

Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work

By Michelle Caswell. Routledge Studies in Archives. New York: Routledge, 2021.
142 pp. Hardcover, \$160.00. EPUB, \$48.95. Hardcover ISBN 9780367427276;
EPUB ISBN 9781003001355.

Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work is many things. It is a “tough love letter” (p. 16) addressed to archivists, scholars, and memory workers; a “rough blueprint” (p. 16) aimed at activating records to “interrupt cycles of hetero-patriarchy and white supremacy” (p. 64); and a “provocation” (p. 116) aimed at some of the most fundamental and “dominant Western archival theories and practices” (p. 35). Mostly, however, it is a well-cited, strongly argued *cri de cœur* from one of the leading voices in the archival studies field demonstrating the (urgent) need for major revisions to the ways that archives and archival practices are understood.

Caswell, like her work, is many things: an associate professor of archival studies in the Department of Information Studies and an affiliated member of the Department of Asian American Studies, both at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Additionally, she is the director of UCLA’s Community Archives Lab,¹ the lead organizer of the Archivists Against Collective², and the cofounder of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA).³ Each of these organizations contributes to Caswell’s perspectives and arguments, and the examples she draws from them help to contextualize community archives to readers who may be unfamiliar with them.

Many readers of this review will likely be familiar with Caswell’s work, either through her multiple articles in *American Archivist*, her coedited special issue of *The Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* on critical archival studies, or her work on memory, public history, and social justice. Over the past decade, Caswell has risen to prominence as one of the leading thinkers in archives, as her previous book, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia*, and several of her coauthored articles received awards from the Society of American Archivists and the Association of Canadian Archivists. For a generation of younger archivists and archival studies students, Caswell’s work as a staunch defender of archival studies⁴ is well known, but in *Urgent Archives* and other recent work⁵, she has taken a more conciliatory approach toward humanists, “hop[ing] to bridge the two disciplines and heal what has been an unproductive rift. . . , [so] that we begin to speak to rather than across each other” (p. 15).

Caswell’s approach also aligns with the vision of the Routledge Studies in Archives series to which her book belongs. Edited by James Lowry (an assistant professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at Queens

College in the City University of New York), the series serves as “a platform” for “work in support of memory, identity construction, social justice, accountability, legal rights and historical understanding” and aims to promote the “intellectual history of archival science, the internationalisation of archival discourse and the building of new archival theory” (p. ix). Scholars and students in archival studies will be pleased to know that this series is proceeding at a rapid clip, and two additional publications are expected in 2022. The series manages this iteration by peer reviewing proposals rather than final manuscripts; final manuscripts are then edited by Lowry and the Routledge editor and only (re)sent out for peer review if they feel something contentious or potentially erroneous would benefit from review by a topic specialist.⁶ The goals of this series and its authors are ambitious, and we will see in the coming years if they succeed in their objectives. But it is especially impressive to see the development of another publication venue for archival, library, and information science topics alongside Litwin Books and Library Juice Press.

Excluding paratextual elements, *Urgent Archives* is around 120 pages long (similar in length to other titles in the series), but the page count feels deceptively short, as each chapter forms a strand in a tightly woven argument. Readers who are altogether new to Caswell’s scholarship or the topics of community archives and critical archival studies will be well served by a thorough reading of the introduction, “Community Archives: Assimilation, Integration, or Resistance?” (25 pp.), as it is a demonstration of the author at her best. Through a series of vignettes centered around SAADA and the “racist context of the society in which it was created” (p. 1), Caswell viscerally demonstrates the emotional and historical importance of community archives. The examples she uses are so poignant that when she asserts that archives empower individuals to “see themselves in a new light across space and time . . . [and] then catalyze this new self-reflection into action, motivating users into activism beyond their personal contexts” (p. 6), she makes it seem a logical rather than a radical departure from the principles of Muller, Feith, Fruin, and Schellenberg.

The succeeding chapters make this departure much more explicit; indeed, chapter 1 (“A Matter of Time: Archival Temporalities,” 17 pp.) is a sustained critique of the concept of “time” as it exists in Western archival and societal contexts. Drawing upon Hindu, Indigenous, Queer, and Black literatures and scholarship, Caswell argues that the way time is perceived in a Western context (in a linear manner, descended from Christian and Greco-Roman notions of progress) is a barrier to achieving the liberatory potential of archives. To describe how traditional Western archival theories and practices cause harm to minoritized communities, Caswell introduces the concept of *chronoviolence*. This chapter is heavily theoretical, and readers new to the concepts or literature that Caswell draws upon will benefit from a slow reading or multiple rereadings.

Nonetheless, the section is important for understanding the resultant discussion and forms the core of *Urgent Archives*' contributions to archival studies and the archives profession. Despite the chapter's heavy engagement with marginalized scholars and perspectives, Caswell does not draw upon work on crip time from disability scholarship, a concept that is relevant to Caswell's argument.⁷ This is a critique that could be (and has been⁸) applied to other works in the Routledge Studies in Archives series and is one that is likely to be addressed soon by the work of Gracen Brilmyer and others in forthcoming First Monday and Litwin Press texts.

Some readers might find subsequent chapters more concrete, as they narrow the focus to specific case studies. For example, chapter 2, "Community Archives Interrupting Time" (18 pp.), documents the work that Caswell and her research assistants undertook following a 2016 Institute of Museum and Library Services grant aimed at investigating whether the emotional impact of archives documented at SAADA is "more broadly applicable to other minoritized communities and community archives" (p. 49). Additionally, the grant provided for the development of a toolkit for fund-raising and marketing efforts aimed at community archives. Altogether, the chapter reports the early findings from conversations with La Historia Society, an archives founded in 1998 to document the Mexican American farmworker community east of Los Angeles;⁹ the Little Tokyo Historical Society, founded in 2006 to document Japanese American history before and after their forced removal and incarceration during World War II;¹⁰ the Lambda Archives, founded in 1987 to "collect, preserve, and share"¹¹ the history of LGBTQ people in San Diego and its environs; and the community-centered Southeast Asian Archive at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), founded in 1987.¹² This chapter is essential reading for those interested in the practices and beliefs of marginalized community archives and how they have developed practices that align with or oppose traditional archivy. However, while these four community archives "might be seen as sources of as-of-yet unrealized potential for political resistance" and liberatory memory work, Caswell argues that their "full potential to serve as 'politically generative spaces' [has not yet been] completely realized" (pp. 64–65). To understand what Caswell sees as a more realized form of liberatory memory work, readers will need to turn to the following chapter, "From Representation to Activation" (20 pp.). This chapter narrows the focus further, using SAADA as a demonstration of some of Caswell's concepts in practice. In discussing how SAADA has responded to political events, Caswell argues that the archives "interrupt[s] white time" by "activating" records "to stop cyclical oppression in the now" (p. 70). In rereading these chapters, I couldn't help but wonder if the four organizations discussed in chapter 2 would share Caswell's conception of

“activation” or if they would see their missions as divergent; it would be very interesting to read follow-up discussions.

The final chapter, “Imagining Liberatory Memory Work” (16 pp.), and the concluding coda, “Liberation Now!” (5 pp.), bring together the arguments of the previous chapters to “reposition the archivist as a liberatory memory worker, activating records for the liberation of oppressed communities” (p. 93), via a “two-pronged strategy of simultaneously dismantling oppressive practices and building liberatory practices” (p. 22). However, Caswell notes that she does “not know exactly what liberatory archives will look like yet” but believes that “community archives are getting us one step closer to the archival world we need” (pp. 108–10). An uncharitable reading of the final sections would argue that *Urgent Archives* is unfinished—but this would be too simplistic, as Caswell herself says that she does not think she should be the “sole architect.” Instead, what Caswell is “offering here frees [the readers] to envision and enact new liberatory worlds even as we dismantle old ways of being and doing. Records, if conceived of and activated for liberatory aims, have the power to change ourselves and the world” (p. 116).

Like the work that it calls for, *Urgent Archives* is not perfect, but it does not attempt to be. Some of it, such as chapters 2 and 3, is immediate and proximate; these parts will have the greatest impact on contemporaries but risk being dated by current events.¹³ Others, like the introduction and chapter 1, are timeless and bolster Caswell’s reputation as one of the most significant (re)thinkers of archivy and memory work. Educators will find these sections especially useful as Caswell’s summarization of the history of community archives is unparalleled. Additionally, the book’s dense bibliography is a remarkable asset, and perusing it is a highly rewarding endeavor—it feels like a rare opportunity to peer into the private library of a scholar whose work continues to define the field. As a whole, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* is a remarkable and useful work that deserves immediate elevation to the archival studies “canon.”

© Brian M. Watson

University of British Columbia iSchool

NOTES

¹ Community Archives Lab, “Community Archives Lab UCLA—Your Archive Story Matters,” Community Archives Lab UCLA, <https://communityarchiveslab.ucla.edu>.

² Archivists Against, “About Us,” Archivists Against History Repeating Itself, January 1, 2022, <https://www.archivistsagainst.org>.

³ South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), “About,” Text, South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), <https://www.saada.org>.

- ⁴ Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16, no. 1 (2016), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk>.
- ⁵ Itza A. Carbajal and Michelle Caswell, "Critical Digital Archives: A Review from Archival Studies," *The American Historical Review* 126, no. 3 (2021): 1102–20, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhab359>.
- ⁶ James Lowry, personal communication to the author, 2020.
- ⁷ "A concept arising from disabled experience that addresses the ways that disabled/chronically ill and neurodivergent people experience time (and space) differently than able-bodied/minded folk." See University of Minnesota Critical Disability Studies Collective, "Terminology," *Critical Disability Studies* (blog), <https://cdsc.umn.edu/cds/terms>.
- ⁸ Brian M. Watson, "Producing the Archival Body," *American Archivist* 84, no. 1 (2021): 222–26, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-84.1.222>.
- ⁹ La Historia Historical Society Museum, "About," La Historia Historical Society Museum, January 10, 2022, <https://www.lahistoriamuseum.org/about.html>.
- ¹⁰ Little Tokyo Historical Society, "Our Vision," Little Tokyo Historical Society, <https://www.littletokyohs.org/our-vision>.
- ¹¹ Lambda Archives, "About," Lambda Archives of San Diego, June 20, 2017, <https://lambdaarchives.org/home/about>.
- ¹² Southeast Asian Archives, "The Southeast Asian Archive," Southeast Asian Archives, January 10, 2022, <https://seaa.lib.uci.edu>.
- ¹³ Caswell and her citations, however, would tell us that time is not linear in this way.