

**Can you Hear Me?  
Reflexive Feminist Methodologies & Diasporic Self-Representation in the Digital  
Age**

Saadia Subah Rais

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Katrina M. Powell  
Christine Labuski  
Karl Precoda

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this exploratory thesis project, I consider what emerging approaches we can take as social scientists to showcase and critically engage self-representations of diasporic individuals, who often lack visibility and legibility within the dominant cultural archive. Filmmaking as a social research practice can provide rich audiovisual data, physical and social access to materials for nonacademics, and opportunities to document and share subjects' comments and settings without the limitations of transcription. This is especially salient in the emerging media landscape of Web 2.0, where digital communications technology applications (such as Facebook, Skype, and Snapchat) are accessible by a global audience, and can act as tools for cultural identity production by diasporic individuals.

This project documents the experiences of several first- and second-generation Bangladeshi American immigrants in relation to digital communications technology advances within the past decade, for the purposes of collecting and sharing stories of diasporic individuals, offering a venue for self-expression through empathetic interviewing and collaborative oral history methods, and contributing to the American cultural archive in the context of emerging media and academic landscapes. The full project is comprised of this text document, alongside a short documentary film containing portions of audiovisual data from interviews which can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oh9puazpdrw>.

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## **INTRODUCTION: Inside and Outside the Cultural Archive**

I came to the discipline of Sociology through a circumvented route. Having earned a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy prior to starting my graduate career, I wanted to immerse myself in a discipline of academia that felt more rooted in human experiences. Philosophy, while a useful tool and still a love of mine, often felt so abstracted from the *lived human experience*. Socrates, the father of Western philosophy, was charged with studying things "in the heavens and below the earth" - instead, I had been craving a type of scholarship that had its feet on the ground and its eyes open, rooted in issues concerning humans and their stories, rather than abstracted notions of "order" and "true knowledge." I had been especially interested in feminist conjectures in philosophy by the end of my undergraduate career, and thought Sociology, a department which houses the Women and Gender Studies program here at Virginia Tech, would be a great next step for a Master's degree.

In my first semester of graduate school, I was enrolled in a class titled "Identity, Migration, and Place." This class had been developed out of a reading group between my adviser Dr. Katrina Powell, Dr. Barbara Ellen Smith, Dr. Gena Chandler-Smith, Dr. Maria Elise Christie, and Dr. Emily Satterwhite. The class included themes of identity rooted in the context of different places, and was a huge draw for me to enroll in the Women and Gender Studies program at Virginia Tech. This class was monumental for me in that it incited a paradigm shift in the way I viewed scholarship, and ultimately, it is where I developed the rubric for what is now this Master's thesis.

The paradigm shift that “Identity, Migration, and Place” inspired concerned one particular question: whose voices belong in academic scholarship? I had realized during my undergraduate career that the voices I heard as authorities of knowledge had overwhelmingly been men’s voices, and by the end of that four years, along with exposure to some fundamental feminist theory, I had developed a sense that the knowledges we use in academia were formed from a hegemonically masculine historical narrative. Prior to starting graduate school, I began sitting in on classes in both the Africana Studies program and American Indian Studies program. These classes exposed me to critical discourses from postcolonial perspectives, and I began to take a more radical perspective on how we make knowledge from different positions of power - not just with a gendered lens, but with one that included other systems of inequality, especially in a historical sociopolitical context. Not only were women’s voices pushed aside from the dominant cultural *archive*, but so were the voices and histories of entire nations of peoples, under multiple genealogies of domination.

**Foucault’s definition of the *archive* is the *system of discursivity that establishes the possibility of what can be said*** (Foucault 1972, Manoff 2004). Working with these terms, academic disciplines can be read as “systematic conceptual frameworks that define their own truth criteria” (Manoff 2004). Knowledge-making processes in each of these disciplines differ based on the conceptual frameworks to which they adhere. Hierarchies of power are especially salient in this context: those with power build and define these systematic conceptual frameworks, *defining their own truth criteria and marking the rest as illegitimate*. Science, philosophy, and imperialism formalized European views of the Other during the Enlightenment - all leading to explicit

systems of classification and “regimes of truth” (Smith 1999). **Those who do not fit within those regimes of truth (the Others) are not legible as fully human - or, in other words, capable of self-actualization** (Smith 1999). I became concerned with what voices we recognize in the dominant cultural archive, or even in the American cultural archive: either as authority, or simply as human. Some voices, primarily those who have historically held positions of power and authority, are more legible, more visible than others. However, radical and previously Othered discourses surrounding knowledge and power have grown more popular in the academic social sciences, especially within the last four decades.

Social research practices are constantly developing and shifting as definitions of the research field change over time (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Leavy 2014). The texts I read for “Identity, Migration, and Place” at the start of my graduate career looked different than what I had studied in many other classes: primarily, authors often wrote from a first-person perspective. In the context of displacement narratives and migration stories, it made sense for scholarship to come from personally identified voices, especially for these unique experiences in new, developing, and shifting contexts that may not be as broadly understood within historical regimes of truth. Many of the writers were **insider/outsid**ers, a position theorized by Trinh Minh-Ha (1989): these scholars were *insiders of the communities which they researched*, imbued with a nuanced understanding of the knowledges surrounding the interactions they observed. However, they were also *outsiders of the community as academic researchers*, analyzing the data in a language that was for an audience that was outside of the population of interest. Historically, social researchers and research subjects have been nested in relations of

*distance*, with researchers hoping to maintain an objective perspective to present to the academy as *true knowledge* (Guba & Lincoln 2008, Caputo 2000, Wilk 2011, Magubane and Faris 1989, Mascia-Lees et al 1989). However, some researchers do not prioritize an objective *truth*, so much as *documentation of experiences and discourses of representation*, creating a methodological diaspora: humanists have been moving towards the social sciences, and social scientists towards the humanities, **in hopes to locate themselves and their subjects in reflexive texts** (Guba & Lincoln 2008). Many of these scholars documented their own experiences as part of their research, positioning themselves not at a distance from the topics they studied, but *nested within them* (Guba & Lincoln 2008, Caputo 2000.) I take the role of a social scientist moving towards the humanities in relation to reflexivity, writing primarily from a first-person perspective and considering my own biographical situation within this piece. However, this project is not only humanistic, but also arts-based, in that it is a performative act of cultural identity production via text and additional media.

A scholar who performed such research, and one who is fundamental to this project, is Gloria Anzaldua, specifically in her text *Borderlands* (1987). In this piece, she blends social analysis, personal accounts of her own life, and poetry - partially in English, and partially in her community's dialect of Spanish. **Anzaldua makes a strong impression: it is difficult not to empathize with the stories and experiences she presents, regardless of how unfamiliar audience members may be with those experiences in their own lives.** The audience can carry those stories with them, and eventually, those voices reach far beyond the field. Anzaldua was positioned as an insider/outsider: she wrote from the perspective of an academic scholar, but also from

the perspective of a Chicana activist living in Texas. She embodies a hybrid, **liminal identity**: an identity marked by cultural transitions, and one that is ambiguous between positions assigned by law, custom, convention, and ceremony (Turner 1969). Anzaldua insists that many of the borders we face (in her case, between Latinx and United States culture) are invisible, and that voices from the borders can help expose some of the cultural norms in tension on either side of the border (Anzaldua 1987). She stands at several thresholds: one between Mexico and the United States, between scholarship and autobiography, between social science and arts-based practices, and between the personal and the political. In the current and continuing context of overlapping nationhood, global migration, and international trade and travel, many hybrid experiences and identities emerge. How do we address this as scholars?

A border I choose to focus on in my own research is located between the physical and the digital world. **The Internet is mapping a new geography of identity formation - especially cultural identity formation** (Niezen 2005). In the emerging media landscape and the context of Web 2.0, or websites focusing on user-generated content (DiNucci 1999), one could say that many of us embody a hybrid traversal between physical and digital spaces, and that the border between the two realms is porous. In the midst of this cultural shift, I am interested in documenting experiences and stories to add to the cultural archive - especially because user-generated content can now be easily accessed and shared via social media or cell phone applications. Rather than only relying on publication by entities that act as gatekeepers to academic scholarship, I took this opportunity to create scholarship that responds to this new media landscape *and also* takes advantage of its resources. Additionally, self-

representations take new form as Web 2.0 develops, due to the landscapes' composition of user-generated content (rather than content produced by mass media sources.) I argue that reflexive scholarship can be bolstered in response to modes of self-representation made possible by the context of Web 2.0. Because of the emerging nature of these media landscapes, I employ **exploratory research** rather than descriptive or explanatory. One of my objectives is to expose more potential research inquiries.

In this thesis project, I consider what emerging approaches we can take as social scientists to showcase and critically engage self-representations of diasporic individuals, who often lack visibility and legibility within the dominant cultural archive. Filmmaking as a social research practice can provide rich audiovisual data, physical and social access to materials for nonacademics, and opportunities to document and share subjects' comments and settings without the limitations of transcription. This is especially salient in the emerging media landscape of Web 2.0, where digital communications technology applications (such as Facebook, Skype, and Snapchat) are accessible by a global audience, and can act as tools for cultural identity production by diasporic individuals.

This project documents the experiences of several first- and second-generation Bangladeshi American immigrants in relation to digital communications technology advances within the past decade, for the purposes of collecting and sharing stories of empowerment and struggle of diasporic individuals, offering a venue for self-expression through empathetic interviewing and collaborative oral history methods, as well as

contributing to the American cultural archive in the context of the emerging media/academic landscapes.

## **Section 1: Literature Review: Identity, Diaspora, and Communication Technologies**

Life as a migrant can complicate concepts of home and belonging. There is not necessarily a singular physical place that feels welcoming or familiar for many of these individuals. Their places of residence are culturally new, and simply turning back home is often not an option, especially for migrants that have been displaced. In these situations, one's identity, personal and/or cultural, cannot simply be dictated by geographic place of residence. Transnational experiences "are marked by a spatial and imaginary split: a phenomenon wherein identity, belonging and representation have become increasingly elusive concepts," (Christensen 2012) producing a realm in which critical questions about "culture", representation, and identity-formation become increasingly prevalent. Home is neither *here* nor *there*, but instead consists of sets of interactions spanning the physical globe.

"Being American" is a multiplicitous phenomenon, taking on many different (and often contradictory) meanings. The United States of America houses members of countless diasporas: overlapping and interwoven into a land of plural nationhood, under one government. Cultures and identities are constantly being negotiated; these identities are changing dynamic processes rather than static ideals (Agnew 2005). These processes are nested within histories of migration due to imperialism, as well as ongoing migration in postcolonial and neoliberal global contexts. It is increasingly

complexified by the emerging media landscape, and increased access to communications technologies (Postill & Pink 2012, Wang 1997, Leavy & Hewson 2014). Some individuals are not only new migrants to a nation, but also to cyberspace and social media. My project, then, must draw not only from sociological, feminist, and postcolonial discourses, but also from discourses within media studies that address emerging media landscapes. I draw from discourses on culture and identity as described by Stuart Hall, a scholar housed within both media studies and sociology:

***Cultural identity is a matter of “becoming” as well as “being”. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being essentially fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.*** (Hall 1996; emphasis added.)

Negotiations of identity may respond to narratives of the past, but they also transform and respond to the imminent future and existing structures of power and resources. **In light of new and popular tools used to create user-generated content within the**

**emerging media landscape, I argue that studies of representation, especially self-representation, must also transform and respond to the present and future.**

*Representation*, for purposes of this project, can be defined as “**the process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any system which deploys signs, any signifying system) to produce meaning**” (Hall et al. 2012). Those who straddle cultures and language systems can negotiate modes of representation that *shift and respond* to the changing global and political landscape (Agnew 2005, Hall 1996) - especially if they have tools like digital communications technology with which they can represent themselves, as well as correspond with family and friends in their places of residence or abroad. Historically, both broadcast media and Western academia have represented those who do not fit racist, sexist, classist, and Western norms as the Other (Harris & Carbado 2006, Caputo 2000, Magubane & Faris 1985, Mascia-Lees et al 1989, Young 2008). These limited representations of those individuals homogenized them in a static way, as they were consumed primarily by Western, white, hegemonically masculine, and academic populations. Emerging methodologies, such as collaborative oral history and empathetic interviewing, have grown popular in the social sciences, especially in response to the diversification of the scholarly population, as well as an effort to reach those beyond academia (Leavy 2009, Magubane & Faris 1985, Alfred 2004, Wang & Burris 1997). One such methodology is arts-based research, which can be utilized to bring together community members along with scholars (Leavy 2009). Having largely emerged from feminist methodologies (Fontana & Frey 2008; Mascia-Lees et al, 1989), reflexive methods can work to combat

essentialized, homogenized, and fetishized views of diasporic individuals and populations, as well as invite them to participate in the research process.

Based on this literature, I chose to employ arts-based research practices to create a documentary film, made available on a publicly-accessible online platform, AND use audiovisual data from empathetic collaborative oral history interviews for my analysis. This project utilizes methods that respond to ethics of representation (especially self-representation) and historical mechanisms of Othering in social research, as well as the emerging media and academic landscapes.

Communications technologies have advanced substantially within the past decade. Coupled with transnationality, I urge readers to reconsider the meaning of “place”, as many of us seem to be spanning many different places (physical and digital) at the same time. Digital technologies house countless new applications, many now available for free, all of which produce new landscapes for communication and identity-production. Internet access is more ubiquitous than ever before, carrying with it a global platform. This expanded access has reshaped human geography, muddying relationships of place and time: “the Internet enables the exchange of information across electronic ‘freespace’ or cyberspace, transcending national borders and subsequently, bypassing legal and political constraints within any given country” (Leung 2005). This new, intimate territory can be life-changing for migrants. Those estranged by circumstance from family and friends can now text, Skype, and call their loved ones. Silence is replaced with laughter and sighs - imagined faces replaced with JPEGs and

webcam perspectives. Migrants have more options and opportunities for identity negotiation among kin and friends, at home and abroad.

While cyberspace opens up new territories for interaction and communication, we cannot be idealistic: it has many constraints, often similar to those present in physical space. Some of those constraints include the systems of oppression that hinder diasporic individuals in their everyday lives. Linda Leung reminds us that the internet is a *site of struggle*, not of escape:

*Cyberspace is a point of negotiation between resistance and power. It contends that **relationships of power exist on the Web as they do in daily life**, that the **forces which exclude ethnic minorities in the everyday world also operate in cyberspace**. But these marginalising forces do not function in a way which is so monolithic or totalitarian to rule out **instances of resistance**. So there is a tension between the capacity for the World Wide Web to **offer alternative images of ethnicity to that of the broadcast media**, and the influences of the real world which have constrained representations of ethnicity within popular culture. (Leung 2005)*

Cyberspace stills holds within it iterations of the same marginalizations that exist offline - especially due to limited access to resources and legitimacy. However, it does still provide **venues of representation that are not controlled by mass media sources**. Mass media organizations, such as cable news networks like CNN and the popular newspapers like the New York Times, prioritize White, Western, male, able-bodied and heteronormative discourses and images. The power to “forge, sustain, resist, and

appropriate diverse modes of representation” becomes more tangible for migrants with tools made more widely available over the last decade - “instances of feeling Othered both within the diasporic community and by the larger society leads to a search for alternative means of sociality, **particularly using online platforms**” (Christensen 2012). These pursuits are often not for financial gain, so they are rarely on commercial platforms (Leung 2005), limiting their scope and scale. Many of these productions may never reach the level of success of their mass media counterparts. However, these spaces are essential for connecting those who are often culturally isolated from their physical spaces: “emerging connections between queer identities and online work and play” become visible as “multiplicities of identity formations in online settings” continue to challenge dominant frameworks (Gajjala 2006). I interpret this usage of “queer” in the previous quotation not as nonheterosexual, but instead as hybrid and liminal, in response to contemporary theorists Donna Haraway (1991) and Judith Butler (1990).

Because we will often be discussing the Internet, I have chosen a specific definition of the Internet: *Web 2.0*, or the digital age of user-generated content, with digital communications technologies such as Facebook, Skype, Instagram, Soundcloud, and other social media or audio and/or video platforms (DiNucci 1999). Unlike the telephone calls, which are localized to individual callers, the Internet is a public medium: the information it handles is globally available and accessible (Leung 2005). This challenges our current capitalist concept of property and ownership, making some resources *available to anyone with an Internet connection*. **Digital technologies present new means of relation, complicating how we conceptualize diasporic**

**interactions. Identity and community production gain new territory by opening lines of communication between members of a diaspora to each other, to relatives and friends abroad, and to others** (Gajjala 2006, Christensen 2012, Narayan 1996). I theorize that the Internet acts a **third space** for migrants - a territory in which “the most creative forms of cultural identity are produced on the boundaries *in-between* forms of difference, in the intersections and overlaps across spheres of class, gender, race, nation, generation, and location” (Bhabha 1994). Situated neither entirely *here* (current place of residence) nor *there* (previous place of residence), cyberspace serves as a place of interaction within our increasingly cyborg existence - just as we never truly “log off” of our digital interactions, our geographical locations are destabilized by the digital landscape. The consequences of cyberspace may not be as ideal as previously assumed: early media scholars presumed that “after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned” (McLuhan 1964). The same systems of inequality and oppression that structure physical space also structure digital space; the Internet is not some unscathed, limitless landscape. However, widespread Internet access certainly has changed the way we relate in space and time, especially with continued development of digital communications technology and increased (though still stratified) accessibility worldwide.

This research aims to document some of the effects of digital communications technology at this time, especially among transnational migrants, drawing from fields of anthropology, sociology, and media studies, as well as employing feminist and decolonizing methodologies and arts-based research practices. Reflexive methods such

as collaborative oral history and empathetic interviewing respond to ethics of representation: they encourage research participants to voice their own thoughts, rather than be captured as data for a static interpretation by a scholar hoping to fit within a regime of truth that ultimately frames them as the Other. Finally, this research responds to an emerging media landscape, shaped by user-generated content and constantly shifting identity formation processes. Only ten years ago, I could not call my family members abroad for more than a few minutes at a time, relying instead primarily on our limited physical interactions to communicate and identify with each other. I was not only isolated from my family physically, but I was at a social border in my own country between foreign and American, not quite fitting into either category, and not quite sure how to navigate to and from either side, and with very limited communication with others in my situation. Now, I can see what my cousins eat for lunch each day through social media applications. I want them to be able to see what I'm doing too, especially if it is research: my cousins can watch the documentary portion of this project on their phones. My research participants can share the video with their friends and family, a gift that merely begins to compensate them for the time and data they've provided me with, but that addresses how we as researchers can take the field beyond the field AND beyond the academic populations, into the communities we research and/or to a more general audience.

## **Section 2: Feminist Reflexive Methodologies, Decolonizing Self-Representations, and Filmmaking as an Arts-Based Visual Sociological Practice**

In order to address the issues of representation, diasporic identity, and digital communications technology use, I invited first- and second-generation Bangladeshi American immigrants to speak about how they use digital communications technologies (like Skype and Facebook) to actively form their identities and hybrid cultures. The findings are showcased in a short documentary using audiovisual data from these interviews. This project is designed to be shared and accessed using email, social media, or through text messages. For the purposes of this project, I employ filmmaking from the perspective of **feminist and decolonizing methodologies**: audio and visual data available in the medium of video can provide participants with more control over their representations than they would otherwise have in a text analysis, as well as provide humanizing audiovisual data, like the participants' individual voices and settings, to highlight their heterogeneity and personal autonomy. Also, digital video responds to the evolving digital landscape in which we share and display information - a key focus of this study. Finally, I believe that using film rather than text can maximize **affect** (moving audience members emotionally) and promote solidarity with and legibility/visibility of Bangladeshi Americans and their various concerns, as well as other diasporic individuals, who would have previously been constrained to representations of Otherness by the interpretations of outside academics.

I have chosen to incorporate **documentary filmmaking as a methodology because of its capacity to express audiovisual data that text cannot**. Visual

sociological methods utilize tools that can record that which the human memory/interpretation alone might forget or manipulate - a concept long adopted by natural scientists, but one that has become fairly revolutionary for social scientists (Harper 1998). Many textures of an individual's speech are lost within the act of transcription, and then lost again when written into a scholarly journal article or book chapter. This short documentary is made to be accessed and shared easily among non-academics - including the community that it researches. The filming process is a collaborative effort between participants and myself, the researcher/filmmaker, using the documentary as a platform for self-representation and expression for participants **in order to add diasporic voices to the cultural archive in the emergence of the digital age.**

Film can be very helpful in showing us faces - the affect produced by a human face has been long discussed in film discourses, perhaps most famously by Lev Kuleshov - the Kuleshov effect involved presenting the same shot of a man's face after differing scenes, resulting in heightened audience response (Russell 2005). **It is important to me that my subjects are presented as "humans" rather than as "data"**, and I can facilitate this by using filmmaking as a method, rendering no expressions to text without audiovisual evidence of the qualities of these utterances. The sensorial textures provided from hearing a voice and breath and seeing a face can facilitate empathy in ways that text cannot, while also preserving the unique qualities and character of each individual's' words and expressions without the transcription of the researcher. I do not want to be responsible for bestowing my research participants with humanity or self-actualization - they are invited to represent themselves, using their

own faces, voices, and choice as well as design of setting, all of which is documented for audience members (academic and nonacademic) to witness and interpret themselves. I could not achieve this without the audiovisual data employed in the documentary portion of this project. The written portion, this text document that you are reading now, is meant for a different kind of analysis - on that is more analytic.

One reason I have chosen to use film as a medium is its ability to simultaneously capture both the remarkable and the unremarkable. In writing, authors often only note what is “worth noting”: they act as interpreters of a space, but ultimately, they are *also the egos of the spaces they build* via text. The text tends to be a reflection of the author’s interpretations more than anything else. Cameras, on the other hand, capture that which is not mentioned. It notes that which the author may forget - the birds chirping that day, the fabric of one’s shirt, the sound of traffic in the distance, or the sadness in one’s eyes as they speak casually. **Video editors certainly shape, mold, and alter what is captured, but they cannot direct an image through film in the same way they could with their own words.** This leaves the audience some room for interpretation of my interviewee’s comments, with my interpretation minimized; it also gives my participants the opportunity to use dimensions of their physical embodiment to express themselves in a unique way if they so choose.

Two things that have been *mostly inaccessible* to marginalized peoples throughout capitalist history are **the arts and higher academia**. That is why filmmaking, as art AND as research, has become a **feminist and activist** pursuit (Leavy 2009). Most films that were accessible prior to Internet access were produced by broadcast media organizations, as opposed to the user-generated content available on Youtube

and through Web 2.0. With the decentralization of filmmaking exacerbated by the advent of the internet, more and more individuals (including migrants) can take role as filmmakers. This is a powerful position, as films can reach the vastest audiences - it does not require the ability to read or purchase materials, but simply access them: a feat more and more achievable with tools like YouTube and Facebook. The costs of Internet access and cell phone usage, both in the U.S. and abroad, have decreased over the past decade. Many libraries even offer free Internet access and computer usage with a library card. With these resources now available for scholars AND for the general audience, how can we as scholars adjust our methodologies?

### ***THE DIASPORIC FILMMAKER***

Diaspora studies discourses continue to rise in popularity as theories of nationhood become increasingly complex. Many credit this towards “decolonization, increased immigration, **global communications**, and transport... phenomena that encourage multi-locale attachments, dwelling, and traveling within and across nations” (Clifford 1994). The rise could also be due to increased prevalence of marginalized peoples within the academic and professional realms over the past century, adding new (and destabilizing) perspectives to existing scholarship. Concepts of diaspora present “an alternative way of thinking about transnational migration and ethnic relations to those ways that rely on 'race' and 'ethnicity'” (Anthias 1998). Though ethnic labels may *essentialize* individuals via ethnic definition, I employ what Gayatri Spivak describes as a *strategic essentialism*, or label of reference (in this case, the label “Bangladeshi

American”) to ultimately highlight the diversity and heterogeneity of individual experiences among participants (especially by inviting participants to design their own interview settings), as well as support and promote solidarity within Bangladeshi American communities. In other words, I strategically showcase Bangladeshi American individuals’ stories while also showcasing their diversity.

Bangladeshi people began migration to the United States as recently as the 1970’s, following the nation’s independence from Pakistan. Migration rates did not pick up until the mid-1980’s. Bangladeshi Americans are an emerging population with little cultural academic documentation, especially in comparison to the Bangladeshi (or culturally Bengali) immigrant population in the United Kingdom, which has been researched much more extensively and was established a few decades earlier in history. As a Bangladeshi American scholar, I can use my resources and standing within the academy to showcase voices from my community, and to make them a more legible, more visible part of the American cultural archive.

I have chosen to conduct my research and filmmaking within the Bangladeshi American community because I am also a Bangladeshi American. This is not to say that I cannot research other communities I am not a part of personally, or that non-Bangladeshi Americans should abstain from conducting research with this community. However, it does place me in a very interesting hybrid position within the binary of *insiders* and *outsiders*. I use Trinh Minh-Ha’s *Outside In Inside Out* (1989) to theorize my **hybrid role as a scholarly filmmaker within my community**:

*The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). **She necessarily looks in from the outside***

*while also looking out from the inside. Like the outsider, she steps back and records what never occurs to her-the insider as being worth or in need of recording. But unlike the outsider, she also resorts to **nonexplicative, non-totalising strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure**... She is this Inappropriate Other/ Same who moves about with always at least two/four gestures: that of affirming 'I am like you' while persisting in her difference; and that of reminding herself 'I am different' while unsettling every definition of otherness. [emphasis added]*

As an academic researcher, I am an outsider in the scope of this project. However, I am part of the community I am representing and have a familiarity to my subjects that, in many traditional Sociological settings, could be considered “unobjective” and therefore unscientific. Resisting the colonizers’/researchers’ narrative that 1) there is a secret essence to discover about a community and 2) *insiders have access to that essential secret essence* (Hall 1990), this project **complicates and destabilizes essentialized views of Bangladeshi American community members**, while also serving as a venue for self-representation: both for me and for the participants. This hybrid sense of authority (either as a researcher or as a community member) situates me within the border of two worlds traditionally kept separate. Borderlands theory and the *mestiza consciousness* (both theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa, 1987) heavily influence this project, both in my role as a hybrid researcher (situated both within the community of study AS WELL AS the academy), but also in documenting a hybrid, shifting community - one that is always “becoming”, unfixed in a stable point (Agnew 2005, Hall 1996).

Capturing such an identity requires methods that are just as hybridized, employing both the arts and the social sciences. **The arts have long been considered “scientifically irrelevant”, especially in regards to social research** (Leavy 2009), but the audiovisual data used for filmmaking provide ethical and aesthetic qualities of representation that text cannot. For example, filmmaking can engage a larger community, especially a nonacademic community, by providing audiovisual data for interpretation *rather than* a text article written in disciplinary jargon. In efforts to assert and claim humanity and human subjectivity of diasporic peoples, or as “capable of creating history, knowledge, and society” (Smith 1999), I employ digital technologies to create a virtually accessible platform for diasporic self-representation among participants within the study. The colonial mindset has long viewed the Other as **only partially human** (Smith 1999), and I believe film can succeed in creating a unique humanizing affect and sense of empathy that challenges normative views of diasporic individuals in a way that is different from writing.

**As stated in the introduction, this is an exploratory research project that documents the experiences of several first- and second-generation Bangladeshi American immigrants in relation to recent digital communications technology advances, in order to document stories of diasporic individuals’ experiences, offer a venue for collaborative self-writing, and contribute to the virtual American cultural archive.** In attempts to reach a larger (and likely non-academic) audience, I have produced a short documentary film showcasing my research participants’ comments as an oral history.

The aim of this project is to explore how to create a piece of art scholarship that considers representations of hybrid identities *as well as* how the Internet affects these representations and identity-formations. Rather than find an objective truth about the diasporic experience, I believe that “when the magic of essences ceases to impress and intimidate, there no longer is a position of authority from which one can definitely judge the verisimilitude value of the representation” (Minh-Ha 1989) - I seek to complicate the idea of “truly knowing” immigrant experience, highlighting the difference in each of my interviewees while still strategically maintaining closeness, in order to reduce the hierarchy of authorities aiming to define these experiences. **I hope to humanize my interviewees and, ultimately, the Bangladeshi American community, not by painting them as victims OR as “the same”, but through the audiovisual affect of their bodies speaking.** I would like to add to a body of visual sociological work (particularly arts-based research), as well as **reflexive visual anthropology**:

*Reflexive visual anthropology belongs to the tradition of feminist studies that defines intersubjectivity as an approach of “reciprocal sharing of knowledge and experience between researcher and the researched” and an understanding that the researcher unavoidably takes part in the production of knowledge. (Stassart 2011)*

Reflexivity is now an established concept in social research practices thanks to radical researchers, and filmmaking methods can document what role I played in the process of an interview by providing audiences with audiovisual traces from the interactions and interviews with participants. I share experiences as a Bangladeshi American through my

own lens as a filmmaker, explicitly positioning myself as a hybrid insider/outsider, and emphasizing the collaboration necessary in any type of scholarship.

Within this research, I employ methods of **collaborative oral history and empathetic interviewing** to collect audiovisual data, as well as **arts-based research practices in visual sociology** to compose a short documentary film showcasing results. Empathetic interviewing methods emerge from feminist methodologies, acknowledging that an interview is never a neutral exchange but a positioned one, and is also always a collaborative process between the researcher and her participants (Fontana & Frey 2008). My overall scholarly thesis project consists of this text document *in combination with* the short documentary film - both components in tandem are necessary for full scholarly analysis. However, the documentary film *also* stands as its own piece, which can be accessed by academics *as well as* people outside of academia.

I chose participants with specifically varying ages, occupations, and migration histories to **highlight a diversity of experiences and voices** and destabilizing any homogenizing predispositions. This method is called **heterogeneity sampling** (Patton 2002) and is especially useful in a filmmaking context, when time is highly constrained and valuable. I specifically wanted to include the voice of someone who fit into the “Millennial” generation and spent the bulk of their childhood in the United States, especially alongside older participants who spent their childhoods in Bangladesh. Because Millennials in general have a very different relationship with digital communications technologies than their older counterparts (Sweeney 2006), the contrast was important to showcase. I also wanted to couple male experiences

alongside female experiences, especially among working adults. This sampling style was chosen to facilitate the sharing of diverse experiences, and to combat a homogenized perspective on Bangladeshi American experiences. I was working with audiovisual material, which is both costly to store and process AND difficult to organize. This finished film alone, at under sixteen minutes, amounted to over twenty gigabytes, not including the storage of raw footage and the video editing file. Editing itself is a laborious process - it takes anywhere between three to nineteen hours of editing work per minute of the final documentary film project. It was important to limit the number of interviewees within the sample, in order to strike a balance between quantity and quality of footage available for the final film. In efforts to make a film under twenty minutes in duration, as well as showcase a variety of experiences as expressed by the interviewees, I found it best to find three collaborators of varying age, gender, and profession.

Oral history is similar to unstructured interviewing methodologically, but different in **purpose** (Fontana and Frey, 2008; Bornat 1989; Thompson 1999; Tonkin 1992) - to **record the individual subject's relationship to history**. I intended for participants to play as large of a role as possible in representing themselves, though aware of my own degree of control as a researcher and film editor. Interviewees were invited to speak about their migration experiences, their digital communications technology usage and how it affects their relationships with their families and local communities, and their memories. Because audiovisual data was used to construct a documentary production, interviewees were also given the choice of how they would like to "present themselves": **they planned and designed their interview spaces prior to recording and could**

**present any additional visual or audio data to the researcher to include within the documentary piece.** Because the setting of each interview serves as a part of each interviewee's representation AND can have great impact on the interviewee's level of comfort, it was imperative that participants collaborate with the researcher in the process of building each interview environment. **The audiovisual data captured not only represents the interview process, but the decisions made by the participant about how they wanted to be presented.**

Interviewing is a collaborative process - the researcher always plays a role in the data that is collected at the end of an interview. **Empathetic interviewing emphasizes taking a stance, contrary to the scientific image of interviewing, which is based on the concept of neutrality** (Fontana & Frey 2008). While the history of interviewing methodologies within social sciences aimed toward a disciplinary regime of truth about humanity, empathetic interviewing is less concerned with "truth" and more concerned with understanding experiences and perspectives. As a hybrid insider/outsider, I am in no way a "neutral" or "objective" researcher - a stance informed by dominant discourses of Modernity, masculinity, and the interpretation of the oppressor. Oral history has grown popular in the feminist movement, where it is seen as "a way of understanding and bringing forth the history of women in a culture that has traditionally relied on masculine interpretation" (Fontana & Frey 2008). Rather than focusing on a history of women, I am adding to digital literatures on diasporic individuals, a discourse that has traditionally relied on colonialist interpretations. The methodologies produced within the feminist movement have proven fruitful in many contexts involving misrepresentation and Othering processes, even those that are not specifically about women.

The documentary film product was produced using the digital video software Final Cut Pro X, the audiovisual data collected from the interviews, and additional materials provided by three interviewees: Monjur Chowdhury (Bristow, VA), Aditya Choudhury (Sterling, VA), and Salma “Kaniz” Sinha (Albany, NY) . The film is short in length so as not to turn away potential viewers (under sixteen minutes in duration) and is produced for audiences with access to YouTube, either through computer or phone. It highlights stories related to digital communications technology use, adjusting to American life, keeping in touch with family and friends, belonging (or not belonging), empowerment, community, and identity. This literature is available as a document hyperlink online within the video descriptions. This video is the first installation of a Web project aimed at creating an interactive, user-generated, everforming archive of digital diasporic interactions. The web project will be in the form of a website, hosting not only the short documentary and a link to this thesis document, but podcasts, an interactive forum, photographs, and any other available multimedia that can be used to promote scholarship by nonacademics and document diasporic stories in emerging digital landscapes.

Filmmaking and collaborative oral history as methodological approaches are part of my positioning as a researcher - **to destabilize, complicate, and challenge historically constrained representations of marginalized peoples**. Traditionally, white researchers have interpreted brown and black bodies in appropriative ways (Smith 1999, Harris & Carbado 2006, Caputo 2000, Magubane & Faris 1985, Mascia-Lees et al 1989, Young 2008). I will destabilize the act of interpretation, knowing fully

that I am engaging in it nonetheless, by resisting my own interpretations within the documentary piece and interview processes, and by asking for participation from both research subjects and audience members in the representation and interpretation of participants. Rather than attempting to fit representations of the Bangladeshi American community into a regime of truth for the cultural archive, my hope is to resist homogenization of the Bangladeshi American community within my collaborative representations of these migrant individuals, as well as share the multiplicitous and diverse stories and thoughts of members of my community, contributing diasporic voices to the digital American cultural archive. This is primarily achieved and anticipated through carefully considered heterogeneity sampling, as well as the set-designing processes each individual research participant engaged in before the interview through which they staged themselves for visual interpretation. Therefore, as you will see in Section 3, the data analyses, which appear in both written and filmic form and are meant to be viewed and read together, may challenge readers' expectations. However, I offer several ways of "seeing" the data, as an empathetic interviewer using decolonizing methodologies.

### **Section 3: A Reflexive Approach to Oral History Interviews: Challenging Representations of Bangladeshi American Diasporic Identity through Communication Technologies**

## **“It makes him part of my home”: Understanding Bangladeshi identity through diaspora**

Each participant expressed feelings of distance from family members and friends ten years ago, prior to the developed establishment of Web 2.0 and access to digital communications technology tools and sometimes even now. Kaniz begins the documentary by describing her regret that she could not be with her mother more before her death, and that she often feels depressed because of her proximal distance from her sisters and brothers, with whom she wishes she could do everyday activities like “go walking together.” Monjur also expresses a deep attachment to his mother, and a that he made a commitment that despite expenses, he would call her twice a month. This was very difficult at the time: Kaniz mentions phone bills upwards of four hundred to five hundred dollars per month, despite limiting her conversations to three to four minutes each, and creating bulleted lists of conversation topics for efficiency. In both of these cases, both participants experienced a lack of digital/virtual space in which to socialize. This lack of virtual space was coupled with an excess of physical space between locales - I, too, almost feel hopeless at the amount of physical space between my family in Bangladesh and my life here in the United States. It’s an unfathomable distance for the body to traverse on its own, especially without the aid of advanced transportation technologies like airplanes. In fact, one could even postulate that were it not for the twentieth century U.S. push towards technological progress, under values of “science, philosophy, and imperialism” as mentioned in the introduction, there would have been little reason (or opportunity, however you’d prefer to frame it) for engineers like my father and Kaniz’s husband to have migrated here. While advances in digital technology

have opened up doors for more regular communication with family members, the historical narrative under which those technologies were produced may ultimately lead back to the values that contextualized the motivation for migration in the first place.

However, in the emerging context of Web 2.0, Kaniz states something amazing. She tells us that despite her son's absence from the house for university, digital technologies make her feel as though her son is still connected to her and part of her home. She lights up as she speaks about getting to talk to him everyday despite his physical absence. She also states something that starkly contrasts her opening statements about depression and regret: she says that because it feels as though her son is still part of her home, she doesn't feel so sad. Perhaps this acceptance of distance and satisfaction with digital communication stems from a realization of a transitioning global and media landscape: it is not only migrant families that are separated from their other family members and friends, but generally, anyone caught within the grasps of a neoliberal system that prioritizes the idea of the individual before the collective, in the name of industry. Although my family members in Bangladesh all live in the same metropolitan center and visited each other daily in the past decades, they've gradually been unable to see each other more often than once a month. Even without the proximal separation, they tell me that they rely on social media to stay in touch on most days. Now it is expected.

Staying in touch with kin is placed as a priority for my older participants who moved to the U.S. after adulthood, Kaniz and Monjur - enough of a priority that a large amount of money was dedicated to very limited interactions with family abroad.

However, my younger participant Adity seemed to differ. Having spent most of her time in the U.S., she had never been physically close to her extended family for long periods of time. During the interview, she spoke more about her personal identity-formation processes than her identity and desires in relationship with communication with family members here or abroad. When Monjur was asked whether or not his two daughters use digital communications technologies to keep in touch with their relatives (the audiovisual data containing this comment is not included in the documentary film portion of this project), he answered no, and expressed that he had to encourage (sometimes forcefully) their correspondence. When I asked Adity if she used Skype, she answered “not really, not anymore.” In my own experiences as a Bangladeshi American born in the U.S., I hadn’t used Skype for the purposes of keeping in touch with family members. Instead, it was a way to hang out with my estranged high school friends during my undergraduate years - having known Adity and seen our friends’ within the same age range throughout their time in college, I suspect they had similar motivations.

But why? If these tools are available, why were we not eager to use them to keep in touch with family? In my own case, I felt very awkward as a child trying to correspond with my family abroad. My speech was sometimes garbled or delayed, and I did not feel that I could express myself in the way that I wanted to. I had grown up fluent in my family’s language, but many of my peers were not taught how to speak Bangla by their parents - the tension that I felt because of poor communications tools reminded me of the same awkward tension that my peers described when speaking to their older family members or parents’ peers, who often preferred to only speak Bangla unless deemed necessary. They did not have the tools to communicate, either, but their tools were

cognitive, and mine were material. We who grew up in the U.S. are situated in a different position than our parents' generation (that of Monjur and Kaniz): we were not taken away from a context in which we corresponded often with our families - we were simply never in that context, born into a scene in which we were estranged from family members until they were physically present, and even then, there were/are often language barriers.

I find this case particularly interesting because it is parallel to the self-consciousness that Kaniz expressed when it came to English literacy, as well as her initial lack of computer literacy. Two languages that are her second (or third, or fourth) languages are both my first languages - I was still a child in the advent of Web 2.0, in the midst of a transition into never logging off. There were fewer resources just ten years ago for learning English, learning Bangla, and learning the language of the Web and basic computer software usage - resources that are widely available now at the end of a mere Google search. I'd like to continue to research how the diasporic condition plays out for individuals of different generations, especially in relation to access to specific languages and technologies: some of the tensions are highlighted in the audiovisual content from the interview sessions.

### **“Oh yeah, Snapchat too!”: Learning the language of America and communicating across the globe**

Kaniz, Monjur, and Adity all have different preferred applications for digital communication, and each for different purpose. Kaniz mentions Viber at length, an international phone application that uses an Internet connection to make free long-

distance calls and texts. She pulls up a picture of her sister that was texted to her via Viber's messaging system. She primarily uses this application to keep in touch with family. Monjur prefers using email and Facebook, the former more for professional settings (such as the diversity initiative he leads at his workplace) and the latter for keeping in touch with friends, in his locality and abroad. He says he talks to many of his school friends *more now* than he did even when he lived in town with them in Bangladesh. In light of this comment, I think it is important to note that **digital communications technologies do not substitute for lost physical communication, but instead, forge entirely new modes of communication that are initially unfamiliar to all users involved**. As mentioned in the last subsection, I never had developed an existing correspondence with family members abroad except in the moments that I had felt obligated: my current digital/physical relationship with my cousins, aunts, and uncles is one that is newly forged, due to my access to an emerging media landscape (specifically Web 2.0). Similarly, Monjur has developed new relationships (relationships that were unavailable even when residing in physical proximity) with old friends as they make their ways onto Facebook.

Adity fails to initially mention her most used applications after Facebook and Skype, but affirms when I ask if she uses Instagram or Snapchat that she uses Snapchat the most but Instagram as well, primarily for and with friends at home. Her reasoning for using Instagram is that "a lot of people use that" - not specifying whether she means her friends or the general public. It is very possible that she points to both - especially if her friends embody the same mentality for application preferences.

However, her answer differs in relation to Snapchat: she notes its convenience and its strength for documenting on the run for instantaneous sharing, rather than focusing on quality of image. I think this comment is particularly interesting in light of her later comments about her hobby in digital photography - Adity specifically mentions that she likes that she can express what *she* sees, rather than emphasizing that she can express *what* she sees. Easily and readily accessible documentation tools can offer a dynamic stream of content rather than the limited content produced by more expensive, more difficult to wield tools. This dynamic stream could be seen as a form of the digital self - and, ultimately, just the self. The focus on the *process* (rather than the product) of documentation, along with its quick and visible archival tools (like the cell arrangement of profiles on Instagram), is a marker of the dynamic nature of Web 2.0, and how it may change *how* we currently evaluate the creative work produced by a body - a shift from the static Kantian “thing-in-itself” to the active Nietzschean “will to self-actualization.” What kind of identities do Snapchat and Instagram map and/or produce, and what do they look like?

Kaniz’s most-used application may be an indicator of her social isolation and longing for her siblings’ company. Despite being a very social and warm person, she can sometimes feel uncomfortable if she senses that others are threatened by her, as mentioned in her clip about the job interview she attended at a Catholic school. Monjur, on the other hand, primarily speaks of friends and coworkers that he contacts, and does not speak much about isolation or loneliness. Finally, Adity does not initially seem to associate her digital communications technology usage with the topic at hand (diasporic

identity production), but later reveals her usage of these technologies for keeping in touch with those nearby, and documenting her own personal imaginary. This fits very nicely into Hall's definitions of cultural identity production, or processes of *becoming*.

### **“I knew they were, for lack of a better word, racist...”: Forging Identities in Prejudiced Contexts**

It can be easy to be boxed into the role of the Other in a context where you do not fit the norm. Adity, Monjur, and Kaniz experience insecurity and a lack of belonging here in the United States in certain contexts. Kaniz spoke of her insecurities as a Muslim during an interview process at a Catholic school soon after an explosive attack in Paris, France that was believed to be by Muslim perpetrators. However, she also expresses a strong confidence in her ability to get along with anyone, and even attributes it to her Bengaliness, despite the insecurity. She talks about her teaching experiences, for which she was certified after learning and grappling with different computer programs. She now feels pride in helping her students express themselves, despite her initial difficulty in expressing *herself* as well. It seems that helping others is a part of Kaniz's processes of self-actualization, especially if she can encourage others to self-actualize as well. In the scope of an art teacher, her limited English and computer skills were keeping her from pursuing that path initially in the U.S., despite her graduate education in fine arts during her years in Bangladesh. Now, she has enough of her own tools to distribute artistic “tools”, or healing/self-actualization processes, to others. This dynamic process she underwent is a form of cultural identity production, as described by Stuart Hall.

Adity describes hiding in her school playground as a child because of her white classmates. She smiles as she says it and stares off, a clear difference from another response later on in the documentary: when Adity speaks about shooting digital photographs behind the camera, her body language becomes quite postured and erect, and she moves her hands while she speaks directly facing the camera. She says that she can show her perspective and how she sees things/what her lens on life looks like by means of photography and wielding the skills to use it, despite it not being a main focus in her everyday life. Audiovisual data could capture this change in posture and energy in a way that text could not - my description was a mere pointer to moments in the documentary project.

Monjur speaks cautiously as he recounts his early American days in Alabama, the American south, where he anticipated that folks might be racist. He said he didn't experience anything overt, but rather more insidious racism via more subtle cues. However, he then goes on to talk about the hobbies he picked up while there (Toastmasters, a public speaking club, as one, despite his experiences of being asked to repeat his words as an immigrants in the United States.) He even mentions the diversity initiative that he leads in his place of work, that he usually manages by email. These are all cultural identity productions that he underwent, especially in the face of discrimination. His bravery in entering Toastmasters as a non-Native English speaker is something I admire.

Based on these interviews (including footage not included in the short documentary film), some digital applications used by Bangladeshi Americans to keep in

touch with family and friends are Facebook, Viber, Skype, iMessage, and email, as well as long-distance internet phone services like Vonage. Other social media, text message, and video call technologies are sometimes utilized. The youngest interviewee, Adity, expressed that she and her friends primarily use newer applications like Snapchat and Instagram to keep in touch with each other. She also shared the most of her own content online as compared to Monjur and Kaniz, mostly through digital photography, which she had taken a class on in her undergraduate studies. Meanwhile, Kaniz expressed an initial struggle with learning to use email and Microsoft Powerpoint when in school for her teaching certificate a few years ago. Though Kaniz has a graduate degree and is an educated woman, her lack of experience with computers coupled with her slight troubles with the English language exacerbated the issues she faced adjusting to the digital nature of schooling today. Monjur uses email professionally as the leader of a diversity initiative at his place of work, and has used the Internet to find meetings of Toastmasters, a public speaking club and hobby of his.

Overall, each interviewee expressed an increase in correspondence with family members and friends abroad as digital communications technologies have become more accessible. Some friends and family received no communication while others received very minimal communication (once or twice a month at most.) Now, Monjur and Kaniz speak daily with most family and friends, while Adity speaks daily with friends and only occasionally with family, depending on context. Duration of phone calls has increased dramatically (from three to four minutes to no time constraint), while costs have significantly decreased. Interviewees mentioned pictures and video as new features of particular interest, especially in regards to children or infants, but also with

family in general. Interviewees also noted increased correspondence with family, friends, and colleagues *nearby*. Though some privacy concerns were mentioned by the youngest interviewee, the overall effects of this increased correspondence (both with folks at home and abroad) were considered positive, especially in regards to mental health and depression. Adity, Kaniz, and Monjur all felt empowered by different digital communications technological advancements: whether it was professionally (e.g. Kaniz's mastery of digital assignments during schooling or Monjur's diversity initiative at his workplace), socially (Adity's digital photography), or for leisure. These experiences are not unique to Bangladeshi American necessarily, but instead the documentation of these reflections are meant to fill a lack of exploratory scholarship on the topic within the cultural archive.

Each of the interviewees picked a very different setting to be shot in, even though two of the interviews were shot within the interviewees' places of residence. This led to some interesting results. First of all, each shot and setting was very aesthetically different. Adity's face was brightly lit, outside, and her voice was riddled with car sounds and birds chirping. Meanwhile, Kaniz, though also a Bangladeshi American woman, chose a very different physical representation - her interview was recorded in her house's sunroom, deep into the evening and with candles on. This contrast showcased the diversity I wanted it to among Bangladeshi American female experiences: it resists the formation of a "typical Bangladeshi American woman."

I was worried that there might not be enough variation in the house interviews, but Kaniz's interview setting was put together very differently than Monjur's setting. Kaniz felt most comfortable in a curated space *away* from the general residential

activities that occur throughout the day, but still *inside* of her place of residence. She set up a small fire in the stove in her sunroom so that we would be warm during the interview, and set up candles for light. Meanwhile, Monjur felt most comfortable in a more frequented part of his house, close to other family members and friends socializing. This is evident when listening to the film - though some of the footage from Monjur's interview has been edited to diffuse background noise, it is still apparent that we were in a more densely populated part of the residence. He did not feel the need to alter much in his interview space, aside from moving an ottoman. Adity felt most comfortable and best represented at her alma mater, and we were able to conduct her interview during golden hour, which both of us enjoyed. Her footage was the easiest to process and edit due to optimal lighting conditions, and this may be due to her insights as a photographer. Each interview process lead to highly variable results, as anticipated - this strengthens the notion of a diversity of experiences as intended by heterogeneity sampling methods.

Though this project emphasizes the necessity of uninterrupted diasporic voices in the US cultural archive, I did not wish to leave my interviewees entirely unprompted during the interview process, fearing that they would be left feeling anxious as the camera continued rolling. Before the interview process, I went over a series of topics that we would/could cover during the collaborative oral history process so that my interviewees could feel grounded in the discussion without having to look over a set of scripted interview questions. This limited the constraints that I imposed on their comments, but gave enough structure off of which to improvise. At points during the interview, if the conversation felt as though it was moving towards a particular topic

within the series, I would invite the interviewee to comment on that topic. This worked well, and led to a variety of conversational paths between interviewees and their experiences. I also felt that this allowed me to participate in the collaborative oral history process without pushing interviewees into any particular present representation of themselves. The results are open-ended, as anticipated.

The filmmaking process requires a willingness to improvise. This was not only evident during the interviewing process, but also within the film editing process. There were plans I had anticipated to carry out, only to find that they were not sufficient after reaching certain points in my research.

One such plan was to create a documentary less than ten minutes in length. The intention of this goal was to maintain a level of “clickability.” However, as the editing process continued, I found that I simply could not fit as much content as I thought was necessary to allow my participants to express themselves to a sufficient extent within the ten-minute time frame. I think that keeping the length of the documentary at under twenty minutes maintains the academic integrity of the project *and* its intention to act as a vessel for speech, *but* also keeps it within the category of “short documentary” and at a digestible size.

Another plan that was altered was my intention for collecting B-roll footage in Queens, NY. I had originally wanted to capture images and sounds from Bangladeshi American neighborhoods, but ultimately, because none of my interviewees were from the area, I felt that it would *not* be an accurate addition to the thoughts expressed by participants. I instead chose to collect B-roll from sources closer to the interviewees (in

most cases, their homes.) The youngest interviewee commented that if her setting were to represent her in the way that she preferred, she would rather be shot on her university campus than in her place of residence. The campus is not specifically “Bangladeshi American” in nature, but my intention with this project is to destabilize the notion of a “Bangladeshi American” essence in the first place.

My scholarship is and is not Bangladeshi American. It is Bangladeshi American in the sense that it is conducted by a Bangladeshi American, myself, and is about other Bangladeshi Americans. It is not Bangladeshi American in that there is no “Bangladeshi American” essence which it expresses or implies, but instead, quite the opposite - it destabilizes any singular thesis of digital behaviors of Bangladeshi Americans, and instead, asks you, the viewer, to simply listen to the stories developed through the collaborative oral history process and empathetic interviews.

I felt very close to interviewees, and almost voyeuristic as I played with data on film editing softwares. While we may have inhabited the interview setting together during the time of the interview, the time I spent with and within the collected audiovisual data is an entirely different experience. This was a time when my hybrid role as an insider-outsider became highly apparent. There is a lot of control behind the screen, and I am lucky to have been oriented within the community I was doing research on, otherwise my gaze may have been more patronizing. It is easy to fall in love with something familiar and yet mysterious, and brown bodies on camera are often treated in this particular light. The mundane time spent with my interviewees helped me to avoid focus on some kind of beautiful, narrativized exoticism - or, perhaps, gave me the ability to recognize the time *as mundane*.

Throughout the process of creating this film, I was struck with what I believed were conflicting desires: to both maintain academic integrity AND artistic experimentation. I credit my committee members and mentors in helping me realize that the two desires were not mutually exclusive, and that experimentation can resist existing narratives of knowledge-making as well as simultaneously respond to them - an academically-minded pursuit in itself. I had originally created a film with less texture, focusing on establishing an obvious and familiar ethnographic intention. However, as a Bangladeshi American myself, I am as much a participant as I am an author of this project, and my own views can be expressed through my filmmaking techniques. Aesthetic experimentation and texture in films do not necessarily create a less objective lens of inquiry, but instead one that is positioned and cultivated by the experiences of the producer.

There are some challenges to using filmmaking as a method for data interpretation. It is very difficult to declare clear arguments and conclusions using film rather than using text - **one cannot simply state “These are my findings”, but instead must invite the audience to complete the role of interpretation of data.** Because this research does not aim to land on any stable interpretations, this does not pose an epistemological issue, but it did make the film editing process very long and laborious. Finding interview clips “worth including” felt similar in some ways to the process of *coding* within the social sciences (or categorization of data.) There were some broadscale codes I had used in relation to the audiovisual data collected from the interview process, but due to the unstructured nature of oral history *as well as* the

collaborative knowledge building required for empathic interviewing, the coding process was slightly different for each interviewee.

There were other practical things to consider when choosing content to include: legibility of words or expressions, for example. There were moments when the wind interfered with audio data collected from Adity's interview because the interview was collected outside on a breezy day. There were also moments when the background conversations in Monjur's residence overpowered his dialogue. While the contents of data may have been interesting in those moments, their aesthetic qualities rendered them unusable in comparison to better-captured data with clearer resolution. This is a concern of mine as a reflexive visual anthropologist as well as a filmmaker - I do not want to limit the footage that I use based on factors that could be alleviated or eliminated by more preparation (such as choosing a microphone that can be kept close to the interviewee, or choosing a location with less interfering noises.) In a transcription process, as long as the data is *transcribable*, its contents can be used. However, this is usually not the case for audiovisual data collected for filmmaking purposes, and must be considered when conducting such a project. Time spent with interviewees can be precious: I have realized how important it is to have an efficient set of data collection and troubleshooting methods to ensure that the time spent collaborating with participants results in well-captured data. This could mean keeping microphones that are easy to attach to interviewees, designating interview areas with little background noise, and other methods that may not be as necessary when collecting interview data to be transcribed for a scholarly article. Post-production tools, like subtitles, can also be used during the editing process.

While these are all considerations to make whilst conducting this type of research, I feel that ultimately, my objectives in using filmmaking methods were accomplished. The first objective was to capture textures of each interviewee within their utterances, so that those engaging the research get to hear the voice and see the face of the person speaking. This addresses issues of self-representation that were discussed previously in this text: because the thoughts and words of diasporic individuals are often unaccounted for, assumed, or homogenized, I wanted each individual participant and their subjectivities to be as 'recognizable' as possible. After ensuring that each participant was satisfied with their representation in the short documentary: oral history methods do not require IRB approval, but I still wanted to include several opportunities for consent from interviewees throughout the process, so I made sure to send them working drafts as the project continued. I was happy to know that my role as an interpreter of the collected data was limited, and that instead, the contents produced by the interviewees was assembled for an audience to interpret mostly on their own. Filmmaking is not unlike creating a collage, and there is only so much I can preemptively design prior to collecting the interview data. Instead, my process involved dwelling with the interview contents and audiovisual data, finding collections of content that stood beside each other in some potentially meaningful way, and considering what interventions those collections may create as opposed to others. In consideration of Trinh Minh-Ha's scholarship as well as Borderlands theory and the decolonizing methods laid out by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, it was a personal objective of mine to resist interventions that spoke too much for a homogeneous narrative of the people I studied, and instead to complicate a singular narrative by introducing a

diversity of experiences. Human experiences are not singular, and it has been a historical role of the Western anthropologist to seek out the “true essence” of different peoples - those almost always those designated as Others. This project serves as a resistance to that mode of scholarship, and instead offer a warrior scholarship (Alfred 2004) that includes community voices and confronts existing modes of representations.

The process of filmmaking within my community has done more than create a tool by which those outside the community can relate to those inside. Throughout the process, I've received praise and curiosity from many community members. Many had never thought that their stories were worth sharing. Many had never realized how convenient it could be to record an interview, and later share it. Many were surprised that they hadn't considered their own experiences with digital communications technologies in a conscious way previously. And finally, many of these thoughts were shared with me long before the film was released. I am happy that members in my community feel empowered in some way by this project, not only as Bangladeshi Americans but as producers of valuable knowledge and insight.

This project is meant to be the first in a series of short documentaries focused on showcasing marginalized voices, all showcased in the website I am developing around this project. The methodological considerations laid out within this first project serve as a template for continued documentary work. In the advent of the digital age, I believe it is imperative to engage methods that lend well to digital platforms. I have chosen filmmaking as such a method, but the Internet can easily provide a venue for additional information related to the documentaries. This document will be available alongside the

audiovisual documentary film, but that is not all: a website specifically dedicated to emerging methodologies and reflexive anthropology is currently being created with the objective of showcasing this project, as well as my future projects and related projects created by other scholars, filmmakers, and artists. Unlike current scholarly journals, websites can host multimedia research and are easily accessible by many audiences. The scholarly landscape co-evolves with the media landscape, and this project is one result of that evolution.

## **CONCLUSION : A Meta-Analysis Using Digital Communications Technology For Identity Production**

I end this written document by discussing my experiences with these emerging digitally-focused methodologies in sociology. First of all, there are inherent complications that arise when trying to do interdisciplinary work in a disciplinary institution. No matter how initially supportive a colleague within the discipline may be to a radical or emerging project, it becomes very difficult to make decisions on how to assess the project because it does not fit the expected protocol established as the discipline developed. This may make for interesting scholarship, but it also puts me in a precarious position as a young researcher hoping to legitimize her work enough to make a salary from it. If marginalized voices choose to remain silent and play by the rules in hopes of survival, can the academy ever shift to include them on their own? Thankfully, this project is not so out-of-the-ordinary that I felt like I could not describe it by disciplinary terms: sociology covers an enormous array of social topics and spheres,

and you can theorize mostly anything you'd like to write about as a social phenomenon. However, I did have to reach outside of the department to find help adjusting to filmwork. A camera is not an easy tool to use, and it takes long practice to know how to use well. As an emerging methodology, sociological filmmaking was a task that required many teachers. My guide throughout the camera filming process was not necessarily interested in my social research questions, which was nice in some ways (I came for aesthetic training, whereas I could discuss the social research aspects with other people), but also tough considering that this was for a Master's in Sociology and I hadn't quite felt comfortable yet in the sociological imaginary, let alone as a filmmaker, and all of the sudden I had to be confident being both.

Sociologists have picked up on the issue of constrained representations of marginalized peoples for quite a few decades. However, the emerging media landscape has only been at a comparable place in to where it is now for about the past five years: sociologists will have to keep adjusting their practices in accordance to a very quickly changing world, and my own scholarship will have to change and keep up as well. The false binary between the "real" and the "virtual" is slowly whittling away, and digital scholarship opens up vast new fields for research for sociologists and anthropologists - the Internet is a very social world. However, that scholarship may look different. It may have small, specifically intentional samples it draws from like mine, or use filmmaking methods to share finished products online with the public.

Bangladeshi Americans do not have some essential tie to digital interactions because of their situation. There is not necessarily a single overarching " Bangladeshi American digital identity" so much as thousands and thousands, all with their own

details. The methods I use, especially collaborative oral history and visual sociology filmwork, highlight these distinguishing details - even my documented manners of speech change around different participants, adding to the reflexive nature of the study. Overall, I look forward to sharing this document as well as the film documentary to different audiences and taking note of their experiences as audience members. Much of this work is performative, and audience reactions are important to me, especially with such a personal research topic.

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