

Lovers in a Dangerous Time: Archives, Archivists, and Community

Terry Baxter

Greetings, comrades.

It is wonderful to be in community with you all, whether in this room or situated somewhere else in this world, all of us connected to each other in friendship.

Before I get into it, I'd like to thank some folks for their support through the last couple of years. Much love all around, but specific love for these people.

Courtney Chartier spent a year providing wisdom and guidance through her SAA presidency. Her mentorship and generosity of spirit gave me the confidence that I could, as I like to say, not fuck things up too badly.

Hā'awi 'o Helen Wong Smith i ke kākō'o a me ka na'auao a me ko mākou hope pelekikena. Mahalo au i kona kuana'ike, kona mau mana'o no'eau a me kona pu'uwai hāmama a lokomaika'i. E pōmaika'i 'oukou a pau mai kāna alaka'i ikaika 'ana.

Jackie Price Osafo has navigated SAA through an ongoing transition period calmly, wisely, and carefully. Her leadership and vision for the Society has been invaluable to me and to you all.

Debbie Jewell and my comrades in the Multnomah County Archives have provided so much support in so many ways. I could not have spent the time doing this gig without them, and I am deeply grateful for them.

And all of you. I have worked as an archivist for thirty-eight years. The amount of wisdom, correction, support, kindness, fun, and solidarity I've received from thousands of comrades—many of you in this audience—is humbling. None of us do our work alone. The fact that I am standing here talking with you is the result of you all's generosity and our shared commitment to helping each other.

I attended the annual NAGARA meeting last week. Sitting at a discussion table, we did the standard round of introductions. After identifying myself and

saying I worked as an archivist at Multnomah County and the Oregon Country Fair, Rebekah Davis mentioned that I was also the president of SAA. The woman next to me just started laughing. After a few seconds, she looked around, got quiet, and said, “Oh no. You’re serious.” I feel you, sister. So, you all might have been expecting something polished and professional. Rubes. What I’ve got for you is something with deep meaning for me, in my own words, that I hope will resonate with you all in some way.

I have a large tattoo on my back. It includes the Nom block rendition of a poem translated as “Spring-Watching Pavilion.” Written by Vietnamese poet Ho Xuan Huong some 200 years ago, it was translated by John Balaban into English and published in a book of her works titled *Spring Essence* in 2000. Balaban’s translation reads:

A gentle spring evening arrives
airily, unclouded by worldly dust.
Three times the bell tolls echoes like a wave.
We see heaven upside-down in sad puddles.
Love’s vast sea cannot be emptied.
And springs of grace flow easily everywhere.
Where is nirvana?
Nirvana is here, nine times out of ten.¹

When I first encountered this poem, it spoke to me in ways that few other things have. I knew I had to write it on my body. It sits with me daily, guiding and informing my path through life. Courtney’s thoughts on grace, shared with us a year ago, sparked my brain to consider the role of love in our lives as archivists.

I approach this topic with humility. The work of the Michelle Caswell coaching tree around radical empathy is firmly entrenched in discussions of archivists and archival work. Holly Smith’s presentation on radical love has also deeply impacted my thinking. I’m not claiming originality—the heavy lifting on this topic has been done by bigger brains than mine. But what I would like to do is talk in my own words about why this matters to me and why it could matter to you.

A brief confession here. I was raised by wolves, or missionaries as they are sometimes called. I grew up enmeshed in religious imagery and language. Even



FIGURE 1. Courtesy of Terry Baxter.

though I have grown secular, I often speak and think in religious ways. So, if this comes off sounding like a homily, please filter accordingly.

As part of the plenary group that presented at RBMS 2021 (shoutout to the sweetest comrades—Athena, Dorothy, and Jesse), I spoke about the centrality of mutual aid and solidarity in the future of our work. I included a quote from Peter Kropotkin that contends that mutual aid and human solidarity superseded love and sympathy as key factors in a just and equitable society.² I have thought about that for two years now.

I'm not confident enough in my analysis to say that he's wrong. What I do feel confident enough to say is that love and solidarity are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, build upon each other.

We construct community through mutual aid, from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs. We all live in a mix of communities. Some are nested, like matryoshka dolls. Others are interconnected. And a very few exist in isolation. Most communities share similar general attributes.

A community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. People form and maintain communities to meet common needs. Members of a community have a sense of trust, belonging, safety, and caring for each other. They have an individual and collective sense that they can, as part of that community, influence their environments and each other.

That treasured feeling of community comes from shared experiences and a sense of—not necessarily the actual experience of—shared history. This feeling is fundamental to human existence.

Communities form institutions—what we usually think of as large organizations and systems such as schools, government, faith, or the nonprofit sector—to more effectively fulfill their needs. Equally important, however, are communities' informal institutions, such as the social or cultural networks of helpers and leaders.

In dangerous times, solidarity and mutual aid can be vital in a community's ability to survive. But I would contend that communities need love to thrive. And, if communities have both solidarity and love, they are positioned to resist, overcome, and transform oppression.

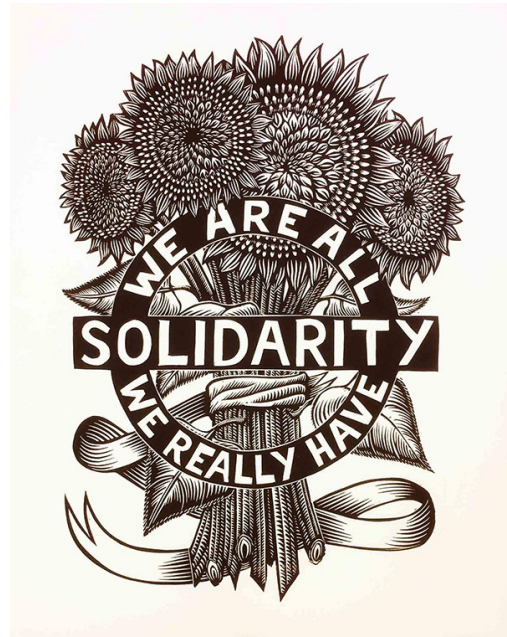


FIGURE 2. Courtesy of Roger Peet.

But it's not just the doom-and-gloom part of life that matters. Love also provides communities with the potential for joyful life. Poet and gardener Ross Gay reflects in *Inciting Joy*:

My hunch is that joy is an ember for or precursor to wild and unpredictable and transgressive and unboundaried solidarity. And that that solidarity might incite further joy. Which might incite further solidarity. And on and on. My hunch is that joy, emerging from our common sorrow—which does not necessarily mean we have the same sorrows, but that we, in common, sorrow—might draw us together. It might depolarize us and de-atomize us enough that we can consider what, in common, we love. And though attending to what we hate in common is too often all the rage (and it happens also to be very big business), noticing what we love in common, and studying that, might help us survive. It's why I think of joy, which gets us to love, as being a practice of survival.³

But this is not the world we currently inhabit, is it friends?

We are encouraged by a culture steeped in capitalism, consumerism, and smug settler rugged individualism to focus on self-betterment, as if we can somehow work hard enough to transform ourselves into “better” individuals situated and poised to save the world. In *All About Love*, bell hooks is clear: “I am often struck by the dangerous narcissism fostered by spiritual rhetoric that pays so much attention to individual self-improvement and so little to the practice of love within the context of community.”⁴

We do not learn to be less racist, comrades, by reading some books, posting a meme, and cogitating on how we can become a better person. We learn by being in community with people who are antiracist, by opening our hearts and minds to

being challenged, by loving people who are different from us but want to be in community with us, and by being willing to change and grow together.

Nearly a decade ago, I was sitting in a hallway at a professional gig chatting with a friend. My dear comrade Holly Smith and some friends were heading out to dinner. “Stay out of trouble,” I admonished them as they walked by. A few minutes later, Holly came back and told me that that phrasing, from old white men to young Black women, is often coded and offensive. I was embarrassed, but she followed up,



FIGURE 3. Courtesy of Roger Peet.



FIGURE 4. *Courtesy of Terry Baxter.*

“I know you were just clueless and didn’t mean anything by it. I just thought you should know.”

That is radical love in action, friends. Holly could have walked by and just been aggravated. Or she could have left me in my ignorance, another insult waiting to happen. But she cared enough about our community to challenge me with love, hoping that I would live up to the aspirations we have for each other. I have been endlessly thankful for that moment, both for the personal knowledge but also for the modeled behavior for how loving community should work.

You all are probably wondering, where’s the archives? This is the Society of American ARCHIVISTS, not the fucking Love Lounge!

Well, first off. Elections have consequences! You got what you voted for, and it’s not like I’m throwing out some smooth bait-and-switch. And there’s nothing wrong with the Love Lounge. At the Oregon Country Fair, we elders share our archives-oriented space, named the Still Living Room (still living, get it? Get it?), with the Love Lounge for their nighttime raves. Plenty of room, plenty of history, plenty of music, and some intergenerational community.

Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor identify four relationships central to the practice of radical empathy. The first is between the archivist and the creator of the record. The second is between the archivist and the subjects of the records. The third relationship is between the archivist and the user. The fourth relationship is between the archivist and the broader community.⁵ In “Radical Love,” Holly Smith proposes the addition of a fifth relationship—one among archivists.⁶

If we consider radical empathy and love as foundational principles for our work, it transforms all of the archival work we perform. Appraisal, arrangement and

description, preservation, access, outreach—all of them become love in practice. As important, it can resituate archives and archival workers and begin to integrate them into the communities they are part of.

We are not in solidarity with each other as archivists, or memory workers, or data scientists, or whatever flavor of culture keeper we identify with. We are in solidarity with each other as human beings. Archives is merely the occupational means we've chosen to build connection and solidarity in our communities. I'm not downplaying the importance of archives and archival workers, just trying to situate them in the wide swath of human activity that keeps communities vibrant.

I think many humans, and archival workers specifically, are hesitant to talk about love outside of familial and romantic contexts. For a profession still struggling to break out of an archaic affiliation with concepts like neutrality and objectivity, love appears too emotional, too prone to taking a side. Love is also one of those concepts that avoids sharp definition and boundaries, swirling around conceptually and subject to multiple interpretations.

There's the old saw from Cornel West: "Justice is what love looks like in public."⁷ Bell hooks adds in *Outlaw Culture*: "The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others."⁸ James Baldwin wrote that "The longer I live, the more deeply I learn that love—whether we call it friendship or family or romance—is the work of mirroring and magnifying each other's light. Gentle work. Steadfast work. Life-saving work in those moments when life and shame and sorrow occlude our own light from our view, but there is still a clear-eyed loving person to beam it back. In our best moments, we are that person for another."⁹ Catherine Wybourne declares that "The paradox of love is that it is supremely free yet attaches us with bonds stronger than death. It cannot be bought or sold; there is nothing it cannot face; love is life's greatest blessing."¹⁰



FIGURE 5 (left). FIGURE 6 (right). Figures courtesy of Terry Baxter.

The Interference Archive, in *if a song could be freedom . . . Organized Sounds of Resistance*, says that:

A big part of learning how to be in Solidarity is unlearning what we have been taught about Love. We are taught that love is reserved for those who are like us, our blood families, “our people” and that love should be romantic or familial. We know that expanding who and how we love is essential to build the world we want to live in. Solidarity means learning how to love each other’s complexities, nuances and baggage, as people who have been oppressed and want liberation for all. That process is messy, and essential. It is not an easy love, it is an intentional decision to build movements with other people, despite the circumstances. You are in it knowing you might change, you are leaving your comfort, leaving what you may have because there is no other way to live unless we’re all there, unless there’s liberation for all.¹¹

In thinking about this for some time now, I have some thoughts that really grate on my brain. The idea, attributed to many but possibly originating with Emma Lazarus, that “Until we are all free, we are none of us free” is a powerful rallying cry among oppressed communities. It calls on folks of varying backgrounds and practices to work together, in love and solidarity, to resist that oppression.

But the more I think about this, the more I believe it is also a call to love those who we cannot be in community with. Not in some sort of bullshit “love the sinner hate the sin” way, but with true empathy. In 1970, James Cone wrote in *A Black Theology of Liberation*:

. . . there is no use for a God who loves white oppressors *the same as* oppressed blacks. . . Is it possible to understand what God’s love means for the oppressed without making wrath an essential ingredient of that love? What could love possibly mean in a racist society except the righteous condemnation of everything racist?¹²

James Baldwin also said of love, “We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.” And bell hooks also said that “there can be no love without justice.”¹³

Loving oppressors doesn’t mean staying silent in the face of injustice, to maintain civility. It means speaking out, correcting what needs to be corrected, using whatever voice you have to amplify the voices of those who have been silenced.

Loving oppressors doesn’t mean calling for cheap “nonviolence” that only serves to preserve the current power structure. It means engaging in purposeful acts of resistance, peaceful if possible but not if necessary, dedicating yourself to the work of advocacy and solidarity, showing up when it counts.



FIGURE 7. Courtesy of Josh McPhee.

And, most important, it means doing all of this with the best interests of oppressors in mind. If you love someone, you want to guide them away from behavior that harms themselves or others. In this context, polite silence in the face of injustice is the opposite of love. Love is speaking up. Love is resistance.¹⁴

I'm not handing out advice here. I'm so flawed in this respect that I can barely recognize myself here. But it is not just aspirational to me. It is a commitment to work every day toward bringing love—either through solidarity or resistance—to all. For me, this is often a hard love. But like Toni Morrison said: “Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all.”¹⁵

This is all done with the goal of universal liberation in mind. I will not see this in my lifetime. My kids won't see it. My grandkids won't see it. But I'll keep plugging away. Why not? I don't mind a little resistance now and then, and I truly believe that none of us are free until every. fucking. human being. on this planet. is free. Every one.

So, while we wait for Eden, how do we archival workers build and expand loving community in the now?

Community archives are not collections of material gathered by prestigious institutions to serve an often elite and often academic crowd. If an archives is not the collected records of the actions of an organization or of a community, it is by nature extractive, removing records from their creators into thematic “collections.” This model reflects capitalist and colonialist structures. In community archives, the records are integral to community activities and life—serving as community memory, reflecting community relationships, and providing immediate resources for language, art, foodways, and a variety of other activities.

We need to resist systems where archives and archivists are seen as commodities provided to communities for a cost and communities are seen as resources to be extracted or markets to be exploited. This colonialist model situates archives outside communities in an imbalanced power dynamic. We need to see archives as tools that we archivists share, as community members, with other community members to build community resilience, joy, and strength.

In the “Archiving the Black Web” forum, Yusef Omowale is clear: “Our understanding is that we're willing for the archive to burn, that the archive is not what is precious, our lives are precious. So much has already been lost to us and



FIGURE 8. Courtesy of artist N.O. Bonzo.

we're still here."¹⁶ Archives are like gasoline. By itself worthless. But gasoline lets a car drive. It powers a chainsaw. It can burn down a police station. You bring the task, archives have the fuel. Archives only matter insofar as they support how we aid each other, the communities we participate in, the land that we live in, and the natural world we coexist with.

Archival practice based in love is central to community archives and to the success of the community itself. Community archives are the condensed wisdom of our ancestors, selected and passed along by us because we think they are a valuable guide for the generations to come. The more we can transform, day after day, whatever archival setting in which we currently exist into a community archive, the closer we move to a world of joy, love, solidarity, and someday, liberation.



FIGURE 9. Courtesy of artist N.O. Bonzo.



FIGURE 10. Courtesy of Oregon County Fair Archives.

NOTES

- ¹ Xuàn Hu'o'ng Hò and John Balaban, *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hò Xuàn Hu'o'ng* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2000).
- ² Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin et al., *Mutual Aid: An Illuminated Factor of Evolution, Kairos* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2021).
- ³ Ross Gay, *Inciting Joy: Essays, First Edition* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2022).
- ⁴ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2018).
- ⁵ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* (May 6, 2016): 23–43, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557>, captured at <https://perma.cc/PV76-U2Y2>.
- ⁶ Holly Smith, "Radical Love: Documenting Underrepresented Using Principles of Radical Empathy," *Journal for the Society of North Carolina Archivists* 15 (2018): 2–13.
- ⁷ Cornel West and David Ritz, *Brother West: Living and Loving Out Loud: A Memoir*, 2nd ed. (New York: SmileyBooks ; Carlsbad, 2010).
- ⁸ bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- ⁹ James Baldwin, Imani Perry, and Eddie S. Glaude, *Nothing Personal* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021).
- ¹⁰ Jim Al-Khalili et al., "What Is Love? Five Theories on the Greatest Emotion of All," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2012, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/13/what-is-love-five-theories>, captured at <https://perma.cc/P7FN-AAED>.
- ¹¹ "If a Song Could Be Freedom . . . Organized Sounds of Resistance—Interference Archive," <https://interferencearchive.org/exhibition/if-a-song-could-be-freedom-organized-sounds-of-resistance-3>, captured at <https://perma.cc/JP64-X694>.
- ¹² James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).
- ¹³ bell hooks, *All about Love: New Visions* (New York: William Morrow, 2018).
- ¹⁴ John Dougherty, "Love as Resistance: Loving Your Enemy and the Struggle for Liberation," *Medium* (blog), February 24, 2018, <https://medium.com/@johndoc86/love-as-resistance-loving-your-enemy-and-the-struggle-for-liberation-c7f5bed3bd9d>, captured at <https://perma.cc/F665-3R8F>.
- ¹⁵ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage International, 2004).
- ¹⁶ Archiving the Black Web, <https://www.archivingtheblackweb.org/schedule>.