

Entangled Archives: Cultural Memory, Diaspora, and the Reconstruction of Global Narratives in the Post-Migration Era

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Abstract

This study examines how diasporic communities construct, preserve, and transmit cultural memory in the post-migration era, with particular attention to the archival practices through which global narratives are rebuilt across geographic and generational boundaries. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from memory studies, postcolonial scholarship, and diaspora theory, the research describes the mechanisms by which displaced communities engage with fragmented heritage materials, digital archives, and embodied knowledge to sustain coherent cultural identities. The study adopts a strictly descriptive methodology, systematically characterizing the phenomenon of cultural memory reconstruction across multiple diasporic contexts without attempting to establish causal or predictive relationships. Findings suggest that archival entanglement, the overlapping and sometimes contradictory coexistence of host-country narratives and origin-country histories, defines the memory practices of contemporary diasporic subjects. The implications extend to archival science, memory studies, cultural policy, and the broader scholarly conversation on migration and global identity formation.

Keywords

cultural memory, diaspora, archival practice, post-migration, global narratives, memory reconstruction

¹Independent Research

INTRODUCTION

Migration is among the most consequential forces shaping contemporary societies, and its cultural implications extend well beyond the moment of physical displacement. When communities relocate, voluntarily or otherwise, they carry with them not only material possessions but entire systems of meaning: languages, rituals, narratives, and the tacit knowledge that anchors identity to place and time. What happens to these systems when the contexts that originally sustained them are no longer accessible? This question sits at the center of a growing body of scholarly work addressing cultural memory in diasporic settings, and it is the animating concern of the present study.

The term "entangled archives," as used here, refers to the condition in which the documentary and experiential records of a displaced community are simultaneously shaped by at least two distinct socio-cultural environments: the community of origin and the host society. This entanglement is

not merely additive. It is generative of new, hybrid memory formations that neither faithfully reproduce origin-culture traditions nor fully adopt the archival logics of the receiving nation-state. The result is a body of cultural memory that is structurally complex, often internally contested, and perpetually in the process of reconstruction.

Scholars have long noted that memory is not a passive repository but an active, socially mediated process (Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011). In diasporic contexts, this active character is intensified by the pressures of acculturation, the politics of recognition, and the logistical challenges of maintaining connections across national borders. Recent scholarship has increasingly attended to the role of digital technologies in mediating these processes, observing that online platforms, social media archives, and transnational digital communities have dramatically altered the temporal and spatial parameters of diasporic memory work (Hoskins, 2022; Leurs & Smets, 2019).

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Despite this growing interest, the field lacks systematic descriptive accounts of how entangled archival practices operate across different diasporic communities and what characteristic features they share. Most existing studies focus on specific ethnic or national groups, making comparative generalization difficult. This study addresses that gap by synthesizing available scholarly evidence to characterize the phenomenon of archival entanglement as a broad feature of post-migration cultural life, rather than as a peculiarity of any single community.

The research does not seek to explain why entanglement occurs or to predict its outcomes. Instead, it describes what entangled archival practice looks like across documented cases, what forms it takes, and how it has been understood and theorized by scholars working in related fields. This descriptive objective is appropriate given the current state of the literature, where conceptual clarity and systematic characterization are still very much needed before causal or predictive analysis can proceed responsibly.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Cultural Memory and Its Social Dimensions

Jan Assmann's foundational distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory, first articulated in the 1990s and extensively elaborated since, remains one of the most productive frameworks for understanding how societies encode and transmit the past (Assmann, 2011). Communicative memory encompasses the living, everyday recollections shared among contemporaries, typically extending no more than three to four generations back. Cultural memory, by contrast, operates over much longer time horizons, is institutionally mediated, and is anchored in symbolic artifacts, texts, rituals, and commemorative practices rather than in personal experience alone.

For diasporic communities, both registers of memory are simultaneously at stake and under stress. The communicative memory of first-generation migrants is often vivid and highly specific, populated with detailed recollections of

particular places, social networks, and embodied routines. But this memory is vulnerable. As the first generation ages and direct experiential access to the homeland diminishes, communities face the challenge of translating communicative memory into more durable cultural forms before it dissipates entirely (Bond & Rapson, 2014; Hoskins, 2022).

Cultural memory, meanwhile, is shaped by institutional forces that diasporic communities may not fully control. National archives, museums, and heritage organizations in host countries frequently organize historical narratives around majority cultural logics, marginalizing or selectively incorporating the records of migrant communities (Caswell et al., 2022). This institutional asymmetry means that diasporic groups must often construct their own archival infrastructures, informal or semi-formal, to ensure the preservation of materials that mainstream institutions ignore or misclassify.

Aleida Assmann's work on the distinction between storage memory and functional memory is equally relevant here (A. Assmann, 2011). Storage memory consists of the vast, largely inert accumulation of records from the past; functional memory is the active, selective retrieval of materials from storage for present purposes. In diasporic contexts, communities must perform this selective retrieval work without the institutional scaffolding that majority communities typically take for granted, making the process both more labor-intensive and more politically charged.

Diaspora Theory and the Politics of Belonging

The concept of diaspora has undergone significant theoretical refinement over the past two decades. Early formulations, particularly those associated with the African diaspora and Jewish historical experience, tended to emphasize displacement, trauma, and a longing for return (Safran, 1991). More recent scholarship has challenged this orientation, arguing that it romanticizes origins and understates the creative cultural productivity of diasporic life (Brah, 2020; Clifford, 1994).

Stuart Hall's influential account of diaspora identity as a "production" rather than a given remains a touchstone for contemporary scholars (Hall, 1990). Rather than treating identity as a fixed essence that migration disrupts, Hall argues that diasporic identities are continually produced through representation, narration, and the creative negotiation of difference. This framework has been extended and updated by scholars attending to the specific dynamics of twenty-first-century migration, including transnationalism, circular migration, and the role of digital connectivity in sustaining diasporic community bonds across distances (Faist, 2020; Vertovec, 2021).

The politics of belonging, a concept developed by Nira Yuval-Davis (2011) and elaborated by subsequent scholars, is particularly useful for understanding the archival dimension of diasporic experience. Belonging is not simply a feeling; it is an achievement, produced through ongoing practices of affiliation, narrative, and material culture. Archives, whether formal or informal, institutional or domestic, are among the material practices through which belonging is claimed and contested. Who controls the archive, whose records are preserved, and which narratives receive institutional recognition are all questions with direct implications for the political and cultural standing of diasporic communities (Caswell et al., 2022; Punzalan & Caswell, 2016).

Postcolonial Perspectives on Archives

Postcolonial scholarship has productively complicated the apparently neutral concept of the archive, revealing it as a site of power as much as a site of knowledge. Ann Laura Stoler's concept of "the archive as form" draws attention to the ways in which colonial archives organized knowledge about colonized populations in ways that reflected and reinforced imperial logics (Stoler, 2009). This insight carries direct relevance for diasporic communities whose histories are often legible within European and North American archival systems only through the lens of colonial encounter and post-colonial migration.

More recent work has extended Stoler's critique to digital archives, noting that algorithmic curation

and platform governance reproduce many of the exclusions and hierarchies characteristic of older archival institutions (Bhatt et al., 2021; Noble, 2018). For diasporic communities that rely heavily on digital platforms for memory work, these structural inequalities are not merely abstract: they determine which materials survive, which are accessible, and which search logics govern retrieval. Understanding these dynamics is essential for any account of how global narratives are reconstructed in the post-migration era.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive research design, consistent with the goal of systematically and accurately characterizing the phenomenon of cultural memory reconstruction in diasporic contexts. Descriptive research is appropriate when the objective is to produce a reliable account of the features, dimensions, and variations of a phenomenon rather than to test hypotheses about its causes or predict its future trajectory (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

The study draws on a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature published between 2019 and 2026, supplemented by analysis of theoretical texts foundational to the field. Sources were identified through searches of major academic databases, including Scopus, JSTOR, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, using search terms including "diaspora and cultural memory," "archival practice and migration," "digital diaspora," "postcolonial archives," and "post-migration identity." Inclusion criteria required that sources address cultural memory, archival practice, or identity formation in explicitly diasporic or post-migration contexts. Sources that addressed memory in non-diasporic settings were included only where their theoretical contributions were directly applicable to the diasporic case.

The descriptive synthesis proceeds thematically, organizing findings around three main dimensions of the phenomenon: the structural characteristics of entangled archives, the practices through which diasporic communities engage with archival materials, and the narrative forms

that result from archival reconstruction processes. No causal claims are advanced. Where patterns or associations are noted, they are described as characteristic features of the phenomenon as documented in the literature, not as explanatory mechanisms.

FINDINGS: CHARACTERISTICS OF ENTANGLED ARCHIVES

Structural Features

Across the documented cases examined in the literature, entangled archives exhibit several consistent structural features. First, they are almost invariably hybrid in their composition, containing materials from multiple linguistic, national, and media contexts. A representative community archive maintained by a South Asian diaspora organization in the United Kingdom, for example, might contain oral history recordings in Urdu, Punjabi, and English; photographs acquired from family collections in Pakistan, India, and the UK; bureaucratic documents produced by British immigration authorities; and digital files downloaded from online heritage platforms (Bhatt et al., 2021). No single institutional logic governs the organization of such a collection, and classification decisions must constantly navigate between incommensurable systems.

Second, entangled archives are characterized by significant lacunae. Documents that would be routine in the archives of settled, majority communities are frequently absent from diasporic holdings: property records, birth registrations, and educational credentials from origin countries may have been lost, confiscated, or never produced in the first place, particularly for communities displaced by conflict or persecution. The gaps in the archive are themselves historically significant, encoding the specific conditions of displacement that produced the collection (Caswell et al., 2022). Scholars working with refugee community archives have noted that the incompleteness of holdings is a primary datum rather than a methodological inconvenience, requiring archivists and researchers to develop interpretive frameworks capable of reading absence as evidence (Zinn, 2019).

Third, authority is diffuse in entangled archives. Unlike institutional archives governed by professional archivists operating within established frameworks, community and diaspora archives typically rely on volunteer labor, contested community governance, and negotiated decisions about what counts as authoritative or representative material. This diffusion of authority makes the archive more democratically accountable to its community but also more vulnerable to internal disputes and to the departure of key individuals whose tacit knowledge sustains the collection's organizational logic (Flinn, 2021).

Generational Variations in Archival Practice

One of the most consistently documented features of diasporic memory work is its generational variation. First-generation migrants typically engage with archives, formal or informal, primarily through the lens of personal testimony. Their investment in particular documents or artifacts reflects direct experiential attachment: these are the materials that authenticate their own life histories and validate claims about the communities and places they left behind (Erl, 2021; Hoskins, 2022).

Second-generation community members, by contrast, tend to relate to archival materials primarily as cultural inheritance rather than personal testimony. For individuals born or raised in the host country, heritage documents and oral recordings function less as confirmations of lived memory and more as bridges across an experiential gap they have not personally traversed. Research on second-generation South Korean and Vietnamese diaspora communities in Australia and Canada has documented this shift in detail, noting that younger community members often engage with archival materials through highly mediated forms: documentary films, social media heritage accounts, museum exhibitions, and community festivals (Lim, 2021; Nguyen, 2020).

Third and subsequent generations present a further variation. For these community members, the distance from origin-country experience is so great that archival engagement often takes on an explicitly reconstructive character, involving

active research, formal archival visits, and creative practice. The growing genre of diasporic memoir and creative nonfiction, in which authors document their own archival investigations as a central narrative thread, reflects this reconstructive orientation (Hamid & Hussain,

2023). These texts are themselves secondary archives, embedding fragments of primary documentation within reflective narrative frames that make them accessible to readers who share neither the author's cultural heritage nor their specific research journey.

Table 1: *Generational Variation in Diasporic Archival Engagement: Characteristic Practices Across Three Documented Generational Cohorts*

Generation	Primary Relationship to Archive	Characteristic Practices	Dominant Media
First generation	Personal testimony and authentication	Oral history, document preservation, material collection	Physical documents, photography, audio recordings
Second generation	Cultural inheritance and mediated heritage	Festival participation, community media consumption, selective digitization	Digital platforms, documentary film, social media
Third generation and beyond	Reconstructive inquiry and creative reinterpretation	Archival research, diaspora memoir, artistic practice	Mixed media, online archives, creative publishing

Note. Table 1 summarizes characteristic archival practices across three generational cohorts as described in the reviewed literature. Categories represent modal tendencies rather than exhaustive classifications; significant individual and community variation exists within each cohort (Erll, 2021; Lim, 2021; Nguyen, 2020; Hoskins, 2022).

As shown in Table 1, the shift across generations is not simply one of decreasing intensity of engagement; it is a qualitative shift in the mode and purpose of archival practice. Each generational cohort brings distinct epistemological orientations to the archive, and the community archive must therefore serve several different kinds of users simultaneously.

Digital Mediation and Archival Transformation

The rapid expansion of digital technologies over the past decade has substantially transformed the character of diasporic archival practice. Scholars have documented several dimensions of this transformation. Digital platforms have lowered the barriers to creating and sharing archival materials, enabling community members without specialized technical knowledge to contribute photographs, recordings, and documents to shared online repositories (Leurs & Smets, 2019). Transnational social media groups, private Facebook archives, WhatsApp chains distributing family photographs, and YouTube channels

dedicated to heritage music and oral history have become significant sites of diasporic memory work, operating largely outside the purview of institutional archives and professional archivists.

This democratization of archival production carries important benefits: it multiplies the points from which a community's history can be documented, reduces dependence on centralized institutional authority, and enables real-time connection between diaspora members across multiple national locations. However, it also introduces new vulnerabilities. Digital materials stored on commercial platforms are subject to platform governance decisions that may result in content removal, account suspension, or platform closure, events that can destroy irreplaceable community records with little warning or recourse (Hoskins, 2022). The ephemerality of digital media stands in tension with the archival aspiration of long-term preservation, a tension that community archivists and scholars alike are increasingly seeking to address through practices of redundant backup, format migration, and



advocacy for platform accountability (Bhatt et al., 2021).

Beyond questions of preservation, digital mediation has altered the temporal structure of diasporic memory. The ability to access and share materials across national contexts in real time has, in some respects, compressed the experiential distance between diaspora and homeland communities. Scholars working on Irish, Filipino, and Nigerian diaspora communities have documented how online archival practices enable a form of "co-presence" between dispersed community members, allowing shared commemoration of events, real-time documentation of heritage practices, and coordinated responses to threats to cultural heritage in origin countries (Faist, 2020; Ong, 2019). This compression of distance does not resolve the structural conditions of entanglement; it introduces a new layer of complexity into the already hybrid character of diasporic archival practice.

FINDINGS: NARRATIVE RECONSTRUCTION AND GLOBAL MEMORY FORMATION

Counter-Narrative and Archival Activism

A consistent feature of diasporic archival practice across documented cases is its counter-narrative orientation. Communities whose histories have been systematically marginalized, misrepresented, or absent from mainstream archival institutions do not engage with those institutions from a position of neutrality. They approach the archive as a contested site, one where the struggle to include their records and perspectives is simultaneously a scholarly and political act (Caswell et al., 2022; Punzalan & Caswell, 2016).

Community archives established by African-Caribbean diaspora organizations in the United Kingdom, for example, have explicitly framed their collecting mandates in opposition to the silences and distortions of national archival practice. The Black Cultural Archives in London, established in 1981 and significantly developed in subsequent decades, represents one of the most documented

examples of this counter-archival orientation, organizing its holdings around the deliberate recuperation of materials that mainstream institutions had declined to collect (Flinn, 2021). Similar dynamics characterize the community archiving projects of South Asian, Latin American, and Southeast Asian diaspora communities in Europe and North America, where the effort to construct usable historical records has been inseparable from advocacy for political recognition and cultural rights (Zinn, 2019).

The concept of "archival activism," developed by Michelle Caswell and her collaborators, captures this politicized dimension of community archiving practice with particular precision (Caswell et al., 2022). Archival activism refers to the deliberate use of archival work to advance social justice goals: to document marginalized experiences, to challenge dominant narratives, and to create the evidentiary basis for claims of historical redress. In diasporic contexts, archival activism frequently intersects with campaigns for immigration reform, recognition of colonial harm, and the repatriation of cultural property, making the archive a node in a broader network of political struggle rather than simply a repository of passive documentation.

The Role of Oral Tradition in Archival Reconstruction

Written documentation has historically dominated the concept of the archive in Western institutional practice. For many diasporic communities, however, oral tradition constitutes the primary medium through which cultural memory is stored and transmitted. The incorporation of oral materials into archival frameworks raises significant conceptual and practical challenges, including questions about authentication, consent, classification, and the appropriate relationship between oral sources and their transcriptions or recordings (Erll, 2021).

Research on West African diaspora communities in France and the United States has documented the sophisticated oral archival systems that community elders maintain and transmit. These systems encompass genealogical knowledge, historical narrative, and performative repertoires

(including songs, proverbs, and ritual formulas) that collectively constitute a rich memorial infrastructure operating largely independently of written documentation (Ong, 2019). When community archives seek to incorporate these materials, they must grapple with the fact that oral tradition is not simply a less formal version of written documentation but a distinct epistemic mode with its own internal logic, authority structures, and transmission protocols.

The challenge of integration is not merely technical. It raises fundamental questions about the authority of different knowledge forms and the degree to which archival institutions, even community-controlled ones, reproduce the documentary biases of the institutional frameworks within which they operate. Scholars have argued that genuinely decolonial archival practice would require not merely the addition of oral materials to existing archival systems but a reconceptualization of what an archive is and what kinds of knowledge count as archival (Bhatt et al., 2021; Punzalan & Caswell, 2016).

Transnational Memory Networks and Global Narrative Formation

The reconstruction of global narratives in the post-migration era does not occur in isolated community contexts. Diasporic communities are embedded in transnational networks that connect them simultaneously to their communities of origin, to other diaspora communities in third countries, and to global networks of scholars, activists, and cultural producers working on related issues. These networks function as informal meta-archives, circulating materials, interpretations, and narratives across national borders and enabling forms of collective memory formation that no single institutional archive could sustain independently (Vertovec, 2021).

Research on Armenian, Palestinian, and Kurdish diaspora communities has been particularly illuminating in this regard, documenting the ways in which geographically dispersed communities coordinate their archival and narrative practices across multiple national contexts. The Armenian diaspora, distributed across North America, France, Argentina, Lebanon, and Australia among

other locations, has developed a remarkably coherent global memory infrastructure, encompassing community archives, digital repositories, academic research centers, and commemorative institutions, that collectively sustains a shared historical narrative across contexts that differ substantially in their local political environments (Ter-Matevosyan, 2019). The coordination required to maintain this infrastructure is itself a significant social achievement, demanding ongoing negotiation of differences in emphasis, interpretation, and institutional capacity across diaspora nodes.

Palestinian diaspora archival practice illustrates a further dimension of transnational memory networking: the specific challenges of archiving the history of ongoing dispossession and political conflict. The fragmentation of Palestinian archives across multiple national jurisdictions, including Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, the United States, and various European countries, reflects the historical circumstances of repeated displacement that have characterized Palestinian experience since 1948. Scholars working on Palestinian memory and archival practice have documented the extraordinary efforts of community organizations and individual researchers to locate, digitize, and connect these dispersed holdings into coherent usable collections (Sela, 2019). These efforts are not simply scholarly or preservationist in character; they are inseparable from political claims about historical presence, territorial rights, and the legitimacy of national aspiration.

DISCUSSION

The descriptive analysis presented above reveals several characteristic features of cultural memory reconstruction in diasporic contexts that merit systematic attention. Taken together, these features constitute what can usefully be called the condition of archival entanglement: a structurally complex, politically charged, and generationally differentiated engagement with the documentary and experiential record of displacement.

Three aspects of this condition stand out as particularly significant for future scholarly and policy engagement. First, the incompleteness of

diasporic archives is not merely a technical problem to be solved through better documentation practices. It is a constitutive feature of diasporic experience, encoding within the archive itself the conditions of loss, rupture, and institutional marginalization that produced the community's dispersal. Any adequate theoretical account of diasporic memory must be capable of reading gaps and absences as significant data rather than as deficiencies to be remedied (Caswell et al., 2022; Zinn, 2019).

Second, generational variation in archival practice is a systematic and predictable feature of diasporic memory work, not a contingent variation across particular communities. The shift from testimonial to hermeneutic to reconstructive modes of archival engagement across generations reflects the changing relationship between living memory and cultural inheritance as time and distance from the origin context increase. This generational dynamic has important practical implications for community archives, which must design their holdings, finding aids, and programming to serve genuinely different archival needs across their user communities.

Third, the entanglement of diasporic archives with digital platforms, transnational networks, and host-country institutional frameworks makes them sites of genuinely global narrative formation, not merely local or ethnic documentation projects. The stories that diasporic communities construct and circulate about their own histories are increasingly legible to, and influential within, global public discourse on migration, belonging, and cultural rights. This visibility creates new opportunities for diasporic communities to contribute to global historical narratives; it also creates new vulnerabilities to appropriation, misrepresentation, and political instrumentalization by actors whose interests may not align with those of the communities whose records they cite.

The implications for archival science as a discipline are significant. Professional archivists working in national and regional institutions are increasingly confronted with diasporic materials that challenge existing classification systems,

provenance principles, and appraisal frameworks. The literature reviewed here suggests that adequate responses to these challenges will require not merely methodological adaptation but genuine conceptual rethinking, drawing on community archiving practice, postcolonial scholarship, and diaspora theory in ways that mainstream archival science has not yet fully achieved (Flinn, 2021; Punzalan & Caswell, 2016).

Cultural policy implications are equally significant. Government agencies responsible for heritage, immigration integration, and multicultural programming frequently operate with archival assumptions that treat mainstream national collections as the default standard against which community archives are measured and found wanting. The evidence reviewed here suggests that this evaluative framework is inappropriate: community archives are not failed approximations of institutional archives but distinct social formations with their own organizational logics, epistemic commitments, and community functions. Policy frameworks adequate to the reality of post-migration cultural life will need to recognize and support this distinctiveness rather than seeking to absorb community archives into institutional structures designed for different purposes.

CONCLUSION

Cultural memory in the post-migration era is not a simple matter of carrying a fixed heritage from one national context to another. It is an ongoing, socially mediated process of construction, negotiation, and reconstruction, shaped by the structural conditions of displacement, the politics of institutional recognition, the opportunities and vulnerabilities introduced by digital mediation, and the varying needs and capacities of successive diasporic generations. The concept of archival entanglement, as developed in this study, captures something essential about this process: the irreducibly hybrid, contested, and politically charged character of the archival practice through which displaced communities sustain and remake their cultural identities.

The descriptive account offered here makes no claim to exhaustive coverage of the phenomenon. The cases documented in the existing literature represent a fraction of the world's diasporic communities, and significant variation undoubtedly exists across communities not yet adequately studied. Future descriptive research should attend more systematically to communities whose archival practices have received less scholarly attention, including internal migration contexts and communities displaced by climate-related events rather than political conflict or economic necessity.

What the present study does establish is that archival entanglement is a robust and widespread feature of post-migration cultural life, identifiable across communities differing substantially in their geographic origin, host-country context, and historical trajectory. This robustness suggests that entanglement is not a peripheral or exotic phenomenon but a central condition of cultural memory in a world characterized by sustained high levels of human mobility. Scholars working in memory studies, archival science, migration studies, and cultural policy will need to engage seriously with this condition if their work is to remain adequate to the realities of contemporary global life.

The archive, understood in its fullest sense, is never simply a neutral repository. In diasporic contexts, it is a site where the most fundamental questions about identity, belonging, authority, and historical truth are actively negotiated. Attending carefully to what happens in these negotiations is not a specialized scholarly preoccupation; it is a prerequisite for understanding how the world's people make sense of who they are and where they come from in an era defined by movement, loss, and the persistent human need to remember.

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