

# feminist review

the FR blog

## Embodied Archives of Institutional Violence and Anti-Racist Occupation – Reading Julietta Singh’s ‘No Archive Will Restore You’ in the University

BY AKANKSHA MEHTA

*This blog post is part of issue 125 of Feminist Review, which explores theories of the archive within feminist, queer, crip, decolonial, and diasporic studies. The issue, which brings academics, artists, and archivists into conversation with each other, launched in July 2020. Blog posts in this series can be found here.*

### Gratitude

I am in full solidarity with the members of the *Feminist Review* Collective who have written the statement Crisis of care within the Collective. The issues and questions they raise speak to some of the themes in this piece of writing and are painfully recognizable. I stand with them as they refuse to ignore racialized, classed, and ableist power dynamics and violence within a supposedly feminist collective, as they withdraw their labour, and as they demand a committed response from other members in the collective. I see their utter exhaustion as they confront this crisis of care. I am grateful to them for speaking up. I am angry and tired that they had to.

I am grateful to Nydia Swaby and Chandra Frank for inviting me to write this piece – Nydia’s feminist guiding voice, care, and editorial comments enriched this essay in numerous ways. We’ve been in conversation for almost eight years now and I am thankful for our exchanges. Thanks also to the other writers in the special issue and this blog series and to Julietta Singh for her generous thinking that has brought some of us together. Finally, I remain deeply thankful for, inspired by, and accountable to my comrades in GARA and to the students I am in community with. Our commitment to collective care, radical politics, liberatory pedagogies, and to holding and feeding each other, our everyday work to fight, dismantle, and survive institutions (and the world), the spaces and struggles we nurture and the difficult, miserable, joyful conversations and work we do shape everything I write.

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In the summer of 2019, a friend handed me Julietta Singh’s powerful and unsettling book *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018) and insisted that I read it immediately. The images and text on the book cover tell you that this work was a feverish meditation on the body, and remains at once theory, prose, poetry, memoir, and fragment. Having read (and loved) Singh’s *Unthinking Mastery* (2018), I was curious and hungry. I read the book over two evenings and

two frightfully early mornings in June – the long hours of daylight in the month bringing welcome disruptions to routine and rhythm – and took to Instagram Stories to share fragments of Singh’s fragments. I wanted others to read this with me; I wanted conversations; I wanted critiques – even lazy ones; I wanted to think and feel *out loud*. There are many reasons why this book moved me (and so many others) but two of them stand out.

First, questions on/of/about/with the body have been crucial in politicising me in numerous ways. As a fat chronically ill bisexual upper caste woman of colour, they remain at the centre of how I navigate the world (and how the world navigates me). They play a part in my teaching, writing, and commitment to political struggles and shape the daily negotiations and fights I have with myself and the world. Gendered caste-based ableist ideas shaped my earliest understandings of bodies – and I am committed to challenging and dismantling them and the violent systems they are rooted in. Second, I read *No Archive Will Restore You* in a summer that wasn’t ordinary. From March to July 2019, there was an anti-racist occupation led by Black and PoC students at the university where I work (which is also in the neighbourhood where I live). Goldsmiths Anti-Racist Action (GARA)[i] – a collective of students, (very few) lecturers, activists, and assorted committed souls in South East London – was formed out of years of collective pain, anger, exclusion, hope, and imagination carried by bodies marked as black and brown that travelled through the institution in various ways. GARA occupied Deptford Town Hall[ii], a key building on campus, demanding that the university take structural and everyday racism seriously, and establishing and nurturing an alternative space of pedagogy, care, community, kinship, love with a politics rooted in anti-racist anti-capitalist feminist queer disability justice praxis. I was involved in this 137 day-long occupation and my days and nights, at the time, were consumed by it. The occupation made Julietta Singh’s call to behold one’s body as an archive urgent and necessary. It gave me/us a ‘language’ to articulate what we had been doing (and where we wanted to go) as we discarded institutional ‘truths’ about our bodies, sensed and felt what we had been taught to disavow about the traces and deposits left on our bodies, took up space with our bodies and were forced to pay attention to the exhilaration and limitations of that, and as we remembered our racialized bodies as more than themselves.

I re-read *No Archive Will Restore You* in December 2019. This time I was reading it to write this review essay and the registers of pleasurable engagement had shifted. I was accompanied by post-its and a pencil to scribble and a word document opened and saved with a suitable name/title. The days were cold, short, and dark and my bodyminds were in intense depression, anxiety, and pain. I still wanted conversations (about this book and more) but had no energy to demand and sustain them. The occupation had ended months ago; our bodies were back in the *regular* institution – exhausted, still suffering, but also emboldened and proud; our struggles were continuing in different forms in the university and local community; our collective anti-racist movement was consumed by questions and anxieties around archiving what we had done and what was done to us. Doing the re-read, I began to think through and write about the bodily archives of fatness, brown-ness, and debilitating chronic pain and anxiety. But I didn’t get far. I wasn’t ready to tell those stories. Sorry Julietta Singh, everything I wrote felt like a portrait of vulnerability. Too intimate, too bewildering an undertaking like you said your writing was. But unlike your words that turned *towards* the body and one-self, mine turned *against* the body and myself and the task of writing seemed daunting and futile. Moreover, all I could think about at this point was the anti-racist occupation and the many archives of surviving and fighting the institution. So, in this short essay, I’d like to reflect on *No Archive Will Restore You* as it relates to being a racialized body in the university and in an occupation and to the embodied archives of an anti-racist movement. The other stories will find their words when they’re ready to be told.

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*How do you relate to and move through an institution that was never built for you? With careful calibration to both subvert and negotiate (with) the white gaze and a body that’s vigilant and anxious.*

Over the last two years, several Black and PoC students have walked through my office door, angry and upset for a very particular reason. Sitting on a chair in my office, they tell me about the assessment feedback they receive from their white lecturers and tutors. In their written and visual work, many of them turn to fragments of bodily archives – their own and of those who matter to them. They write essays and produce visual work that often explore the politics of gender, race, sexuality, disability, religion, war, state violence, migrant and diasporic life, displacement, and family as felt on/through/by bodies. As they create work through their own archives, they remain very cautious about the white gaze and the consumption of their embodied self and they build in wilful walls to shield some of their vulnerability. As they create work through the stories of others, they centre the ethical responsibilities they have to their communities and interlocutors and refuse the demands of the racist colonial gaze. The desire to unveil fragments of bodily archives and narrate stories always checked by the haunting question of who was reading/watching and how. The white university, after all, thrived on consuming the trauma of students and communities of colour while simultaneously exacerbating it and pretending that this trauma either doesn’t exist or its causes reside in the remote past. In the name of pedagogical and creative (and also feminist-queer) exploration, it sometimes demanded students tell stories only in particular ways, swallowing archives hungrily – ‘eating the other’ as bell hooks (1992) calls it – with no aftercare or care at all. The students who walk through my door angry and upset about feedback on their work knew they had to continually negotiate all of this. Sometimes they had to reveal to satiate their (white) teachers’ curiosities (and to not be marked down) but hold back to protect themselves and disallow this extractive violence. Sometimes they wanted to reveal but only in ways that were ethically and politically important to them and they took ‘risks’. But the feedback was often along the same lines. Response 1: *We don’t understand what your work is trying to do. Why are these things important?* Response 2: *Why are you telling these stories this way?* Response 3: *We see what you’re saying here but give us more details of the violence your/these bodies face(d).* Response 4: *We remain dissatisfied, we want to spectate more, we want to look (deeper) into your embodied pain and the trauma of those you speak about.* Pick. Mix. Add (to taste). And here is where we end up: *That work you made told a very important and urgent story of state violence and you did it so ethically, centring the voices and narratives of your interlocutors. But why didn’t you show us the faces of the Black and brown women who were speaking? If you can’t show their faces to protect their anonymity, then maybe we can see their hands? Their bodies? Their eyes as they cry? Their intimate spaces – a bedroom? A kitchen? Or maybe you could have hired actors to play these roles? The ‘abstract’ visuals just didn’t work (for us). Without seeing their embodied pain, how are we to emotionally identify with your work and your commitment to political justice? Of course, our comment is not racist (how could you even think so?); it is just about your skills.*

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In *No Archive Will Restore You*, Julietta Singh takes on the intimate, uncomfortable, and scrambling task of compiling an archive of the body. She departs from Antonio Gramsci’s call to analyse the infinite traces deposited in us by historical processes. This departure is exhilarating as she traverses memoir, poetry, prose, essay, diary, theory, and more to present vignettes and fragments of her life that stand together and separate as her intimate and intensely personal-political embodied archives. She calls the body archive ‘an attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason’ (Singh, 2018, p. 29) and remains committed to its instability, its silences, its gaps and holes, its urgency, its necessity, its potential, and its impossibility. Right in the beginning of the book, she states that the idea of the archive as a physical space holding masses of information overwhelms and disinterests

her. Her commitment to the body is in part an exercise to think of the self as a becoming/unbecoming that is worthy of archival devotion. It is also a deep and important obsession with destabilising and rethinking the very idea of the archive and the body itself. What happens to the archive when we begin to remember and collect all the things that we have been trained to forget, disavow, and discard? What happens to our bodies (or how we think about bodies) when we begin to notice, remember, feel, and document all that which enters and leaves them, touching them and (re)shaping them, bringing them and ourselves into existence?

Like the task of crafting a bodily archive that is complete, it remains difficult if not impossible (and also unimportant) to think about all the things that Julietta Singh covers in the book. Beholding her queer racialized body and the experiences that mark and make it as a place of feverish and disordered remembering and studying, she presents evocations on gender, sexuality, race, identity, movement, mothering, illness, pain, consuming, dying, losing, and more. From experiences of bulimia to the feral pain and joy of childbirth and motherhood, from queer mothering and queer love to relationships and desires in times of social media, from orifices, openings, and closings to ageing, surgery, chronic pain, and death, from food and sex to losing loved ones – the fragments attend carefully to the ways in which the body is porous and permeable, constantly eating, excreting, purging, holding, moving, staying still, and exchanging substances, materials, and affects with the world around it. The body here then holds enduring legacies that we must sense, feel, and archive not only to understand how we become/unbecome who we are but also to explore the assemblages of power, politics, and violence that make the world what it is.

*No Archive Will Restore You* is being referred to as a ‘short book’ that covers a lot of ground. There are fragments that go into intense detail and narrow into specifics that are seared into the reader’s mind – a lot is revealed. And then there are vignettes that do not disclose the full story (as if there ever can be one) – undescribed, unexplained, unelaborated moments that haunt you with what they’re hiding and the puzzles they leave behind. These speak to the impossibility of an all-encompassing and whole bodily archive, but they also leave me asking (and take me back to my aforementioned conversation with the student) – are (deliberate) silences and gaps in the embodied archive tricks and subversions to muddle the gaze of who is consuming our bodies and lives? How can we reveal, capture, and compile but also sabotage, lie, deceive, disguise, hide, and confuse as forms of resistance when we build our bodily archives?

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*How do you relate to and move through an institution that was never built for you? With pain and anger and a body that’s exhausted by structural and everyday violence.*

Why are we, Black and PoC students and staff, ignored in the curriculum, the classroom, the department, these institutions – our knowledges discarded, our voices silenced, and our bodies excluded? Why aren’t our bodies given space on this campus but our faces used for your diversity campaigns and posters? Why aren’t we cared for and nourished and loved? Why are we having to read/hear/sometimes even teach text after text that denies our histories or worse, glorifies those who oppress(ed) us and kill(ed) us and our friends and families? Why did you not stop that student from praising colonialism in the name of free speech – *his hands moving, his eyes dancing, I am just playing devil’s advocate, he eventually said, a smirk on his face?* Why do you cut us off when we speak up about whiteness – *there’s no time, this is not relevant, let us move on, a sigh in the room, shared glances, smirks, there we go again, shifting bodies, frustrated eyes, can we move on?* Why are you using racial slurs over and over again even when we’ve told you to stop? Why are you marking Black and PoC students

down ... even when they give you what you want in your assessments (even when it really hurts them) – *when will you stop assuming a universalised white student? Why are you talking over us or ignoring us or undermining us? – We don’t know what shape your violence will take today and what we might be able to bear today, hmm, let me see, would I rather be ignored, talked over, or undermined today? Why are you so violent to the very few lecturers (especially Black and women of colour) who are with students in everyway, building worlds of care and fighting all the time – their bodies exhausted, their hearts breaking? Why is our curriculum white but you decide to use image after image of black and brown bodies in death, suffering, undress, duress, and violence in the classroom? Why do you linger on those particular lecture slides? Why do you not acknowledge our discomfort and pain but constantly remind us to be kinder to our peers when they are violent to us? Why do you continue to protect your white university but demand our labour to help you ‘transform’ systems you built to exclude us? Why is the violence we carry in our bodies neglected, mocked, and heightened whenever we touch (and are touched by) the sprawling tentacles of this/the institution?*

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The university (and its violence) are present in a myriad of ways in *No Archive Will Restore You*. Pushing the genre of auto-theory (and through writing that defies/combines genres and destabilises what we’ve been taught as ‘truth’) seems like a strong fuck you to academia and the way it disciplines us to think/write in itself. But in the pages too, we/Julietta Singh encounters the institution that is the university. The book begins with her experiences as a graduate student – living in the archive of debt, precarity and casualization, exploited labour and hierarchies of work in institutions, no access to healthcare, tense and fragile solidarities with other students, failed promises and anxieties of academia – and finding the ‘right’ archive here becomes a hope and desire that keeps you going. Mostly tangentially and subtly, other themes come up – an affair with a professor, gendered and racialized dynamics on intellectual relationships and mentorships, dissertations and writing, guest lectures, teaching, students, symposiums, academic socialities, friendships, and more. In thinking about the institution’s violence through embodied archives, these fragments from the book envelop you in their familiarity (even though they remain situated in the US academy) and put you at ease. However, ultimately it is one of the core calls of Julietta Singh’s project that enables mediations on the questions I raise in the vignette above – paying attention to colonial and imperial legacies and flows that make, remake, and inform how we think about bodies, archives, ourselves, the institutions we walk through, and the embodied power structures in this world. *What is the institution’s bodily archive? And how does that pre-figure our bodily archives?*

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*How do you relate to and move through an institution that was never built for you? With finding each other and holding tight and a body that fights the institution’s violence and refuses the institution itself.*

In March 2019 in the university where I work, the campaign poster of a PoC student standing for office in the Student Union elections was vandalised with a racist message. Complaints were filed and voices were raised, but as always, the institution refused to listen and respond. The elections went ahead and the matter was relegated to the slow bureaucracy of institutional procedures. A group of Black and PoC students had had enough. They were not going to be ignored anymore. They walked into a key building on campus – symbolic not only because key members of the university’s leadership sat there but also because it was a Town Hall that was once open to the majority Black and PoC local community but now owned and controlled by the university – and they started an anti-racist occupation. Their

manifesto held twelve demands that connected struggles across campus and the local community, traversing from curriculum reform to ending outsourcing of workers in the institution. In the next 137 days of occupation, the students and a small handful of us Black and PoC staff, built a world of care, kindness, and love within the comfort of which we did the uncomfortable, necessary, and extremely difficult work of fighting the institution, naming and dismantling structures of oppression within the movement, and imagining and creating alternative pasts, presents, and futures.



*Photo Credit [iii]*

*Daily communal meals*, lunch and dinner, sometimes breakfast and tea too, snacks at all hours, collective cooking in a patchwork kitchen, groceries dropped off by well-wishers, everyone was welcome, let us pause and feed our bodyminds and let us laugh, talk, and/or sit in silence with each other. Grateful for all the labour that allowed us to hold that space. *Teach-outs*, workshops, events, intentional spaces of study and unlearning. We don't need their curricula and classrooms, we (un)learn from/with/through/about each other. Pedagogies of embodiment, care, and direct action – we abolished *that* university and created our own universe(s). *Check-ins*, friendships, meditative time and space, prayer, dancing, singing, reading, joy, pleasure, consensual touch and intimacy, call-ins and addressing divisions within the occupation, kindness and second chances, restorative justice as presence. Listening to the violence we carried in our bodies – the different intensities, histories, trajectories – collective care to hold us as we live in occupation and move through the world. Healing bodies. Held in webs of mutual aid and resistance.



*Strategizing*, negotiating, planning, manifesto-writing, escalating, plotting, consensus-based meetings that lasted for hours, late into the night, plans A, B, C, D and more, researching, writing, sharing, teaching, role-playing, social media posts, speaking to journalists, phone-calls and visits, the long and draining meticulous labour of fighting the institution and nourishing a community. In the university that relies on departures, arrivals, and turnovers to ‘forget’ and ‘move on’, bodily archives as holders of institutional knowledges. Pay attention, they will teach you everything you need to know. *Court orders*, eviction notices, persons unknown, trespassing, lockdowns, they turn the heat and water off, sleep deprivation, exhaustion, ‘an unreasonable small group of students’, ‘but we are taking racism very seriously’, the performances of PR and diversity exercises and emails sent to the whole university, silent lecturers and professors, where is your solidarity? Where is your body? Why isn't it here? GARA sits across from an all-white university leadership, Black and brown people that come together, you can't break us any more, eleven hours of negotiation over two days, ending with each student core member of the occupation holding space in the room, speaking truth to power, our bodies will not leave till you acknowledge what you've done to them. *How do you relate to and move through an institution that was never built for you? You fight for your body to survive it so you can build a world that abolishes it.*

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In *No Archive Will Restore You*, Julietta Singh rejects the idea of the bodily archive as a collection of imperfections and vulnerabilities. The book is definitely not a neoliberal self-care call to catalogue your flaws and turn them into love, attaching a new value to all the bits of you and your history that have been socio-culturally and politically coded as deficiencies. It is not looking for validation. Its premise is messier, its possibilities more imaginative and far-reaching. How do we see the body as messier – the ‘dirty’ bits, the fluids, the flows? How do we refuse a bodily archive that fits into normative ideas of the world and of the archive? How do we take pride in (being) the illegitimate, the irrational, the unruly, the wayward, the chaotic, the ugly, the rebellious, the erratic, and the arbitrary? How do we build worlds of communal care and love that reject any legitimacy that relies solely on narratives of our victimisation and the violence our bodies endure and that disavow any politics of inclusion, assimilation, diversity, and appeasement? How do we realise solidarities through the political work of dreaming, imagining, creating, and nurturing while holding each other? How do we imagine new and never-before ways of holding each other? There are no concrete answers – and we aren’t looking for those either – what these questions offer (and what both, Julietta Singh and GARA’s anti-racist occupation offer) are openings and invitations for us. Let us embrace them.

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Throughout the occupation of Deptford Town Hall and after its end, questions of archiving our movement surfaced frequently. We took thousands of photographs and videos. There were strategy documents, emails, shared drives and folders, social media feeds, posters, scraps of paper with quick thoughts, notes from teach-outs, box after box of love and appreciation notes, books and pages of (un)learning in every corner, so many scribbles – digital and physical. Objects of care and intimacy spread across the rooms we occupied, placed in the ‘liberation room’ of the student union building for weeks after the occupation – *come over, collect your things, take things from the leftover food cupboard, but what do we do with our collective belongings? Where do they go? How do we archive these ‘things’ that carry so many stories within them?*





And then there were our bodyminds, carrying the dense weight of a movement and a shared struggle – *tiredness, illness, and the desperate need for rest, anxieties about the struggle ahead, how will our bodies navigate the institution again? How will we continue to build our worlds without losing ourselves in the world given to us? Friendships and relationships missing the proximity to one another and the comfort of shared space, finding new ways of holding each other in the sadness of the end, how do we write the archives of this longing? Fractures, fights, and tensions within the collective (and within our lives outside of it) – who was still here and who had left? How will our archive grapple with these departures? Maybe the future of our collective is just the past. We begin collective writing spaces – sitting together to remember, share, laugh, and mourn. There are prompts and exercises and pages filled with stories. Shall we write a book? Shall we make a film? Did all this really happen? Are we allowed to fictionalise the past? What if I am not recalling correctly? Our memories differ, pieces fit in and fall apart, stories with multiple beginnings, middles, and ends and sometimes, none at all – fuck linearity and ‘truths’, it is this process of coming together and remembering and re-collecting that matters. A white ‘ally’ tells us about an art project they are planning. I am thinking about an audio tour of Deptford Town Hall as a body, they say. The university leadership are the brain and GARA is the gut bacteria; visitors will walk through the building as if it were a body and feel the memories of the occupation. We exchange glances, there we go again, we are not even surprised, we move on; the only bodies we want to think about are ours – the only embodied archives we want to reach are ours. *How do we listen to/for/with the embodied archives of occupation?**

A few months ago, we marked the first year anniversary of the beginning of the anti-racist occupation. We met to share food and stories; we watched videos and looked at photographs; we posted memories on social media – sending each other emoticons of hearts, heartbreaks, tears, and smiles; we thought of our struggles and the irreparable fractures within our movement, the demands we made of the institution, the continuing violence of the university, and mostly, of how grateful we were/are to have each other. A mere three or four days later, most of us began to ‘socially isolate’ and a week after that, the UK was officially in lockdown due to Covid-19. For many of us, the re-union and celebration was our last social gathering

before the pandemic and how grateful we were – the memories carried us through the weeks ahead. I am now finishing this essay in a world where the global pandemic and transnational uprisings against anti-Black state violence and calls for abolition have yet again amplified what we already knew – ‘normal’ is rooted in white supremacist violence, in extractive and ableist racial capitalism, in death and injustice. There is no going ‘back’ – we dream and build worlds we want to, worlds of collective care. As Dionne Brand (2020) recently wrote:

*Everything is up in the air, all narratives for the moment have been blown open — the statues are falling — all the metrics are off, if only briefly. To paraphrase Trouillot, we want ‘a life that no narrative could provide, even the best fiction.’ The reckoning might be now.*

We watch as racist and anti-Black institutions rush to profess performative support for the same Black communities that they have excluded, erased, and oppressed; we watch our white liberal racist colleagues, lecturers, and neighbours turn ‘anti-racist’ overnight and we laugh in despair. It becomes urgent to behold the archives of violence and institutional racism. But what we need even more urgently in order to realise the worlds we want are the bountiful scattered archives of solidarity, resistance, and care and I ask – what might happen to these (and to our ways of relating to one another and the world) if we remember Julietta Singh’s call to hold the body as a continuously unfolding, untameable, and expansive archive? As I/we learn(ed) from GARA, from our anti-racist occupation, collective struggle, and the relationships we nurtured – our ever re-remembering selves might just find ways to unearth and build new forms of community and imaginative care-worlds of radical collective politics.

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[i] See more on GARA’s social media – <https://www.facebook.com/goldsmithsanti/> and <https://twitter.com/goldantiracism>

[ii] You can read about the occupation here – <https://gal-dem.com/what-can-we-learn-from-the-goldsmiths-occupation/>

[iii] All photographs in this piece are from the collective visual archives of GARA

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