

Featured Commentary

Revisiting an Ethics of Care in Archives: An Introductory Note

Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor

It is with great joy that we celebrate the publication of this special issue of *The Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* on “Radical Empathy in Archival Practice.” In 2016, we published “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives” in *Archivaria*.¹ In that piece, we issued a challenge to archivists to shift our thinking about archival ethics from an individual, rights-based model to a relational feminist ethics of care. We argued that in a feminist ethics of care approach, archivists are understood and understand themselves as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility based on radical empathy. It has been our highest professional honor and privilege to see our original article resonate and inspire new modes of scholarship and practice in ways beyond our wildest academic dreams thanks to so many archivists and scholars, including those sharing their work in this issue. We are deeply grateful for the thoughtful and caring work of the special issue’s editors. To Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith: You give us life! Thank you for sustaining us and our ideas with such empathy during the most difficult times. We are also delighted to share the accompanying poster, “Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,” where we have translated some of our ideas on feminist ethics for archives into the [powerful visual designed by Gracen Brilmyer](#).

Much has changed in the archival and wider worlds in the five years since our original article’s publication. Much has also remained the same. We would like to emphasize four key points about the ongoing and urgent need to engage critically with a feminist ethics of care and with radical empathy from the vantage point of 2021.

¹ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23-43.

Caswell, Michelle and Marika Cifor. “Revisiting A Feminist Ethics of Care in Archives: An Introductory Note,” in “Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,” eds. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3.

1. CARE WORK IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER.

In the midst of the vast devastation that constitutes the ongoing, intertwined, and still unfolding crises of state-sponsored anti-Black violence and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever that we care for each other. Care is a continuum. Mourning the victims of police violence and intubating coronavirus patients are examples of urgent, necessary care work. The necessity of such work has been laid bare in 2020. Exposing and exploiting the pre-existing conditions of our society, these twin crises of racism and virus act along social fault lines, hierarchies, and inequalities. Care is what we can offer in the face of unmitigated disaster. It is care and caretaking, nurturing relationships and collectivities formed amidst crises, that engender resilience and survival.

Yet, intervening to dismantle oppressive structures before they create the conditions that warrant intubation or mourning is the highest form of care. We might call it structural care. Structural care shifts the structures that inequitably produce the need for care, working to redistribute harm and risk in response to the dangers posed by white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism, and other forms of oppression. Structural care simultaneously dismantles oppressive structures and builds liberatory structures.

Tremendous deficiencies in available care and the neglect of care obligations by our institutions mean that in this time, archival care work, though sometimes less immediate, is also urgent and necessary. We need archival care even in the face of—especially because of—the emergency of the crises we face. While archives cannot hope to alleviate physical suffering, end discrimination and stigma, or to stall death, alone, they can be a manifestation of the kind of care that we can actually provide right now. It will take decades, and not just weeks of frenzied collecting, to formulate archival responses to our intertwined crises and the others that have preceded and will come in their aftermath. Care encompasses, as we wrote in 2016, “both the often bodily labours of providing what is necessary for the health, sustainment, and protection of someone or something, and the feeling of concern and attachment that provokes such acts.”² Archival labor, then is a means of taking responsibility, of caring for bodies of records, and mostly importantly, the bodies of those whose lives are implicated in them. The most vital archival responses will be marked by care—care for the most oppressed people who create, use, and steward records, and care for each other, as archivists, as the editors of this special issue assert. More than ever, we stand by our earlier assertion, records are not the most important aspect of archival work; people are. We need to examine the current deficits in archival care’s reach, who remains uncared for, for as 2020 has shown us, archival work should not just center people, but the needs, realities, and lives of oppressed people specifically.

² Caswell and Cifor, 31.

2. CARE WORK IS MORE UNDERVALUED THAN EVER.

In our current moment, the burden of care for the victims and survivors of the twin crises of racism and COVID-19 has fallen greatly on the shoulders of women, particularly BIPOC women, and particularly Black women, once again. Data demonstrates already a harsh reality where working mothers are being pushed out of the workforce in unprecedented numbers while shouldering greater child-rearing labor. Women of color are put at additional risk by being overrepresented in high-risk essential care jobs. Along with care, comes risk—medical, professional, and emotional risk. Unsurprisingly, care and risk are not meted out equitably, but along the fault lines of oppressive structures. Essential medical workers lack adequate personal protective equipment while no expense is spared outfitting police in combat gear. A feminist ethics of care resists the use of austerity to justify privatization and refuses to invoke “the natural” or “the medical” as an excuse for manufactured mass death brought on by state failure. Instead, a feminist ethics of care not only makes visible the labor of care, but values that labor, professionally and monetarily.

In archives, this means supporting the labor of care, refusing to dismiss care as a “soft skill,” protecting care workers from the risks they incur, and adequately compensating those archivists who excel at it, especially BIPOC women. We are encouraged by recent examples of mutual aid in the field, such as the Society of American Archivists’ Archival Workers Emergency Fund, providing direct aid to archivists whose income has been made precarious due to COVID-19.³ Another exciting example is the emerging Community Archives Collaborative through which grassroots memory workers are sharing skills, advocating for resources, and engaging in peer-to-peer mentoring.⁴ As legal scholar Dean Spade writes, mutual aid efforts both meet basic survival needs and build “a shared understanding that the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust.”⁵ Care demands both of these tactics, immediate and long-term, individual and structural, simultaneously.

³ Society of American Archivists, “FAQ: Archival Workers Emergency Fund,” undated, <https://www2.archivists.org/groups/saa-foundation-board-of-directors/faq-archival-workers-emergency-fund>.

⁴ South Asian American Digital Archive, “Community Archives Collaborative,” undated, <https://www.saada.org/project/community-archives-collaborative>.

⁵ Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (And the Next)*, (New York: Verso, 2020), 7.

3. RADICAL EMPATHY DEMANDS A POWER ANALYSIS.

In our original article, we posited that empathy was most radical when it was extended to those who are least deserving of it. In 2021, we would like to issue a correction: empathy is radical when it centers the needs of those who are most oppressed by the dominant forces of white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, capitalism, ableism, and colonialism. We do not ask archivists (or anyone else for that matter) from oppressed communities to empathize with their oppressors; one should not be tasked with empathizing with those who deny the validity of one's own existence. Such a request puts an undue burden on and risks further harm to oppressed people. Instead, empathy must be taken up in tandem with a power analysis in order to be radical. Radical empathy should be a tool for those of use with access to power not to further entrench ourselves into the hierarchies of power, but instead to open doors behind ourselves, to make archives permeable by creating holes in our structures and systems where power can be redistributed in ways that always prioritize the needs and desires of those made vulnerable by oppressive structures. Empathy in such a practice is a means to challenge, subvert, undermine, make possible, change.

4. FEMINIST ETHICS ARE BOTH PERSONAL AND STRUCTURAL.

As feminists have been asserting for decades, the personal is political. Care is structural, as is a failure to care. Radical empathy is not about being nice to each other; we should not suffer death by a thousand white women in "Be Kind" t-shirts.⁶ Radical empathy *is* about recognizing our personal roles within power structures, dismantling oppressive structures (including, especially, the structures we may personally benefit from), and rebuilding liberatory structures that serve us all. We can use radical empathy to interrogate intersecting structures of violence, both public and private, taken together, as always already political. We must insist that care work leverages personal experience to dismantle systemic oppressions.

Doing the work of feminist ethics now requires recognizing and contending with where we have been individuals, as a profession, and where we are now and where we are going. As feminist writer Roxane Gay has powerfully written of living amidst our current crises, "most of us are wondering when life will get back to normal but normal is what brought us to such a precarious place. Nothing should ever be the same again and

⁶ Rachel Cargle, "When Feminism is White Supremacy in Heels," *Harper's Bazaar*, August 16, 2018, <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/politics/a22717725/what-is-toxic-white-feminism/>.

while that is an unnerving prospect, it may also be our saving grace.”⁷ Archives and archival work when done with a feminist ethics of care steeped in radical empathy have much to offer us during this moment of upheaval that enable us to cultivate critical understandings of the before, the during, and offer important opportunities to work out together what can come in the aftermath of this personal, social, and political upheaval. We are thrilled to be accompanying the contributors of this special issue as they build on, transform, and push back against our original formulations, as they do archival care. Let the discussions, critiques, applications, and refinements continue!

Onward!

⁷ Roxane Gay, “Notes on Power in a Pandemic,” *Medium*, April 3, 2020, <https://gay.medium.com/notes-on-power-in-a-pandemic-b43996c3e03>.

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