

# Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work

Michelle Caswell. *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. London: Routledge, 2021. 142 pp. \$128.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780367427276.

Written during the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 and the global COVID-19 pandemic, Michelle Caswell's book, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, builds upon her earlier work, offering significant additions to critical archive studies and calling on archivists to transform their own practice to disrupt white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy. Caswell, one of the foremost theorists of community archives, critiques traditional archive theory and practice and integrates theoretical explorations with empirical observations from ethnographic research of community archives and her own work as a community archivist. While *Urgent Archives* is primarily a work of theory, it is not a call to think or theorize about archives differently so much as a demand to transform them, arguing that by embracing approaches to memory work developed by marginalized communities, community archives can help develop solidarity, create new understandings of time and history, and become liberatory actors in our present moment.

In *Urgent Archives*, Caswell straddles the social sciences and the humanities. Working within an interpretative research paradigm, Caswell weaves together empirical data, such as focus groups and surveys, with her work in the UCLA Communities Archive Lab and her extensive firsthand experiences as a community archivist at the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). Utilizing critical approaches from queer theory, postcolonialism, feminist theory, and critical race theory, Caswell works toward the development of a normative claim of what archives could and should be. *Urgent Archives* fits within the larger field of critical archive studies, which seek to explore how power impacts archive theory and practice and “to create transformative praxis that liberates rather than oppresses” (12).

Divided into four dense chapters with an index (in addition to an extensive and well-structured introduction and conclusion sections), *Urgent Archives* is organized around three interrelated concepts: temporal justice, representative justice, and liberatory memory work. Chapters 1 and 2 address temporal justice. In Chapter 1, Caswell argues that traditional archives theory and practice have internalized and reproduced a white, Christian concept of linear time and history that centers a concept of progress where history inevitably moves towards a post-racial future. This concept of time acts as a form of “chronoviolence” that forces a specific future onto the past and present. In Chapter 2, Caswell uses empirical data from focus groups of users of community archives that support LGBTQ+ people and communities of color to illustrate new temporalities, such as cyclical and corollary temporal concepts, which can be used to connect the past to the present in ways that can break cycles of oppression.

While building upon Caswell's earlier work on the value of representation, Chapter 3 also marks a shift in her thought. Caswell describes methods of representational and recuperative collecting used by community archives that help a community to recognize itself in the archive. She argues that these collections must not simply exist within the archive but be paired with “liberatory activations” of archive records in the present. For Caswell, records are valuable not solely for their evidentiary value, but for their ability to enact change in the present. Chapter 4 is a call to action for archivists to dismantle existing oppressive systems and create new liberatory systems based on the lessons of community archives. Caswell's call for change is urgent and one centered not upon a future yet to come, but the immediate present. The changes she urges are not reform, but a funda-

mental reworking of how archives function. This call has material implications, including distributing resources away from predominantly White cultural institutions to community archives led by and serving marginalized communities.

This urgent call to memory workers is one theological librarians and archivists have much to learn from. Caswell, who has a B.A. in religion and M.A. in world religions, does not incorporate religious archives into her empirical data on community archives. Her treatment of religion is primarily confined to her exploration of chronoviolence and the role of Abrahamic religion, specifically Christianity, in centering a teleological approach to history and progress. Despite the lack of an extended treatment of religion, religious communities, and religious archives, *Urgent Archives* puts forth a model of memory work aligned with liberation, queer, and feminist theologies. She even briefly points this out, citing an earlier essay she co-wrote on the topic of liberation theology and memory work. However, this reference is in passing and the religious implications of liberatory memory work are largely left unaddressed. This, however, does not limit the utility and pertinence of *Urgent Archives* for theological librarians and archivists tasked with preserving the memory of faith communities. Caswell's emphasis on temporal justice is an exciting new perspective that religious-based community archives are uniquely equipped to explore through theological frameworks provided by the religious traditions of the communities they serve. For archivists at religious archives who are not familiar with community archiving, *Urgent Archives* also provides an excellent introduction into the theory of community archives but is not intended as an introduction to the practice of community archives.

*Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* is a timely and significant book that advances the field of archive studies. The concepts of temporal justice and chronoviolence are important additions to archive theory, providing a critical framework to address many of the assumptions baked into archive practice. Caswell's expansion of representational justice to include activation reflects a growing awareness of the limitation of representation in creating change. The real impact of Caswell's book, however, should be judged by its own stated goals: Does it change the theory and practice of archives? *Urgent Archives* does not provide concrete steps for this work but a set of frameworks to interrogate how archives work and who they work for. The success of the book will depend on memory workers using these frameworks to enact change.

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