dust, organisms. Death is made alive, she writes, when the historian opens the document and the dust rises up. And in this rising, she

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Eric Prenowitz, trans, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p 2

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Steedman, ‘Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust’, *The American Historical Review*, vol 106, no 4, Oct 2001, p 1175

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Steedman, quoting Jules Michelet, *Dust*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2001, p 71

includes the smell of the paper, the ink on the parchment, the smell of leather binding, and the dust of the workers and animals involved in the making of these objects.<sup>6</sup> There is thus an active traffic between dead time and present time in the archive. As Achille Mbembe has argued, the power of the archive ‘as an “instituting imaginary” largely originates in this trade with death’. He gives three dimensions to this trade: first, ‘the struggle against the fragments of life being dispersed’; second, ‘the internment’ of the remainders of death (the past) in a consecrated site – the archive itself; and third, the element of the ‘spectre’, the other remnant of death – the spectre being ‘an existence that no longer unfolds according to the same modality as in their lifetime’<sup>7</sup> and hence invokes absences and aporias.

The traffic between livingness and death in the archive is thus both fixed and in flux, animated by three different labours of time, as it were – the time of constitution, creation and acknowledgement of the archive; the time of accessing the document/artefact; and the time of the reading/sensing/writing/curating. At every stage, as Mbembe argues, the archive is ‘fundamentally a matter of discrimination and selection’ resulting in the ‘privileged status to certain written documents and the refusal of that same status to others ... the archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status’.<sup>8</sup> One potential of living archives, we suggest, lies in the dismantling of such status and opening up of avenues for the discarded and refused to find home. The community – even communion – of the three different labours of time, (potentially) dialectical in its operation, is key to the scope of the living archive, particularly when we foreground ways in which scholars and practitioners are expanding and contracting what that community or communion of pasts and presents will contain, or look like or say.

The archive, as Michel Foucault’s widely discussed intervention has argued, is the system that governs what is said and unsaid, governing in its turn our relation to the past.<sup>9</sup> Hence, archives are active structures of thought, knowledge and narrative that condition our relation to history, identity and even futurities. While a Foucauldian reading alerts us to the power/knowledge axis that shapes the archival production of pasts, Giorgio Agamben has related this conditioning of power to the question of the possibility and impossibility of speech:<sup>10</sup> who gets to speak, what can be spoken of, what remains unsayable, and indeed what materialities, texts and speech are accorded the privilege of being sources of knowledge and evidence – in other words, who will be the voices and agents of history? Antoinette Burton has argued that marginalised groups ‘believe that their histories have not been written because they have not been considered legitimate subjects of history – and hence [not legitimate subjects of] archivization per se’.<sup>11</sup> A living

<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Steedman, ‘Something She Called a Fever’, op cit, pp 1170–1171

<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe, ‘The Power of the Archive and its Limits’, in Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris et al, eds, *Refiguring the Archive*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, Boston and London, 2002, p 22

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p 20

<sup>9</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, op cit

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, Zone Books, New York, 1999, p 145

<sup>11</sup> Antoinette Burton, ‘Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories’ in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina and London, 2006, p 2

archive, we argue, potentially challenges this selection and production of historical agency in the archive by altering the materiality of an archive itself. Burton explains that ‘archives – that is traces of the past are by no means limited to official spaces or state repositories... Scholars have been reading archives housed in unofficial sites since time immemorial – from the Rosetta stone to medieval tapestries, Victorian house museums, [and] African body tattoos’.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, what constitutes the archive has already begun to be questioned by historians. In this extract, Burton expands the definition of archive from physical documents to material and visual objects. However, in seeking living archives, we go beyond the document to material expansion and consider the ephemerality of that which cannot be recorded and the value of that which is absent in the archive.

As Steedman’s evocations about Jules Michelet show, the labour of *making alive* lies at the core of historical practice. This traffic between the dead and the living, the embodied and the disembodied is always a matter of selection and slippage. Materiality of the archive is the simultaneity of this presence and absence. The archive ‘oscillates between embodiment and disembodiment, composition and decomposition, organization and chaos’, as Sven Spieker has noted.<sup>13</sup> In its flux, the archive also captures what ‘escapes from the archivist’s control, a “beyond the archive” that remains inaccessible...’ Spieker calls this *beyond*, the *unheimlich*, from etymological roots in German *heim*/home and *heimlich*/secret, hidden.<sup>14</sup> This beyond (in its absence) is, however, as constitutive of the archive as is the presence of data/voices/material. A living archive embodies this organic whole; in its palpability and spectral quality (via traces, anxieties, excesses, absence) it puts pressure on the nature of the voice of the hegemonic whole at any given historical time or context. If the ‘archival impulse’, as Hal Foster has noted, is a modality of making ‘historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present’,<sup>15</sup> the forms this *presence* takes are open to alternative forms of living and narration – and hence to counter-hegemonic resistance.

In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida has noted that the control of the archive (and of memory) is a critical act of political power: ‘Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.’<sup>16</sup> What are the scopes – or even requirements – of this democratisation? While digital technologies have played a critical role in this democratisation, so have counter-hegemonic impulses to displace the archive from its originary meaning as only a *place or building for official records*. Conversely, how might digital democratisation of the archive be grasped as a space of justice and restitution when access to these spaces of technology is limited or restricted in underprivileged geographies? The idea of living archives appears, in scholarship, today as

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p 3

<sup>13</sup> Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2017, p xi

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p 3

<sup>15</sup> Hal Foster, ‘An Archival Impulse’, *October*, no 110, Autumn 2004, pp 3–22, p 4

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, op cit, p 4

a way to conceptualise archiving at the interfaces of digital archiving and digital democratisation.<sup>17</sup> But, if the idea of place is democratised, displaced and re/distributed into new spatial and sensory containers, even beyond the digital, what new lives do such archives get? The material of living archives we are exploring in this Forum are, however, outside the scope of the purely digital. They speak also to the marginal spaces in the Global South where access to digital infrastructure is not a given, where the digital is an elite space or is appropriated by fascist, populist and state-driven forces. We are interested in pursuing what relation the living archive might have with the marginal. We are also interested in thinking archive ‘from the south’ but also from marginality ‘within’ the north. This is a proposal, also, to think of the archive *beyond* the institutional or the hegemonic reading it has had in the Euro-American or in state-driven contexts. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has argued for reading archives not as ‘the tomb of the trace’ but as a ‘collective project’: ‘the product of the anticipation of collective memory’.<sup>18</sup> We strongly believe that the archive has become so entangled with power that we need to leverage it for the marginal and those who cannot *be* in the document/object/archive. And indeed, some of these marginalised emotions and voices cannot be captured in any tangible archival manner and remain outside of representation. As Alan Sekula has strikingly put, to ‘listen to, and act in solidarity with, the polyphonic testimony of the oppressed and exploited’ we must recognise that the nature of their testimonies will be ambiguous – unordered, fragmented, perhaps even contradictory.<sup>19</sup>

In contemporary conversations around the living archive, coming largely from the field of (digital) media and communications studies and performance studies, the quality of livingness is animated by ‘practices and environments that connect the organisation, curation and transmission of memory with present-bound creative, performative, and participatory processes’.<sup>20</sup> Amalia Sabiescu has proposed using the idea of ‘archival performativity’,<sup>21</sup> an idea which all our interventions develop. She argues that at the core of living archives lies ‘the performative celebration of the past through contemporary acts of creation and transmission’: ‘Living archives marry the archival and the artistic by recording and tracing the past with contemporary creative practice’.<sup>22</sup> Art, by forcing imaginary and fluid performances connecting past and present, has a particular potentiality when it comes to disrupting ‘the exclusionary

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, Annet Dekker, ed, *Lost and Living (In) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2017

<sup>18</sup> Arjun Appadurai, ‘Archive and Aspiration’, in Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder, eds, *Information is Alive*, V2\_Publishing/NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2003, p 16

<sup>19</sup> Alan Sekula, ‘The Body and the Archive’, *October*, no 39, Winter 1986, pp 3–64, p 64

<sup>20</sup> See Malmö University, Living Archives research project, 2018 <https://livingarchives.mah.se/about/>; see also Amalia Sabiescu, ‘Living Archives and the Social Transmission of Memory’, in *Curator, The Museum Journal*, vol 63, no 4, October 2020, pp 497–510

<sup>21</sup> Jane Birkin, ‘Art, Work, and Archives: Performativity and the Techniques of Production’, in *Archive Journal*, part Archives Remixed, Autumn Issue, 2015, pp 1–14, p 5

<sup>22</sup> Amalia Sabiescu, ‘Living Archives and the Social Transmission of Memory’, op cit, p 497

epistemological field structured by oppressive political systems', Kašić has argued in the field of post-Yugoslav aesthetic practice.<sup>23</sup> This performativity of the archive in and via artworks is a critical trope in the livingness of the archive, and also in the recuperative power of the living archive that we have been arguing for.

We will propose, resonating with ongoing conversations within the wider field of aesthetics and power, that the notion of the living archive, as explored by the feminist theorist Biljana Kašić in the context of East European Studies, is 'an open, malleable, guerrilla archive that stands in opposition to the traditional, authoritative and access-restricted archive, and challenges any centralised effort to control knowledge'.<sup>24</sup> In this Forum we are arguing for 'livingness' to be understood as a new archival ontology, one that conditions a new democratisation of the archive. If, in contemporary times, everyone stakes a claim at being an archivist and all everyday actions can be archival, what questions of democratisation of site/power/discourse come up? How can we not only democratise the idea of the archive but also as usefully and carefully as possible? This question points to a larger conversation between archive, power and access, and to whether the everyday dynamism of living archives can recalibrate the relation of archives to power.

## Living Archives as Method

The living archive has not been theorised enough, and its meanings to a large extent develop via the contemporary experimentations with processes of archiving. Contemporary archive entrepreneurs have foundationally reoriented traditional assumptions about what an archive would look like, challenging, as Antoinette Burton notes, ideas of archival fixity and materiality as well as the historian's craft itself.<sup>25</sup> These require understanding the archive first and foremost as a process. As the artists Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme claim, 'What makes an archive "living" is an important question, because what we are interested in is the possibility of not only questioning the archive but perhaps more importantly transforming it'.<sup>26</sup> An archive, while associated forever with the formations of power, becomes a 'closed, static, even a dead archive' unless the dynamics of power are deconstructed.<sup>27</sup> Writing from a queer studies perspective, Leah DeVun and Michael Jay McClure consider not only how archives are made

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<sup>23</sup> Iva Glisic and Biljana Puric, 'Art as a Living Archive', *Third Text*, vol 33, no 2, 2019, pp 213–234, p 219

<sup>24</sup> Biljana Kašić, 'Thinking Living Archive; "Archiving" the Thoughts or Feminism or?', contribution to the public discussion, 9 March 2012, Gallery Kapelica, Ljubljana, pp 5–13, [https://bringintakeout.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/in-out-sarajevo-biljana-notebook\\_web.pdf](https://bringintakeout.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/in-out-sarajevo-biljana-notebook_web.pdf) quoted in Glisic and Puric, op cit

<sup>25</sup> See Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories', op cit, p 2

<sup>26</sup> Basel Abbas and Rouanne Abou-Rahme, 'The Archival Multitude', *Journal of Visual Culture*, vol 12, no 3, pp 345–363, p 353

<sup>27</sup> Jason W Buel, 'Assembling the Living Archive: A Media-Archaeological Excavation of Occupy Wall Street', *Public Culture*, vol 30, no 2, 1 May 2018, pp 283–303, p 298

but also how they are ‘made to behave’.<sup>28</sup> They offer an alternative to the idea of the archive as being ‘encased... or stilled in the past’ and show how ‘archival objects circulate in ways that parallel yet differ from their previous uses... instead of being a catalog of dead objects, the archive may foster an afterlife, and it may recirculate. And such circulation inextricably depends on bodies.’<sup>29</sup> DeVun and McClure speak, also, of the selectiveness of the archive – of the distinctions that are often made between that which is ‘merely’ personal and that which is ‘worthy of preservation’.<sup>30</sup> In highlighting the hierarchies of the archive, they show how ‘good behaviour’ in the archive is treating objects ‘with reverence, reconstructing narratives that acquire the weight of history... [that are] dependent upon and constitutive of the hierarchies approved by historical authority’.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, they discuss Leah DeVun’s own artistic work and its rephotographing of archival objects to show how bodies have activated, and might still activate, archival objects. For example, in the work *Womanist Pin*, the back of the political button is photographed in conjunction with tactile surfaces instead of the front. The latter would typically be of more interest to the researcher, but DeVun shows us the back – that part which would have attached itself to an unseen body. In this reversal, they show that the archival object accentuates ‘dynamic use, movement, and the unarchived being onto whom this might attach’.<sup>32</sup> This photographic experiment shows that the archive is inseparable from the bodies, spaces or things to which it might be attached. DeVun and McClure’s analysis asks us to turn our attention to the ‘tension between what is archivally seen and unseen’.<sup>33</sup> Accessing living archives, or analysing archival material with mutability and bodily touch in mind, teaches us not only to pay attention but to pay attention differently to materials, embodiments and traces of the past. Indeed, there is an aspect of healing, of paying attention to that which has been missed that living archives offer when used as evidence and method. As Erin Manning has illustrated, the work of recuperating that which has already passed is also an act of repair. Repair, Manning notes is entwined with value as repair reanimates that which is considered to have been of value. Much like the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer, gold and silver, or *kintsukuroi*, repair is also ‘creative reanimation’.<sup>34</sup> The bruised pottery, much like the absented or marginalised archival material, is not thrown away. Rather, it is lovingly repaired and reanimated so that it may be of value.

Jason Buel writes that in popular movements from the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, the idea of ‘living archive’ and ‘anarchist archives’ have been developed to capture ‘the

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<sup>28</sup> See Leah DeVun and Michael Jay McClure, ‘Archives Behaving Badly’, *Radical History Review*, no 120, Fall 2014, pp 121–130

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p 122

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p 122

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p 123

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p 123

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p 124

<sup>34</sup> See Erin Manning, ‘How do we Repair’, *Theater*, vol 50, no 2, May 2020, pp 47–61, p 47



emerging movement's ephemeral traces – both its 'born digital' and its analogue artifacts – and 'recirculate them within online spaces' so that the archive becomes publicly accessible across multiple sites and potentially grows with new additions of material from anyone who wanted to contribute.<sup>35</sup> This horizontal and permeable structure of the living archive of resistance is in itself an act of democratisation of historical agency. While such forms of archiving still depend on funding, they nonetheless provide forms of self-archiving and self-articulation that have allowed a movement such as the 'Occupy movement's counter-public sphere to shape their history rather than only allowing people, institutions, and other forces entirely outside of the movement to dictate its history'.<sup>36</sup> The living archive here is a modality of the movement itself developing its own narrative in real time, in presence – not a retrospective act of archiving the way the movement itself is understood in the moment it is becoming a movement. There is at play the 'production of a common history', and the living archive of real time documentation 'effectively calls a public into being, provides evidence of its existence, and lays a foundation for its continued history'.<sup>37</sup> However, Buel also acknowledges that this egalitarian living and the anarchist archive has problems 'living up to its own ideals' of inclusion.<sup>38</sup> He explains that not everyone who has something to contribute has the technological access to do so, and those who have the social capital could over-contribute. Vigilance ensuring access, then, is also central to the success of living and anarchist archives.

In contemporary scholarship, the notion of the archive is being questioned and reimagined, and the field of aesthetic practices is often the site from where such reiterations of the archive are being experimented upon. Diana Taylor, for instance, argues that the archive and the repertoire (of cultural acts) are different modalities of materiality and being: the repertoire, Taylor notes, is an assemblage of mediums – written, visual and oral – that document historical memory in performative and more ephemeral ways. The 'rift' between the archive and the repertoire 'does not lie between the written and the spoken word, but the archive of supposedly enduring materials (ie texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)'.<sup>39</sup> While 'the archive includes, but is not limited to, written texts... the repertoire contains verbal performances – songs, prayers, speeches – as well as nonverbal practices'.<sup>40</sup> 'The written/oral divide does, on one level, capture the archive/repertoire difference', Taylor argues, 'insofar as the means of transmission differ, as do the requirements of storage and dissemination. The repertoire, whether in terms of verbal or nonverbal expression, transmits live, embodied actions. As such,

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<sup>35</sup> See Jason W Buel, 'Assembling the Living Archive', op cit, p 285

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p 299

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p 297

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p 284

<sup>39</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2003, pp 19–20

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p 24

traditions are stored in the body, through various mnemonic methods, and transmitted “live” in the here and now to a live audience. Forms handed down from the past are experienced as present.<sup>41</sup> The repertoire, she argues, is similar to the archive in the sense that like the archive, a repertoire is mediated: ‘The process of selection, memorialisation or internalisation, and transmission takes place within (and in turn helps to constitute) specific systems of re-presentation. Multiple forms of embodied acts are always present, though in a constant state of againness.’<sup>42</sup>

Radical archiving, being explored in fields of performance studies and transgender studies, argues for practices of embodiment on a personal and social level as foundational acts of archiving.<sup>43</sup> To Ann Cvetkovich, writing on ‘affective archives’, an archive of feelings becomes an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception.<sup>44</sup> To Cvetkovich, ‘trauma challenges common understanding of what constitutes an archive. Because trauma can be unspeakable and un-representable and because it is marked by forgetting and dislocation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation ... it thus demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma’s ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral.’<sup>45</sup> Thus, archives of feelings can hold materials both tangible and ephemeral; they can reside in personal and intimate spaces as well as in ‘cultural genres’, and not just in museums, libraries or institutional holdings.<sup>46</sup> These practices of the affective archive are integral to ongoing projects that are ‘creating testimonials, memorial spaces, and rituals that can acknowledge traumatic pasts as a way of constructing new visions for the future’.<sup>47</sup> Such histories of trauma and marginalisation are integral to the gay and lesbian histories that Cvetkovich talks about, which have been subjected to institutional neglect, even erasure, and are hence critical to new grassroots movements of salvage, restitution and repair. Likewise, in this collection, we argue that the marginalised lives, artists and histories that appear in our interventions around the *living archives* are also often marked by forgetting. Therefore, we, too, seek unusual forms of archives and ways of reading and marking them as evidence to give voice to the ephemeral and transitory.

In exploring the affective archive as method, scholars have argued that while archives can continue to consist of the ‘physical *stuff* of a repository’, new methods of research-creation or

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p 24

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p 21

<sup>43</sup> See Abbra Kotlarczyk, ‘Radical Living Archives and Trans Embodiment: Shu Lea Cheang’s Brandon’, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, vol 2, no 4, 2015, pp 683–688, p 685

<sup>44</sup> See Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2003, p 7

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p 7

<sup>46</sup> See *ibid*, p 244

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p 14

‘process-making engine’ are required that generate new creative engagements in research. This new method they have called the ‘anarchive’, a ‘dynamic and engaged process’ that is ‘always changing, continuously creating novel events, and transcending monolithic categories’.<sup>48</sup> The concept of the anarchive animates a critical counter/archival discourse that seeks to leave behind the ‘classical archival principles of order, accessibility, and tangibility in favor of regeneration, submediality, and embodied memory’,<sup>49</sup> becoming in the process the space for the tangible in its practised, palpable form. The question of the anarchive, it has been argued, perhaps should do more with the *where* than with the *when*: not, that is, in asking *when* something begins, but rather *where* it begins, because the very act of the anarchive is one of working with ‘bodies and material remains, memory and history, medial substrates and mediatized subtracts’.<sup>50</sup> Benjamin Hutchens, in his theorisation of the anarchive, has argued that the anarchive provides a space for the compensating for archival loss by turning to living memory. Such *anarchival counter-memory*, Hutchens argues, does not only exceed but also disrupts the archive by furnishing ‘alternative protocols’ as well as ‘thematic frameworks’.<sup>51</sup>

The anarchive, Brian Massumi has argued, does indeed thrive on documentation, but still carries the foundational methodological core of having to both pass through and depart from the archive.<sup>52</sup> While in this work we are arguing against tying the notion of an archive to a static physical repository (only), we remain in dialogue with the critical analytical potential of the anarchive as a modality of making the idea of the archive mutable, unstable and potentially counter-hegemonic. We read the living archive as a site and modality of radical rethinking of the archive’s materiality and tangibility, as well as the labour of reanimating the past that archiving does. This labour of reanimation is also one of repair and value, Erin Manning has argued. The archive as the site for holding and restaging the past, Manning notes, makes it an agent of *repair*, asking for instance: ‘How to return to liveliness that which has come to pass?’, ‘How to repair what has been left behind?’, ‘How to repair to that time of wholeness?’<sup>53</sup> To Manning, as mentioned earlier, this act of repair is also an act of valuation: what is considered valuable enough to be reanimated? The archive as repair guides us to what is valuable for the present, what must be reanimated towards new futures. Yet, as Manning notes, the ‘creative reanimation’ in the archive also raises the questions: ‘How to value the inexpressible in the work

<sup>48</sup> See E E Colmenares and J K Morvay, ‘Affective (An)Archive as Method’, *Reconceptualizing Educational Research Methodology*, vol 10, nos 2–3, pp 310–329, pp 310–311

<sup>49</sup> Timmy De Laet, ‘The Anarchive of Contemporary Dance: Towards a Topographic Understanding of Choreography’, in *The Routledge Companion to Dance Studies*, Helen Thomas, ed, Routledge, London, 2020, pp 177–190, p 178

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p 185

<sup>51</sup> See Benjamin Hutchens, ‘Techniques of Forgetting? Hypo-Amnesic History and the An-Archive’, *SubStance*, issue 113, vol 36, no 2, 2007, pp 37–55, p 38

<sup>52</sup> See Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, Polity Press, Malden, Massachusetts, 2015

<sup>53</sup> Erin Manning, ‘How do we Repair?’, op cit, p 47

and move it into new registers? How to make felt what tangibly moved across the archive but couldn't find expression in it?'<sup>54</sup>

## Living Archives and Decolonial Potentialities

Archives direct our attention not only towards the past, origins and sources but also towards an uncertain future. Even what we assume as 'facts of the past' carry 'fantasies of the future within them'.<sup>55</sup> What is preserved archivally and what is defined as such determines what will be said about the past and also shapes the future. Derrida also contends that the archive is never really closed, but is always 'open to the future'.<sup>56</sup> Using living archives as agents, evidence and method of any scholarship, then, has the potential to shape more equitable futures by giving voice to those objects, events and people that have hitherto been marginalised.

Our conversations around living archives in this collection had a concrete starting point. We were inspired specifically by Stuart Hall's provocation in his critical piece, 'Constituting an Archive' published in *Third Text* no 54 in the spring of 2001. Hall was addressing in particular the context of Black British/diasporic artists and aesthetic histories in Britain. Constituting an archive, he noted, represents a self-conscious process of becoming – when a relatively random collection of works becomes 'something more ordered and considered: an object of reflection and debate'.<sup>57</sup> This self-reflexivity shows an intention, Hall argued, that an archive 'should be, not an inert museum of dead works, but a "living archive", whose construction must be seen as an on-going, never-completed project'.<sup>58</sup> The *living*, to Hall, meant 'present, on-going, continuing, unfinished, open-ended'.<sup>59</sup> Staying with Hall's drift, the *living* implies also intuition, empathy, expansiveness, dialogue and indeed labour – all of it seeking some form of presence, and recognition. For us in this collection these are intertwined with questions of historical agency, and social, political and epistemic justice.

Hall's text was drawing from his keynote delivered at 'The Living Archive' conference that had been co-organised by the African and Asian Artists' Archive (AAVAA) and *Third Text* in March 1997, with a host of representatives who had been working on or keeping the archives of Asian and African artists working in Britain. Other papers from the conference also published in a special issue of *Third Text* in 2001 laid out what the collective meant by a living archive, emerging as it did from within the art of the colonial diaspora in Britain but attuned nonetheless to the structures of exclusion that doubly mark diasporic art: both within the public and

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p 49

<sup>55</sup> See Paula Amad, *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2010, p 11

<sup>56</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, op cit, p 51

<sup>57</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', *Third Text*, vol 15, no 54, Spring 2001, pp 89–92, p 89

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p 89

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p 89

discursive spaces of contemporaneous art practices, and within the historicisation of such that inhibited *longue durée* genealogies. ‘The term “living” immediately suggests a friction, or tension with the past, or in this case tradition’, wrote artists David Bailey and Sonia Boyce in their introduction to the *Third Text* collection, the idea of tradition being inescapably tied to the question of institutional power and authority.<sup>60</sup> The Foucauldian paradigm of the fluid archive and its discursive constitution informed the grain of these conversations, as questions of difference, incompleteness and power, the collective rightfully argued, marked what a living archive would consist of. For the artist Rasheed Araeen, writing in the same volume and drawing from his own paper, a living archive must address the spectre of absence, exclusion or marginalisation – the ‘suppression of history’, as he noted, that had resulted in ‘the dehistoricisation and dislocation of AfroAsian artists or black artists’.<sup>61</sup>

In the late-1990s, while Afro-Asian artists in Britain were receiving more recognition, as Araeen notes in his essay, a discursive life of their hitherto absent histories in the narratives of British art history was what was at stake at the turn of the century. Yet, two climactic decades into the twenty-first century, with the consolidation of postcolonial studies, Black Lives Matter movements, new challenges from indigenous activisms and decolonial theorisations, along with the rise of right-wing populisms, such questions of marginalisation still persist, with renewed urgencies of decolonising structures of knowledge and futurities. Such negotiations make Hall and Araeen’s artistic calls in the 1990s for historical recognition via archiving at once conversations on epistemic justice as well as labours of decolonising narrations and subjects of history. To Hall, such acts of archiving are foundationally acts of dissension by those who historically, or currently, are not represented in the established archive. They include, he notes, echoing the Foucauldian paradigm of the discourse, the unseen labour and prior conditions and politics that bring archives into existence. They also reveal how *longue durée* struggles, negotiations and lobbying for the marginalised to be heard and written into histories play a critical role in the discourses of archiving, making the question of living archives also one of a deliberational, alert and active space of historical negotiations.

This dialectical energy of the living archive – at once emerging, resisting and transforming – forms the organic body-politics of contemporary decolonial epistemologies. For instance, Hall, Araeen and the AAVAA’s living archive are concretised today in the radical high points reached by exercises such as the Black Artists and Modernism (BAM) project steered by Sonia Boyce herself, whereby an archival corpus of British Afro-Asian art, artistic experiences and legacies are being collected, digitised and animated for multilateral research in new initiatives of decolonising data ontologies.<sup>62</sup> Such recuperative labours of archiving, relating and generating

<sup>60</sup> David Bailey and Sonia Boyce, ‘An Introduction’, *Third Text*, vol 15, no 54, Spring 2001, 87–88, p 87

<sup>61</sup> Rasheed Araeen, ‘Re-thinking History and Some Other Things’, *Third Text*, vol 15, no 54, Spring 2001, pp 93–100, p 94

<sup>62</sup> See, for instance, the work being done by Paul Goodwin and his team under the Worlding Public Cultures project: <https://www.worldingcultures.org>

what Ariela Azoulay has called ‘potential histories’<sup>63</sup> lie at the core of the conceptual and methodological thrust of the living archive as we explore it here. Our interventions echo also a wider field of artistic labour that is returning to colonial wounds (and its archives) to forge new decolonial healings.<sup>64</sup> At this juncture of the twenty-first century amidst ever-renewing calls for decolonising institutions, collections, pedagogies and epistemes, artists are often becoming conscious agents of decolonial labour – where the past (as trace, material, episteme) undergoes a creative reanimation via artistic montage, refiguration and provocation. Across contemporary artistic work – for instance in the pluri-medium genres developed by artists across geographies of the Global South such as William Kentridge (South Africa), Nalini Malini (India), Kader Attia (Middle East/France), Naeem Mohaimmen (Bangladesh/United States), or as discussed in this volume, Thamothearampillai Shanaathanan (Sri Lanka), the (colonial) archive becomes the raw material for radically re/invigorated re/animations for addressing the present experiences and horizons of new decolonial futures.

‘Historical knowledge is always produced after the archive’, Carolyn Steedman has argued, ‘in the thought and writing of historians and other archival scholars.’<sup>65</sup> Yet making the archive alive is to foreground the *pre* of the writing of history. It is a claim to a new ordering, resonant of and yet *exceeding* what Foucault sees as classified time, a squared and spatialised development.<sup>66</sup> For marginal subjects, as Hall and Araeen noted, it is the moment of creation of the archive itself that captures the politics of being alive, and therefore seeking place, nurture, dialogue. If the archive, as Hall has noted, was an ongoing, never completed project, this in-process character and its acceptance depends upon the curators, creators of that archive, and the acknowledgement of scholars who use it. A living archive should be a site, a process and a methodology for marginal and subversive rationales and interventions, ‘a form of radical creative practice’ as Iva Glisic & Biljana Puric have argued, ‘that intrudes upon and subverts official discourse by insisting on the preservation of social plurality and historical complexity in the face of totalising and homogenising nationalist accounts’.<sup>67</sup>

For Okwui Enwezor, who has written specifically about contemporary artists who employ the archive as form in photography and film, the starting point of the archive, which the artists may of course disrupt and question, is one of stability, rationality, and is document-based.<sup>68</sup> In this series of essays, however, we question the firm ground and steadiness of the archive. We focus on

<sup>63</sup> See Ariela Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Verso, London, 2019

<sup>64</sup> See Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, ‘Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings’, *Social Text*, July 15, 2013  
[https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/)

<sup>65</sup> Carolyn Steedman, ‘After the Archive’, op cit, p 323

<sup>66</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Vintage, New York, 1970, pp 132–133

<sup>67</sup> Iva Glisic and Biljana Puric, ‘Art as a Living Archive’, op cit, p 215

<sup>68</sup> See Okwui Enwezor, ‘Archive Fever: Photography between History and Monument’, in *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, exhibition catalogue, International Center for Photography, New York, 2008

alternate spaces where an archive can be held, the different forms that the archival material itself can take, and, indeed, even claim absence as intangible archival form. In this Forum we are discussing going back to the object itself and seeking different venues for the archive itself – body, monuments, language, oral history/interviews, song, missing artists and their lives from collections, absences in film and visual exhibitions. Our interlocutors in this Forum are mindful in particular of these questions of marginality in the archive, whether they look into non-textual sources such as body, music, monument (Lorena Alvarado, Radha Kapuria, Aditi Chandra); different modes of reading art *as* archive (Dipti Sherchan, Sanjukta Sunderason, Lotte Hoek); absences and excesses within artworks/film or artwork exhibitions (Kaitlin Emmanuel, Yehuda Sharim, Ananya Jahanara Kabir); or creating archives anew with cognisance to their (mutability) livingness (Rahaab Allana, Guneeta Singh Bhalla).

## Living Archives: Some Formations

In this ‘Living Archives’ Forum, we sieve through anecdotes and fragments, or the ephemerality of the performative gesture, that seek to become visible in and as the archive. We dwell on how the archive itself is a sensorium as much as a place for holding traces of what is public and what place the private has in participating in public memories. We show how new archives of home and displacement can be/are being generated, how new *citizen archives*, archives of performances, restagings, memories and emotions are emerging. We want our readers to think along, as we reflect on a larger shared question: if art is read *as archive*, what is gained and what is lost via this transformation, and for whom? We highlight here four key possibilities around reading the living archive as *embodied forms* and *ephemeral forms* that are sensorial, performative, pneumatic; and as *practices* and *after/lives* that span conversations, collections, curations as well as discourse, histories and historiographies.

### *Embodied and Ephemeral*

Archives are captured in embodied forms – within and via bodies, as well as in performances and materials that are prone to ephemerality and erosion. As the ethnomusicologist and scholar of performance studies Lorena Alvarado writes in her intervention, ‘The Place where Records are Kept: Singing Voice as Archive’, via songs sung by her immigrant mother, the body remembers and stores records as a place – not a destination but ‘itself a flesh and bone phenomena that inhabits and haunts spaces real and imagined, an ear that has perceived, a hand that recalls’. A remembered and performed song becomes a ‘sonic artefact’ and can lead to *habitual reflexes* that the body houses, curates, inhabits, becoming thus a corporeal repository and an affective archive. Yet the body can be regarded as a tenuous archive, fragile and forgetful, as much as it is a space of deep embedding. The fragile containment, of appearing and disappearing, is what is particular to the affective archives of performances – not the notes

and structures of songs, but the emotive registers that animate (via singing and listening to) songs. Historian Radha Kapuria asks in her intervention, ‘Ephemeral Embodiments: The Materiality of Music and Dance in Colonial Punjab’, if the *elusive traces* of the aural and the performative constitutes its own ‘embodied’ archive? While historical traces of musical performances appear in the archive as written records and engravings, the sensorial embodiments of reception and performance itself requires what Kapuria calls an ‘intermedial’ reading that can capture livingness. In art historian Aditi Chandra’s intervention ‘Monuments as Body Archives’, the historical, public monument is in itself a body archive, one that is a sedimented repository not only via its own materiality (tangibility) but also through habitation, access, memories, spatial transformations and resistance (intangibility). She reflects on how knowledge can be formed through *embodied traces* and accessed through physical states and actions of those that inhabit monuments.

### *Excess and Marginalia*

Documentary filmmaker Yehuda Sharim’s intervention, ‘The Unfilmed: Repositories of Divinity from the Edges of America’, is an exploration of ‘the abundance of moments and sentiments’ that reside in recorded and unrecorded scenes from his documentary about an immigrant Iranian family, *Songs that Never End* (2019). The essay is a journey into *unfilmed excesses*, margins and marginalia, as Sharim argues, that ‘... reclaiming unrecorded voices force us to reimagine archives as open and broken terrains that are always in flux, incomplete, and wild’. Archives, therefore, are acts of shifting lenses, where fragments, displacements and violence itself can be given place – in alternative narratives, imaginaries and framing. Artistic narrations are ways into these alternative placements – ones that can reposition the eyes of power and the bodies of the oppressed, and give form to what is in excess, or incomplete. In art historian Kaitlin Emmanuel’s intervention, ‘Debt and Death in the Archive: Thamotheampillai Shanaathanan’s Drawers of War Transactions (2019)’, fragmentation itself is a protagonist in the archive. The *artistic installation* (in this case at the 2019 Sharjah Biennale) re/stages objects, testimonies and memories from the Sri Lankan civil war to foreground, as narrative, what fragmented the archive in the first place, giving form – as an aesthetic archive – to incompleteness itself. Excess and marginalia become constitutive sites when we rethink what comprises the livingness of language itself – one that gains life not only in speech but in mutations. An experimental conversation staged by the literary scholar Ananya Jahanara Kabir, ‘Activating Pondicherry Creole: Conversation as Method’, presents us with hidden traces, mis-readings, *mishearing and mistranslation* that make language – in this case, a creole language – seek new arts of listening, connecting and enacting. A living archive is also a sensorium, with inherent aesthetic possibilities, that demands new methods and registers for capturing and collecting as much as translating into art/historical discourse.



## Archives as After/lives

How can absences be relived, reframed or returned in art/historical narratives? And what inter-disciplinary tools do we need to write art histories when we work with absence and contradictions? Anthropologist Dipti Sherchan's essay 'Living in Archives: Traces, Fragments, and Anecdotes on Shilu Pyari' discusses how traces, fragments and anecdotal narratives shape the archival corpus in the context of marginalised spaces. For Sherchan, the geography of her research – Nepal – is one such marginalised sphere within the art historical study of South Asia. Through *archival encounters* she shows that the women artists she studies are doubly inscribed with invisibility. Archives of art from such marginalities are quite unlike the institutional archives – and theorisations therefrom – that dominate an overtly Euro-American narrative of archive theory. Anecdotal archives carry an 'unbearable lightness and ephemerality' that shape the contours of what can be re-collected and written. Absence of institutional or consolidated collections – often the hallmark of art histories in and from the Global South – is both an impediment, and an invitation, to rethink what can constitute an archive, and how art as archive can reconstitute familiar histories. Art historian Sanjukta Sunderason, in her intervention 'Freedom by Other Means: Art as Archive of Decolonisation', highlights how art needs to be given new historical agencies, and thereby a livingness that can be approached from plural vantage points, and via contradictions of *assimilation and alienation*, to reconfigure received histories of decolonisation in the twentieth century. This project becomes all the more urgent in our times where unfinished conversations of freedom – whether via Black Lives Matter or calls for decolonising institutions, epistemes and pedagogies – are becoming ever more pressing. A living archive, even in dispersion or incompleteness, demands this dialogue between the past and the present. Anthropologist Lotte Hoek's intervention, 'Contemporary Art and the Living Film Archive in Bangladesh' reveals the ways in which contemporary artists and art enthusiasts in Bangladesh rework and re-inhabit a dispersed built inheritance by *reinscribing sites along material and genealogical lines*. They do so by participating in shared, public enactments – whether in art projects or the contemporary film society movement where the past becomes a living resource for myriad forms of contemporary becoming of cultural voices and productions.

## Archives in Practice

Practitioners of (alternative forms of) archiving have been alert to the pressures of ephemeral forms, incomplete, disappearing voices and remoteness of stories that need to be revived via untaged fragments found in collections. Rahaab Allana's intervention, 'Archive as Proposition', speaks from the Alkazi Collection (<https://alkazifoundation.org>), but also initiatives like PIX ([www.enterpix.in](http://www.enterpix.in)). These spaces, Allana notes, investigate 'spaces and counter-spaces "from which" or counter "to which" an alternative archive may arise' that focuses on *repair and renewal* and which can exceed the limits of what more traditional (institutional) archives can contain. In Guneeta Bhalla's intervention, 'A Living, Evolving, Crowd-Sourced Archive on India's 1947 Partition', we encounter the exhaustive work done by the 1947 Partition Archive

([www.1947partitionarchive.org](http://www.1947partitionarchive.org)) in collecting oral testimonies and documenting a significant yet much-silenced moment in history through crowdsourcing techniques that exploit modern communications technologies. These techniques enable the representation of voices from diverse ethnic, religious and economic communities in the South Asian region and diasporas but also reveal the *infrastructural anxiety* of the digital archive.

## Conclusion

In this collection, we are interested in thinking through what the living archive can mean in material, epistemological and methodological terms. Most of us are drawing from our expertise in South Asian, Oceanic, migrational and refugee contexts. We hope that the striking entry-points we seek to activate will find resonance among a broader range of specialists and practitioners, as we investigate what potential materialities (forms, sites, bodies, collectives, curations, documentations, and absences, etc) living archives can take, and how such formations can generate new lives and legitimacies for varied pasts in order to envision just and equitable futures. The larger goal of our interventions in this forum is methodological. Living archives, as we show here, need to be read as praxis; a hinge through which to parse open new cohabited spaces of art, histories and anthropological methodologies, and decentre hegemonic narratives of what is archive. Our interventions here thus aim to generate new ways through which the interactions of histories, art, material sites, articulations and even absences can be configured. We foreground organic, embodied, palimpsestic forms and analysis, through crowdsourcing, activist curations, experimental and performative forms of knowledge-making, contextualised mapping and theorisation of networks of discourse, transmission, dialogues or dissonances.

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**Aditi Chandra** teaches art history at the University of California, Merced and specialises in the Islamic world, with a focus on South Asia. Her research shows how, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, physical transformations and subaltern actors disrupting statist narratives rendered the monument unruly even as the State attempted to order it. Her book *Unruly Monuments: Disrupting the State at Delhi's Islamic Architecture* is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press. She is co-editor (with Vinita Chandra) of *Nations and its Margins: Re-thinking Community* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019). She has curated exhibitions showcasing colonial visual travel ephemera.

**Sanjukta Sunderason** is the author of *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2020) and co-editor (with Lotte Hoek) of *Forms of the Left in Postcolonial South Asia: Aesthetics, Networks, and Connected Histories* (Bloomsbury, 2021). She teaches art history at the University of Amsterdam.