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## Book Review: Urgent Archives

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**Michelle Caswell. *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. New York: Routledge Press, 2021.**

When I pronounce the word Future,  
the first syllable already belongs to the past.  
When I pronounce the word Silence,  
I destroy it.

—Wisława Szymborska

By 1970, the Summer of Love seemed a distant, quaint memory. In the intervening three years, the United States had seen the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, and Fred Hampton. It had seen a bloody Democratic National Convention. It had seen the Days of Rage. It had seen hundreds of riots protesting the oppression of Black people. And it had seen the murders of students on both the Kent State and Jackson State campuses by National Guard members.

The year 1970 was also when Howard Zinn challenged the archival community, first with “The Archivist and the New Left” and then with “The Archivist and Radical Reform,” the latter presented as part of a panel at the 1970 Midwest Archives Conference. Zinn contended that

the archivist, even more than the historian and the political scientist, tends to be scrupulous about his neutrality. . . . But I will stick by what I have said about other scholars, and argue that the archivist, in subtle ways, tends to perpetuate the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business. His supposed neutrality is, in other words, a fake. If so, the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role is not, as so many scholars fear, the politicizing of a neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitably political craft.<sup>1</sup>

By the time I became an archivist in 1985, these notions of archivists as active agents in anti-oppression had largely been shelved in favor of more mainstream theoretical issues such as digital records, descriptive standards, processing best practices, and what was often labeled “diversity.” All important, no doubt, but definitely more amenable to archival claims to neutrality and objectivity than the work that Zinn had proposed. Dr. Michelle Caswell is not claiming that *Urgent Archives* is the only time archival activism has been investigated since 1970.<sup>2</sup> She is, however, making the claim that the time is now (and is *always* now) for direct action.

And then came this now. In 2016, an authoritarian sociopath was elected president of the United States. By 2020, the frictional cocktail of pandemic reactions, endless murder of Black and

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in “New Leadership at Tamiment Library: Shannon O’Neill,” Howard Zinn Website, 2020, <https://www.-howardzinn.org/new-leadership-at-tamiment-library-shannon-oneill/>.

<sup>2</sup> “If younger generations of archival scholars and practitioners are formulating new critiques and emancipatory plans, as I am claiming, it is because they are building on the work of those who first embarked on these critical investigations decades ago” (14). See pages 12–15 for a concise history of literature on this subject.

Brown folks, protest and violent police response, and widespread support of an attempted coup made it seem like the world had undergone some sort of seismic shift. But the reality is that these oppressive systems, these fractured relationships, and this individual and community pain and trauma have always been there. After fifty years, there does not seem to have been any progress toward a future in which oppression is a memory and people are free to live authentic and actualized lives.

*Urgent Archives* is not Caswell's first foray into the world of archival activism, but it is her most direct and fully formed call to action.<sup>3</sup> In her introduction to the book she states a clear purpose: "By imagining what does not yet exist, but might if we collectively will it, I am trying to extricate archival theory and practice from the constraints of the oppressive systems in which it is rooted and for which it has been a tool" (11).

While *Urgent Archives* is aimed at liberatory memory work in community archives settings, it also has a lot to say to archivists in other, often institutional settings. Caswell is pointed but not hostile in calling archivists to action. She repeatedly notes that she is providing a tough-love blueprint that allows archivists, in whatever places they are situated, to take individual and collective action to resist oppression.

I must confess to finding *Urgent Archives* personally challenging. Hope, the future, progress, justice—all of these are longstanding pillars in my personal epistemology. I also inhabit most of the identity vectors in the WEBCCCHAM presence, sitting uncomfortably amid a wealth of unearned power and privilege (13).<sup>4</sup> But the challenge this book presents is worth the effort. It calls our authentic selves to action in solidarity with the express purpose of disrupting oppression *now*. The joy in that action outweighs any discomfort *Urgent Archives* brings.

Caswell organizes the book into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The chapters include "A Matter of Time: Archival Temporalities," "Community Archives Interrupting Time," "From Representation to Activation," and "Imagining Liberatory Memory Work." I appreciate the clear way that Caswell uses parts of the introduction (20–21) and conclusion (114–15) to explicitly lay out what she plans to tell the reader and then what she has told the reader. It is a useful way to check what the chapters say to you against what the author intends to say.

The introduction focuses on positionality and definition. Caswell takes time to discuss her personal history and work in helping to build the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). Being in community and working toward liberation is personal and relational. It requires openness and awareness of the multiple positions and connections one has. It also requires candor about the fact that getting it right is iterative and will involve failures. Caswell states, "There is a continuum that posits white people, on one end, replicating white supremacist structures and appropriating cultures that are not their own, and on the other end, acting as co-conspirators with people of color for mutual liberation. I aim to always be on the side of the latter, but I cannot say I always get it right" (9). Amen to that, comrade.

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<sup>3</sup> Caswell has written and spoken extensively on this and related subjects for over a decade. See "Michelle Caswell's Research," ResearchGate, 2021, <https://www.researchgate.net/scientific-contributions/Michelle-Caswell-77089627>.

<sup>4</sup> WEBCCCHAM is an acronym for Caswell's expansion of Hope Olsen's axes of power. It refers to white, ethnically European, bourgeois, Christian, cis, citizen, heterosexual, able-bodied, and male (13).

In a similar vein, Caswell discusses her research strategy. She notes that *Urgent Archives* sits solidly within an interpretivist research paradigm and that she sits squarely in the situations she describes: “*I am not a detached observer of community archives; I am an advocate for them who believes deeply in their transformative (if as of yet unrealized) potential*” (10, emphasis added).

As mentioned above, Caswell is not claiming to have invented the concepts in this book. She notes that the ideas in *Urgent Archives* are built on cycles of research and theorizing stretching back hundreds of years. Among archival theorists, Verne Harris has had a significant impact on Caswell’s work. Caswell also credits “decades (if not centuries) of work by Black archivists, collectors, and memory keepers like Ida B. Wells, Dorothy Porter, and Arturo Schomburg” with impacting her work (14). In keeping with *Urgent Archives*, I would posit that the most important impact in Caswell’s efforts is the interaction between the communities she works with now and these voices from past memory workers.

Caswell also provides definitions for three key terms: “community archives,” “activist archives,” and “white supremacy.” She makes it clear that definitions of these terms are “hotly contested” and that she includes them to make her position clear. Of the three, “community archives” is the most useful in understanding Caswell’s following arguments. The key elements in her definition are the need to recognize community archives’ inherent power inequities, levels of autonomy of operations, socially constructed nature, and participatory archival activities.<sup>5</sup>

The first chapter of *Urgent Archives* centers around time. The core of her argument is threefold—that linear time, the inevitability of progress, and the focus of archives on saving the past for the future are conceptual allies of oppression. Linear time, also named “white time,” is so familiar to people in what is now called the United States that we often see it as the only way time exists. Today is followed by tomorrow in an endless progression of days. Caswell counters with a variety of ways that humans view time. What is important to note about alternative views of time is that they have been actively suppressed through colonial and neocolonial power. Linear time is seen as natural time—the only way time exists and should exist.

Linear time is closely tied to the inevitability of progress. Predestined progress is key to modernist thinking. It developed during the Enlightenment but has deep roots in Christian theology. It insists that, regardless of individual setbacks and the time it can take to change, humans will always progress—that what is still to come is always better than what has already happened. Linear time and inevitable progress combine to create a framework where the past is closed and we have moved on, or progressed beyond, oppressive histories and will inevitably move forward to a more perfect future. But the reality is that “our systems (of government, of justice, of property, and of education) are built to oppress. The institutions built around these systems are designed to perpetuate rather than progressively dismantle white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy” (34).

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<sup>5</sup> A detailed literature review of “community archives” is located at Alex H. Poole, “The Information Work of Community Archives: A Systematic Literature Review,” 2020, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339935811\\_The\\_Information\\_Work\\_of\\_Community\\_Archives\\_A\\_Systematic\\_Literature\\_Review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339935811_The_Information_Work_of_Community_Archives_A_Systematic_Literature_Review).

Included in these systems and institutions are archives. Caswell details dominant archival theory related to records, summing it up in this way: “Records are fixed (in both time and format), they are deemed archival, they are preserved, and they travel from the past to the future to serve as evidence” (35). Caswell spends the remainder of this chapter dismantling this conception, noting that nonlinear time is incompatible with fixity and requires that records are activated and reactivated (often in different ways by different people) in the present, not preserved as unchangeable objects for imagined future users.

So how can communities use their archives to resist the imposition of white time and inevitable progress structures? In the second chapter, Caswell uses four community archives that served as focus groups for a 2016 Institute of Museum and Library Services grant project to study the affective or emotional impact of marginalized identity-based community archives on the communities they serve and represent. They included La Historia Society, the Little Tokyo Historical Society, Lambda Archives, and the Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California (49).

One of the beauties of this chapter is the way Caswell lets the communities speak for themselves. *Urgent Archives* uses their stories to illustrate how “users of community archives also articulated conceptions of archives as spaces to connect past injustice with contemporary activism and possibilities, to disrupt cycles of oppression, and to hold each other accountable for imparting knowledge of and strategies for resistance to younger generations in the present” (49). Instead of seeing steady progress toward a better future where they could fully express themselves, these communities all talked about how their histories consist of cycles of oppression in which progress is a fleeting and precarious possibility. The younger members see archives as a way to bring the past forward into the present, not the future. Using archives that describe how their ancestors dealt with the same types of oppression, the members create a present that tries to break that cycle by transforming self-recognition into political action. Caswell notes that there are limits to the use of archives to break oppressive cycles. Several community members commented that while the “facts and data” in archives can be used for action, that only matters if power values those facts.

In *Urgent Archives*’s third chapter, Caswell argues that while it is important for community members to see themselves accurately represented in archives, representation is not the ultimate goal. Communities must be able to appreciate recognition while moving past it to use these minoritized histories to remove current oppression. Caswell uses the experience of SAADA and three of its new initiatives to show how a community archives can create meaning in the present through the creation and use of records to build political consciousness and action. These initiatives were the result of a large grant received from the Mellon Foundation and were structured around current events—the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Movement for Black Lives, and the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

A key point Caswell makes is that dominant Western archives tradition often does not see these initiatives as archival because they create new records with the explicit purpose being archival, instead of being created as a byproduct of administrative activity. She (along with SAADA executive director Samip Mallick) argues that “such distinctions are meaningless for many

communities and indeed, that we are ethically compelled to generate new records in the face of racist erasures and silences in pre-existing records” (71).

For instance, the “Letters from 6’ Away” project asks South Asian Americans to write a letter to their future selves about their experiences with the pandemic. These letters are put into the archives and then mailed back to the creator a year later. The submissions are deeply personal and self-reflective. The letters collectively are used to make sense of something that is beyond clear understanding. The act of creating some sort of shared understanding is a mark of community.

SAADA also committed energy to the Movement for Black Lives. While acknowledging the complicated history of the South Asian American community with anti-Black racism, Mallick has positioned SAADA as an organization committed to justice for Black people. Through examples of historic South Asian and South Asian American figures committed to antiracist support for Black people, SAADA creates historic and archival corollaries with modern activists like Shebani Rao and South Asians for Black Lives. These efforts open up “historical possibilities” (to use Mallick’s words). Instead of continuing to rely on “it gets better” narratives, communities can ally with their ancestors to build relationships with them through time, employing their past actions both to inspire current actions and to participate in creating an alternative history for what is happening now.

A third example is a short video encouraging South Asian Americans to vote in the 2020 election. Using images of archival records, the video tells the story of Vaishno Das Bagai, an Indian American businessman. A 1923 U.S. Supreme Court decision that removed South Asian American citizenship based on racial grounds caused him to kill himself in protest five years later. The video urges people to register and vote, closing with, “Your vote, our future.” The video was made in the face of the very real possibility of the reelection of Donald Trump and the continued erosion of hard-won rights. Caswell writes, “These messages communicate: South Asian Americans did not always have these rights, our ancestors fought for them, they could be rescinded, we might have to fight for them again. Oppressive histories repeat themselves; the threat of this repetition looms large” (80).

All of these examples rely on a different take on the traditional and central archives function of appraisal. In keeping with a central theme in *Urgent Archives*, Caswell discusses the importance of an appraisal practice that fits in with the need to activate archives in the present. She sees the key vector in appraisal as the records’ potential for use in current liberation struggles: “Contrary to the past century of dominant Western appraisal theory, liberatory appraisal considers the potential uses of records in making appraisal decisions, and further asks *whose uses* and *for what aims*” (85). Liberatory appraisal assumes archives are selected to be used—not just sometime but now. And used by folks that need to be liberated from some sort of oppression. In direct opposition to any notions that archivists might have about neutrality or objectivity, Caswell asserts that “the work of archives and the work of activism, the work of representation, and the work of liberation, cannot occur on separate but parallel tracks; they must be intertwined” (87).

Chapter 4 is *Urgent Archives*’s money shot. Caswell lays out the three legs of liberatory memory work that were outlined in the previous chapters—temporal, affective, and material. She then

proceeds to outline the nature of liberatory memory work and what it means for communities and archives. Even though the book is deeply intellectual in its analysis, its recommendation centers around urgent, relational *work*: “The ‘liberatory memory work’ framing demands that we work. Our task—activating archives for human liberation—is not easy. It is a struggle, one that demands action” (116).

Temporal liberatory work is based in a concept that Caswell names “chronoautonomy.” Circling back to chapter 1, she asserts that communities must be liberated from white time, that they construct their own time. This construction opposes, or even more effectively is indifferent to, dominant Western theory and practice.

Affective liberatory work is built on the relational aspect of archives. Rather than seeing inclusion as a goal, it focuses on autonomy: “Liberatory memory work based at community archives does not pander to dominant groups for recognition, but rather empowers minoritized communities to recognize themselves in archival records” (100). It is also a basis for joy. Caswell notes that communities feel real joy at seeing themselves as existing. This joy in self-recognition is an important part of liberatory memory work.

She also presses archivists to see joy in doing anti-oppressive work now, even in the face of uncertain futures. The very act of doing this work is liberatory and brings joy: “It is liberating to say no. It is liberating to say ‘enough is enough.’ It is liberating to be a pain in the ass” (101). Joy is not separated from seriousness or anger—they are all tied in with Caswell’s assertion that this work requires urgency, a steady push toward liberation *now*.

Material liberatory work comes from the realization that the joy in this work is not just “fun for fun’s sake” but is only meaningful when it involves redistributing resources. Caswell identifies two broad categories where redistribution is necessary—in broader society and in the archives world more narrowly. In the first case, *Urgent Archives* calls for the use of archival records to support reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans and land reclamation for Native peoples. Archivists have expertise in the use of records, can identify what stories they tell or don’t tell, and can link them to meaningful action. Accordingly, “If archivists think outside of the confines of neutrality and the constraints of professionalism, we can take part in this struggle” (104).

In the second case, Caswell argues for the redistribution of resources away from white cultural institutions to community-based archives. Until recently, many funding sources ignored community-based archives. It is time for funders, agencies, and institutions to take community-based archives seriously. By prioritizing the funding of archives in communities that have suffered from capitalist and colonial theft, archivists can build relationships and strengthen communities.

Caswell provides some insight about how mainstream archivists can help community-based archives. She rightfully identifies the power dynamics in that question and notes that a couple of answers could be to “leave them alone” or learn from their creative solutions in the face of financial precarity. Caswell insists that the “better question” relates to how mainstream archives can actively engage in liberatory work. *Urgent Archives* advocates a simultaneous process of

dismantling oppressive structures while at the same time building new structures: “Dismantle archival concepts, practices, and institutions based on chronoviolence, symbolic annihilation, and maldistribution. Build concepts, practices, and institutions that empower people from minoritized communities with chronoautonomy, self-recognition, and redistribution of resources. Activate records for temporal, affective, and material justice” (106).

This work is bigger than just archives. Archives are located in governments, universities, corporations, and other seats of white supremacist power. Without structural changes to the systems that hold power in this country, changes to archives will be minimal at best. Caswell quotes Fred Moten: “What it is that is supposed to be repaired is irreparable. It can’t be repaired. The only thing we can do is tear this shit down completely and build something new” (106).

While there are no real weaknesses in Caswell’s arguments, I would contend that this is an area that could be expanded. Archivists located in mainstream institutions are not able to tear down their own structures on their own. They will need to forge much broader solidarity than with community archivists only, and not just with the usual suspects in the galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) community. They will need healers, builders, educators, creators, fighters, and a host of others to build the kind of broader community that can bring down white supremacist institutions. The construction of this kind of solidarity will be to the mutual benefit of all communities involved.

So here we are. Fifty years after Howard Zinn’s call for radical archives reform went largely unrealized, another archivist issues a call to action. *Urgent Archives* challenges archivists to intervene in this (and every) cycle of oppression. Caswell’s love for community and for archivists is clear. She wants communities to be liberated and autonomous. She also wants archivists to use their knowledge and skills to step into anti-oppressive roles. She is asking archivists to stop preserving the past for some “better” future but to imagine a better future and to use archives to build it now. *Urgent Archives* is not a blueprint—it is a manifesto on the destruction of oppression in the now and the possibilities that destruction brings. It calls archivists to divest their power and join communities in liberatory work now. *Urgent Archives* makes no promises except that refusing to act changes nothing.