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Feeling Liberatory Memory Work

On the Archival Uses of Joy and Anger¹

MICHELLE CASWELL

Greetings from your failed neighbour state to the south. Or, should I say, a completely successful white supremacist state to the south, since the US has been very successful with that foundational goal. I am speaking to you from the unceded land of Tovaangar, whose traditional caregivers are the Gabrielino/Tongva peoples. You might know it as Los Angeles.

I want to thank the conference organizers, particularly Emily Lonie, for inviting me. I want to thank Verne Harris and Jarrett Drake, whose work on liberatory archives challenges and infuses my own; Marika Cifor, who first gave us the language to talk about affect in archival studies; and Jennifer Douglas, Tonia Sutherland, Rebecka Sheffield, and Jamie Lee, whose work, respectively, on grief, trauma, accountability, optimism, and the body in archives is a shining example of what archival theory can accomplish.² And I want to thank you all

- 1 This is the edited text of a plenary address delivered remotely by the author, on June 12, 2020, at the Association of Canadian Archivists' annual conference.
- 2 Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007); Jarrett Drake, "Liberatory Archives: Towards Belonging and Believing (Part 1)," *On Archivy*, October 22, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/liberatory-archives-towards-belonging-and-believing-part-1-d26aaeb0edd1>; Marika Cifor, "Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7–31; Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisaukas, and Devon Mordell, "'Treat Them With the Reverence of Archivists': Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives," *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019): 84–120; Tonia Sutherland, "Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017), <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/42>; Rebecka Taves Sheffield, "Archival Optimism, Or, How to Sustain a Community Archives," in *Community Archives, Community Spaces: Heritage, Memory and Identity*, ed. Jeannette Bastian and Andrew

for being here, in a distributed sense of the word *here*, listening to me, in this impossible situation.

This is an impossible time to be giving a plenary address. It is an impossible time to be making sense of anything. It is an impossible time to carry on. And yet, here we are, carrying on. I have rewritten this talk a dozen times, each time failing to fully capture the changing circumstances I find myself in – we all find ourselves in. Impossibility is the only constant.

“Welcome to the conditions of impossibility,” those whose lives have always been made precarious and/or expendable by white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, and capitalism might respond. “Welcome to (a drastically tone-downed version of) the club.”

For the past 93 days, I have been at home, barring necessary trips, with a five-year-old son, an elderly father-in-law, and, when he’s not working a shift, my husband, who is a Los Angeles County emergency physician. My house is tiny for four people – the long division leaves us at about 325 square feet each – and even tinnier for the aspirations of a five year old; a trapped, increasingly senile immigrant father-in-law; a husband who has to decontaminate multiple times before crossing the threshold; and me, a woman who previously had ambitions. Last week, I heard a constant stream of police helicopters and sirens out of my window, evidence of a police state clamping down on its own citizens. We live in a heightened state of calculated risk: what are the dangers of leaving the house based on our race, gender, age, profession? Black Americans have always lived in a state of such calculated risk.

In addition to being a professor, I am also now a kindergarten teacher – in the medium of Spanish, I might add, which is the language of my son’s school, but not a language I speak well. I have said “¡buen trabajo!” more times in the past 93 days than I had ever previously envisioned.

I am now also a caregiver, full time; a watcher; an enforcer of protocols, and rules, and distances. I follow everyone around with Lysol. I am simultaneously trapped and liberated by the caregiving roles that have been forced upon me. I did not predict that, when the revolution started, my primary job would be keeping the menfolk safe.

Flinn (London: Facet Publishing, 2020), 3–20; Jamie A. Lee, “Be/Longing in the Archival Body: Eros and the ‘Endearing’ Value of Material Lives,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 33–51.

None of us signed up for this, even though some of us trained for it. My husband re-reads his oath before each shift. He keeps asserting that this, this, *this* is what he trained for.

This is also what I trained for, in some weird way. I grew up in a traditional white working-class American household in Chicago. My mother and grandmother both hard-wired me to be a caregiver, to be pleasing, to be agreeable, to put family first, to have dinner on the table by 5:30. The past 30 years of my life have been revolting against this feminine imperative, or better, channelling a feminine imperative into a feminist one. Care, after all, is ethically valuable, even as it is devalued. And here I find myself back again, as I did in high school, in a noisy house full of people I am responsible for, looking for a corner in which to write. What life choices.

And, as I am a carer, I should mention, Rome is burning. My country is on fire. Unwilling to excise our white supremacist foundations, glorifying and repeating rather than acknowledging and repairing our 500-year history of murdering Black and Indigenous people, white Americans by and large would still rather risk their own lives to maintain white supremacy, just as long as the risk of death remains greater for Black and brown people.³ It is a perverse calculus, a deep feat of moral bankruptcy, for white Americans to strategically divest from public resources for decades, to elect sinister fascists to power, to revel in the death cult of the state, just to maintain our own leading edge as we all march to the grave. I am an atheist Jew, but G-d help us all. So that is a long way of saying to you that I also speak to you today as an American, specifically, a white American woman. I can speak to you no other way.

I am telling you all of this not just so that you can get to know me better, but to situate my knowledge claims in my own experiences. As decades of scholarship in feminist standpoint epistemologies have posited, *who* you are largely determines *what* you know and *how* you know it.⁴ Your position in the social hierarchy, your relationship to dominant identities, your relationship to communities of oppression and resistance, privilege and complacency largely determine how you see the world, your own role in it, and the questions that you ask about it. And not only

3 Jonathan M. Metz, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

4 Sandra Harding, ed., *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Sandra Harding, ed., *Feminism and Methodology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987).

that, but feminist standpoint theorists also argue that the view from the bottom of the hierarchy is epistemologically advantageous – that is, you see better from the bottom, you ask better questions from the bottom, you are better able to address issues that resolve inequities from the bottom.⁵

I have just laid out some assumptions I may need to unpack. What do I mean by dominant, and what do I mean by oppressed? These categories are contextual, but in the current North American context, by *dominant*, I mean what LIS scholar Hope Olson calls WEBCHAM identities – that is, the “white, ethnically European, bourgeois, Christian, heterosexual, able-bodied, male” identities, to which I would also add, at the suggestion of Marika Cifor, “cis” and “citizen,” to form WEBCCCHAM.⁶ By dominant identities, I mean those that go unnamed, that masquerade as universal, that benefit from oppressive power structures like white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, and capitalism.

What does this have to do with archives? It has everything to do with archives in the way that archives are inextricable from society, in the way that archives are “partial and distorted slivers”⁷ as Verne Harris describes them, in the way that you cannot separate the knower from that being known, in the way that positionality dictates what you determine to be of value and of use, in the way that archives are fundamentally about power. In a recently published article I wrote in the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, called “Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Epistemology,” I have proposed a new methodology, epistemology, and political strategy for appraisal that centres positionality and power, asking that we take into account our own positionalities within the social hierarchies of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability when making appraisal decisions.⁸ The feminist standpoint appraisal I propose values the records created by and catalyzed into service by oppressed communities over others.

Today, what I am going to tell you builds on that, but also precedes it, in a sort of *Star Wars* out-of-order kind of way. (I am not bound to linear time.) What I want

5 Michelle Caswell, “Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020), <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/113/67>; Harding, *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*.

6 Hope Olson, “Patriarchal Structures of Subject Access and Subversive Techniques for Change,” *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science* 26, no. 2–3 (2001): 4.

7 Verne Harris, “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 63–86.

8 Caswell, “Dusting for Fingerprints.”

to tell you, first and foremost, is that feelings are epistemologically valuable. That proposition is not an original one; feminist theorists, particularly Black feminist theorists, have been critiquing the tyranny of reason for decades, if not centuries.⁹ But what I also want to tell you is that if we take this seriously, if we believe that our feelings, and especially the feelings of those who are oppressed, provide substantial grounds from which to know, then we have to radically rethink and redo and reuse archives. And that is what I want us to do: to rethink and redo the work of archives.

In a recent editorial in the Australian journal *Archives and Manuscripts*, an editor accuses my spirited defence of the past decade of critical archival theory as being *too emotional*. In contrast to my emotional outbursts, the author asserted, archival studies scholarship should “present new ideas that are based on solid reasoned argumentation, rather than on emotion and personal preferences.”¹⁰ Now, friends, Romans, Canadian archivists, let me tell you about the patriarchy embedded in those assertions. The division of the world into knowledge – based on reason – and emotional outbursts – based on feeling – is deeply rooted in dominant Western masculinist divisions of the world. Right? Classic Cartesian mind/body dualism: I think, therefore I am, unlike you women (who are irrational and therefore sub-human and can be subordinated), unlike you people of colour (who are irrational and therefore sub-human and can be colonized). The creation of these false binaries is Gender Studies 101. That we overcome the false dichotomy between mind and body has been the agenda of feminist research since the 1970s.

The same binary division that separated men from women and reason from emotion also separated knower from known, separated subject from object, classified people into different races, meted out capital based on those divisions, and capitalized and colonized the world based on those divisions. It is the same binary division that runs through dominant Western archival practices, which not only reflected but *enacted* these binary logics in the process of domination. These are the systems that we, as archivists, have inherited.

9 See for example, Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984); and, quoting Lorde, BlackPast, “(1981) Audre Lorde, ‘The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,’” BlackPast, August 12, 1981, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1981-audre-lorde-uses-anger-women-responding-racism/>.

10 Viviane Frings-Hessami, “The End of Archival Ideas?” *Archives and Manuscripts* 48, no. 1 (2020): 2.

I am going to argue that one way we can work against these oppressive systems is to take emotions seriously *in tandem with an analysis of power*, to acknowledge them as valid bases for knowing, as valid bases for archival theory and practice, and most importantly, to address emotions in relation not just to our own personal lives but also to dominant oppressive power structures. Our emotions, while we experience them on a personal level, are deeply political and can be leveraged for structural change. For an example, turn on the news to see how Black Americans are leveraging anger for structural change.

We need to consider emotions in tandem with material shifts and temporal shifts. Emotions are essential but are inadequate alone.¹¹ I am not going to argue that we all be nice to each other; I am going to argue that we leverage our joy and anger to end white supremacy and patriarchy and to initiate material redistribution.

What I am going to cover is this:

1. Feelings enable us to *know*, and we should be listening to them right now if we are to know something different in this crisis.
2. We can begin to do this by building archival theories and practices that heal the false rift between emotion and reason by taking emotion seriously.
3. Namely, we should be leveraging joy and anger in our archival endeavours.
4. Emotions like joy and anger are an important aspect of liberatory archives but must be taken into consideration alongside material and temporal shifts.
5. Finally, I am going to return to care and talk about care as a framework for thinking through structural change.

That is a long five-point plan; I better get started.

¹¹ At the Q and A session immediately following the plenary, I was asked an excellent question about white women weaponizing emotions to reinforce white supremacy. This issue demonstrates precisely why emotions alone are not enough and must be considered in tandem with a power analysis for liberatory aims.

1. Feelings enable us to know.

Most of us of a certain age, who are outside dominant WEBCCCHAM identities or who have adopted critical perspectives, have had similar experiences in our MLIS programs. When we learned dominant Western archival theories and practices; when we learned that archivists are supposed to be neutral and objective; when we learned that records are the passive, neutral by-product of activity; when we learned that provenance is based narrowly on the record creator; when we learned that individual creators and owners alone are entitled to rights over their records; when we learned to privilege universal access over the protection of vulnerable communities, many of us had a gut reaction. A feeling that told us, “Wait a second; that does not *feel* right.” That does not resonate with my experiences. That does not work for my community. Itza Carbajal described this feeling brilliantly at last year’s Archival Education and Research Institute (AERI). We might have reasoned it out, written papers about how the logics of dominant Western archival practices conflict with the logics of our own communities, but first it was a gut reaction. It was a feeling. A feeling that we listened to, that we took seriously.

The great Black lesbian poet librarian Audre Lorde asserts, “Our feelings are our most genuine paths to knowledge.”¹² Reversing the damage of 500 years of Enlightenment thinking, she continued elsewhere, “The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us – the poet – whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free.”¹³ Feeling is not distinct from reason. Reason is not distinct from feeling. They are bound inextricably.

We need to value emotion as a way of knowing. We need to do this for ourselves, as archivists, as we dismantle oppressive archival theories and build new liberatory archival theories. We should be taking that voice that says, “Hey wait a second; this does not feel right,” very seriously. We need to listen to that voice especially in this moment of crisis and of opportunity, where the world is being dismantled and reworked and reimagined, and ask, What does not feel right and why?

12 Audre Lorde, interview by Claudia Tate, republished in *Conversations with Audre Lorde*, ed. Joan Wylie Hall (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 91.

13 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 38.

But we also need to do it for our archival practices. How do records make us feel? How did they make the creators and receivers of those records feel? How do they make our users feel? Most importantly, how do records make those individuals and communities they marginalize feel?

These are questions that can serve as the epistemic basis for rethinking archival appraisal, description, preservation, digitization, and access. And we can rethink these practices to centre the feelings and perspectives of those most oppressed by WEBCCCHAM power structures.

Before some of you accuse me of denying the validity of knowledge claims based on reason, let me clarify what I am and what I am not claiming here. In claiming that feelings matter, I am *not* claiming that facts do not exist. Facts do exist. And here, I turn to Michel-Rolph Trouillot; if you have not read his book *Silencing the Past*, you should.¹⁴ Some things happen and other things do not. Washing your hands and wearing a mask can save lives. The Holocaust happened. So did the genocide of Indigenous people in North America. Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd as emboldened by 500 years of white supremacy. We can simultaneously hold the existence of facts and validate the epistemic importance of feelings. It is not either/or. It is both/and. But it is always an issue of how power legitimizes knowledge. It is always an issue of the stories we choose to tell. It is always an issue of how we deploy the evidence to tell stories. What I do not want us to do is rehash the tired old assertions that archives are about truth in a post-truth world. Archives have never been about truth. They are partially about evidence – evidence catalyzed in support of a claim. If someone gives you the false binary of truth versus post-truth, demand a better question.

Here is a better one, of many: Will we use our feelings as evidence?

2. Liberation is a feeling.

The use of *liberatory* in *liberatory memory work* picks up on Wendy Duff and Verne Harris's first use of *liberatory description* in 2002 to propose new ways of thinking about descriptive standards that, among other things, "would encourage archivists to get in under the dominant voices in the processes of record making."¹⁵

¹⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (2002): 285.

In a 2014 report for the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Chandre Gould and Verne Harris propose the term *liberatory memory work* to discuss a range of practices aimed at preventing recurrence of systemic injustice and cycles of violence.¹⁶

What I want to argue here is that liberation, in addition to demanding a material redistribution of resources and land and a shift in linear temporality, has *emotional* demands of us. Liberation is a feeling, and that feeling is a brilliantly productive mix of anger and joy. Liberation is an affect. One can *feel* liberated. Liberatory memory work must make us feel liberated. It must be joyful. Angry, but joyful. Anger and joy are related. They share the antonym of depression.

3. Anger and joy are two sides of the same coin.

Anger is productive. It should mobilize us to act. What you are seeing in the news coming from the US is not destruction; it is a productive dismantling of oppression. It is a “No.” It is an “Enough.” It is also a condition of possibility, a crack in an old world where a new world is sprouting.¹⁷

Whenever someone accuses me of being angry – and there have been many such accusations because I am not fulfilling my role as the pleasant woman – I ask, *Why aren't you angry?* As humans, we should all be angry at the structural inequities in our societies; we should be angry about the way life chances are distributed based on race, class, gender, ability. We should be angry about the disaster capitalists who have leveraged the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity to draw a further wedge between us, to make trillions at our expense, off the deaths of those most vulnerable. We should be angry at our systems designed to make Black lives collateral damage for the gift of whiteness. We should be angry at our systems that are built on the calculated risk that caregivers' lives are expendable – that valorize healthcare workers as heroes even as they mete out inadequate PPE and fully fund military equipment for police. I am deeply angry that we find ourselves in a manufactured, political crisis being portrayed as a natural, medical one.

16 Chandre Gould and Verne Harris, *Memory for Justice* (n.p.: Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2014), 5, https://www.nelsonmandela.org/uploads/files/MEMORY_FOR_JUSTICE_2014v2.pdf.

17 Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic Is a Portal,” *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>; Robin D.G. Kelley, Interview by Jeremy Scahill, “Scholar Robin D.G. Kelley on How Today's Abolitionist Movement Can Fundamentally Change the Country,” *The Intercept*, June 27, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/06/27/robin-dg-kelley-intercepted/>.

As archivists, we should be angry about the structural inequities of our profession: the pay differences and the precarity particularly faced by younger archivists just now coming into this profession. We should leverage this anger to organize, to unionize, to mobilize. I'm preaching to the choir here. But as archivists, we should also be angry about the power inequities of records writ large and use that anger to shift structures. If we are angry about the whiteness of the historic record, use that anger to shift appraisal policies to centre people of colour as creators of records. If we are angry about the epistemic violence in past descriptive choices, leverage that anger to make liberatory descriptive choices. If we are angry that our archives exclude non-elite, non-scholarly users, make use of that anger to change our access policies and outreach programs to welcome in oppressed communities. This anger is important. Use it.

But equally important is the joy that we should take in resisting oppressive systems. I am advocating that we take pleasure in liberatory memory work. Many Black feminists, like Audre Lorde, adrienne maree brown, and Catherine Knight Steele, have written about the longstanding Black cultural practice of feeling joy as a form of resistance to white supremacy.¹⁸

Confronting oppressive power structures should be joyful. And I mean this despite the very serious consequences we face in so doing, and in acknowledgment that those consequences are not equitably distributed and, unsurprisingly, are meted out across racialized lines. And of course, particularly for people from dominant groups like white people in the US and Canada, this joy must always be tied to *material* consequences or else we risk hedonistically reinforcing the power structures we seek to dismantle. This is not fun for fun's sake. It is fun for the sake of liberation.

We should be doing for archives what the Guerrilla Girls have done for museums. The Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous group of feminist artists formed in the 1980s to fight sexism and racism in the art world. They did this wearing gorilla costumes, staging events like "weenie counts," where they entered art museums and counted the ratio of male artists to female nudes in the collections. And then they hung up posters and stickers that said, "Do Women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?" They published this

¹⁸ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*; adrienne maree brown, ed., *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019); Jessica Lu and Catherine Knight Steele, "Joy Is Resistance": Cross-Platform Resilience and (Re) Invention of Black Oral Culture Online," *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 6 (2019), doi:10.1080/1369118X.2019.1575449.

Art Museum Activity Book, where they encouraged museum goers to re-write sexist wall labels, sticker the bathrooms, dress up as docents, and give subversive tours.¹⁹ They, too, staged antics in service of disrupting oppressive systems. Their work makes me feel joyful even as it exposes deeply painful truths.

This is a reminder to myself, who was raised to be a good white girl who follows all the gendered and racialized rules and pleases everyone in power: well, that train has left the station. It is liberating to say, “No.” It is liberating to say, “Enough is enough.” It is liberating to be a troublemaker. I speak from personal experience when I say it is joyous to walk around the Society of American Archivists’ annual meeting giving out posters on how to dismantle white supremacy in archives to dismayed white people.²⁰ Let’s cultivate that joy, even when (especially when) our work is deadly serious.

4. Liberation is a feeling, but that feeling must also coincide with material redistribution and shifts in temporalities.

In 2016, I was part of a group of three American memory workers – Jarrett Drake; the late Doria Johnson, who is deeply missed; and myself – who formed a delegation to participate in the Nelson Mandela Foundation’s international dialogue series on how to use memory for justice in post-conflict societies. It was unusual to be included in this international dialogue as an American, since we are not a post-conflict society; we are a conflict society in which white people do not acknowledge there is a conflict. Maybe now that is changing, thanks to Black Lives Matter activists. We issued a statement, which I encourage all of you to read online, advocating for a liberation theology for memory work. The statement reads,

19 The Guerrilla Girls, *The Guerrilla Girls’ Art Museum Activity Book* (New York: Printed Matter, Inc, 2004).

20 Michelle Caswell (with graphic design by Gracen Brilmeyer), “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives,” in “Aftermath: Libraries, Democracy, and the 2016 Presidential Election, Part 1,” special issue, *Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2017): 222–235.

The past was never singular, nor will the future be. In order to generate these futures, memory work should be dangerous. It should seek not only to acknowledge past trauma, but to repair it. It should aim to upend hierarchies of power, to distribute resources more equitably, to enable complex forms of self-representation, and to restore the humanity of those for whom it has been denied. . . .

In our immediate context . . . this means using our skills as archivists, public historians, and academics to end the state-sponsored murder and mass incarceration of Black people and the continued genocide and displacement of Indigenous peoples, to dismantle systems of white supremacy, to actively resist the oppression of the most vulnerable amongst us, and to re-envision forms of justice that repair and restore rather than violate and harm individuals and communities.²¹

The first and most crucial aspect of liberatory memory work is mobilizing records to repair past harms through the redistribution of resources. Given the two foundational sins of the US – the genocide of Indigenous people and the enslavement of African people – liberatory memory work in an American context must seek to repair these harms by mobilizing records in service of (1) Indigenous sovereignty and land reclamation and (2) material reparation for descendants of enslaved Africans.

I want to be clear here that these demands have not changed and do not even get reshuffled because of COVID-19. They are bound up in COVID-19 because of the way white supremacy calculates Black and Indigenous lives as collateral damage. They remain the headlines and are intricately bound to the mattering of Black lives.

I know that many of you are in the throes of building collections around COVID-19 and the 2020 uprisings, due to a sense of professional duty to document history as it happens. Perhaps you are engaging in these collecting projects to demonstrate your impact in a time of manufactured budget deficits, or perhaps you are doing so to feel useful in a time when archival skills are not foremost. G-d knows we all need to feel useful right now.

21 Doria Johnson, Jarrett Drake, and Michelle Caswell, "From Cape Town to Chicago to Colombo and Back Again: Towards a Liberation Theology for Memory Work," Nelson Mandela Foundation, February 27, 2017, <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/reflections-from-the-2016-mandela-dialogues>.

But I would like us to take a step back, read the recent blog post by Eira Tansey about COVID-19 collecting, and ask a few questions.²² Are we vultures circling the dying? Whose narratives are we preserving and for which purposes? Why the urgency? Urgency of what? For whom? I posit that the urgency is not in scooping up collections during a pandemic; the urgency is in using archival skills to dismantle systems of oppression. Last weekend, a group of brilliant Black archivists issued a call to action.²³ Please read it. They urged memory workers to, above all, centre Black voices in documenting state violence against Black people and the ensuing uprising. They ask “that Black memory workers should lead the documentation response when Black people are suffering.”²⁴ Take heed. If you are not Black, proceed carefully. If you are not Black, learn to follow direction. Cultivate the wisdom to know the difference between exploitation and empowerment.

I want to directly address white people here as a white person myself, because we have been so easily seduced by the promises of whiteness. Let me be clear: *our whiteness will not save our souls*. Although our life chances are clearly increased by our whiteness, this increase in life chances comes at the detriment of our chances of liberation. We may live, but we live the sad, unfulfilled lives of oppressors.

The goals that I have issued here – supporting Indigenous sovereignty and making reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans – are not about helping others. They are about our own liberation. I cannot be liberated if I am an oppressor. I cannot win liberation off the backs of other humans. That is not how liberation works. It is liberating to do the right thing. It is liberating to fully care for other humans. It is liberating to discard the emperor’s clothes of whiteness. As Fred Moten asserts, white supremacy is killing white people too, “however much more softly.”²⁵ (I will not repeat the well-deserved curse words he follows this up with.)

22 Eira Tansey, “No One Owes Their Trauma to Archivists, Or, The Commodification of Contemporaneous Collection,” *Eira Tansey* (blog), June 5, 2020, <http://eiratansey.com/2020/06/05/no-one-owes-their-trauma-to-archivists-or-the-commodification-of-contemporaneous-collecting/>.

23 Zakia Collier, “Call to Action: Archiving State-Sanctioned Violence against Black People,” *Sustainable Futures*, June 6, 2020, <https://medium.com/community-archives/call-to-action-archiving-state-sanctioned-violence-against-black-people-d629c956689a>.

24 Ibid.

25 Fred Moten, quoted in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013), 141.

We must refuse the easy archival solutions that posit ceremony and historical markers as reparations in and of themselves – that place museum displays and memorials where justice and reparation should be. It is clear to me that what they called “symbolic reparations” in the Cambodian context (memorials, monuments, archives, etc.) are empty gestures without material reparations. And of course, we need to lay bare the deep connections between enslavement and the ongoing scourge of police violence and mass incarceration.

We need to use our archival skills against necropolitics and in support of the life chances of oppressed communities, namely, in my American context, Black communities. I am not convinced that this means collecting *more* right now about COVID-19 or about the uprisings for Black Lives. I *am* convinced that it means leveraging our joy and anger, taking emotions seriously and carefully, alongside a strong power analysis and our archival skills, to resist, imagine, and enact liberatory worlds.

Liberatory memory work is complicated. It is dangerous. It is discomfoting for those of us who inhabit oppressor positions. It should be. To use Tuck and Yang’s term about decolonization, liberatory memory work should be “unsettling” for white people.²⁶ Here, I want to make the case that liberatory memory work demands radical shifts in oppressive structures. These structures must be dismantled, not redecorated. Liberatory memory work is not as easy as putting less-offensive terms into a database built on white supremacist logics or providing cultural competency training for white archivists so that they can then extract knowledge from communities of colour more fluently; it requires a radical repair, a rebuilding, a foundational theoretical shift in support of radical material claims.

Which leads me to the temporal aspect of liberatory memory work. We have a common trope in our field: we preserve traces of the past for the future. We need to disrupt that trope. It relies on dominant Christian ways of thinking about time unfolding in a linear progress narrative – what philosopher Charles W. Mills calls “white time.” What does it mean to liberate archives and records from the “white temporal imaginary”?²⁷ We should be preserving traces of the past for now, to build a liberatory now – not for some future that might never come because of environmental degradation and human depravity. The antics we need are not

26 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

27 Charles W. Mills, “White Time: The Chronic Injustice of Ideal Theory,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 11, no. 1 (2014): 27–42.

based on a linear progress narrative; they are not based on hope for some future that might never come; they are based on the joy of troublemaking in the present. I am arguing against hope as a practical strategy or affective demand of archival labour, instead positing that disrupting oppression *in the now* is its own reward. Forget hope; for me, hope is not a productive emotion. Engage in liberatory memory work because it's the right thing to do right now for our own liberation.

I want to tell you a story from critical race theorist and legal scholar Derrick Bell. Bell writes that, in 1964, he asked an older Black woman civil rights activist, Mrs. MacDonald, where she found the courage and strength to keep fighting despite tremendous odds. Her response? Not out of hope for a better future or a sense of progress, but simply, "I lives to harass white folks."²⁸ As Bell writes, "her fight, in itself, gave her strength and empowerment in a society that relentlessly attempted to wear her down."²⁹ The fight is its own reward. Let us build a liberatory memory work that is not seduced by a false sense of hope or an easy sense of solidarity but that instead unsettles us, that takes feelings – our feelings and those of others – seriously, that investigates and leverages those feelings for deep structural changes, that takes great, messy pleasure in mobilizing records to cultivate disruption in our current political moment.

5. Care must be viewed structurally.

My final point is about care as a framework for thinking through the emotional aspects of archives and the relationship between care and liberatory memory work. Some of you might have read an article that Marika Cifor and I published in *Archivaria* in 2016, called "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives."³⁰ A beautiful poster, designed by the brilliant Gracen Brilmyer, based on this article, will soon be published in a special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* on radical empathy, edited by

28 Derrick Bell, *The Derrick Bell Reader*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 76.

29 Ibid., 77.

30 Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23–43.

Jasmine Jones, Holly Smith, Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, and Shannon O'Neill.³¹ It is one of the greatest honours of my professional life that these amazing archivists have taken up this work. This poster shows the flow of ideas – how the concepts underpinning care ethics in archives bounce off and build off each other.

Marika and I posited that decades of feminist scholarship have called into question the universality of a rights-based framework, arguing instead that an ethics of care is a more inclusive and apt model for envisioning and enacting a more just society. We asked:

What if we began to see archivists not only as guardians of the authenticity of the records in their collections, but also as centrepieces in an ever-changing web of responsibility through which they are connected to the records' creators, the records' subjects, the records' users, and larger communities? What happens when we scratch beneath the surface of the veneer of detached professionalism and start to think of record-keepers and archivists less as sentinels of accountability (or accomplices in human rights violations on the other, and less acknowledged, end of the spectrum) and more as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual responsibility?³²

Our article did a good job of addressing the relationship of care, empathy, and power: how women of colour in particular are gendered and racialized into subordinate positions of care that are devalued by capitalism, and how there are limits to an easy empathy that allows you to slip yourself into someone else's shoes. Archival work, we posited, is above all not about records but about people, their stories (which are told through records), and the relationships they build from records. We got a lot right, but I want to issue a correction, or an evolution, five years after this article's publication. In 2016, we wrote that empathy was most radical when it was extended to those least deserving of it. I think what 2020 is showing us is that we need a stronger power analysis. We do not need

31 Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly Smith, eds., special issue, "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3 (2020), <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/issue/view/10>.

32 Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 25.

to empathize with the enslaver who wrote the registry of the enslaved; there is nothing radical about that. Instead, as we posit in this new poster, *feminist ethics is both personal and structural*. Empathy is radical if it upends existing power relations in favour of oppressed people, if it interrogates intersecting structures of violence, if it is a catalyst for structural change. Injustice is structural *and* personal, public *and* private, always-already political. Our care in response to injustice must focus on caring for each other enough to liberate *us all*; it is not about being nice and pleasing and agreeable, as I was trained to be as a young girl. It is not about being white saviours dedicated to preserving authentic records of The Truth. It is about leveraging our full selves – our inseparable emotions and reason, our inseparable minds and bodies, emotional and material aspects together as a whole – against oppressive power structures.

At the same time, we cannot let care be co-opted. Our caregiving should not be used to pay us less; it should not be used to further endanger us; it is not an easy antidote to doing the hard work. It is a way of thinking through feelings in relation to structures. Liberation is a feeling, but it is a feeling hurled at concrete material structures. Let us use our skills as archivists, leverage our ongoing archival relationships of care, for liberation against oppressive structures. It is not either/or: reason or emotion, anger or joy, care or structural change. Either/or thinking is the apex of patriarchal reasoning. It is both/and, inextricably and simultaneously both/and.

Thank you.

BIOGRAPHY Michelle Caswell is an Associate Professor in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she directs the UCLA Community Archives Lab. Together with Samip Mallick, she is the co-founder of the South Asian American Digital Archive. Her new book, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, is forthcoming from Routledge.