

## IJIDI: Book Review



Caswell, M. (2021). *Urgent archives: Enacting liberatory memory work*. Routledge.

ISBN-13: 978-036742727. 142 pp.  
\$160.00 US (hardcopy) | \$41.60 US (e-book)

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**Keywords:** community archives; critical archival studies; liberatory memory work

**Publication Type:** book review

In *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory*, Michelle Caswell draws upon over a decade of experience working with and studying community archives to urge archivists to centre professional practice with anti-racist actions which embrace and uplift liberatory frameworks rather than reinforce and uphold a singular perspective. Essentially, archival praxis is currently based on the problematic understanding with, “white and heteronormative temporalities [that] insist on the futurity and fixity of records and construct the uses of records as steps on a linear progress narrative toward a post-racial white future” (p. 94). The book “provides us with new language to describe the ethical obligations of memory workers, and shifts us from a cruel and cold neutrality to a messy engaged commitment to co-liberation” and urgently “challenges those of us involved in community-based archives to move beyond the politics of more robust representation [...] toward a liberatory activation of records that catalyzes their creation and use to dismantle systems of temporal, affective, and material oppression” (p. 22).

*Urgent Archives* can be divided into two thematic halves: the first primes the reader with comparisons of varying concepts of time such as white-heteronormative progress linear models and cyclical temporality; the second defines the limitations of applying linear models to archives and the potentialities of reimagined, inclusive approaches to archivy. Different methodologies are employed throughout each chapter in order to achieve the book’s objectives and broader message.

The book’s introduction, “Community archives: assimilation, integration, or resistance?”, starts with outlining the author’s positionality, the trajectory that brought her career to archival studies, the shoestring-grassroots history of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), and how the book came to be. For those unfamiliar with Caswell, she is an Associate Professor of Archival Studies in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California whose work is grounded in critical archival studies, co-founder of SAADA with Samip Mallick, and lead organizer of the Archivists Against History Repeating Itself Collective.

In chapter one, “A matter of time: archival temporalities,” *Urgent Archives* refers to the cyclical conceptions of time exemplified by Hindu, Sioux, Nishnaabeg, Afro-futurist, and queer temporalities. It then shifts to examine white, Christian, heteronormative ideas of linear time and how it is embedded in Western archival theory; and the temporality in archives emphasizes the fixity of records to preserve the past for the future. This framework perpetuates a form of “chronoviolence” as it relieves the archivist from recognizing and disrupting contemporary power imbalances as they must wait for some imaginary future to activate the archive (p. 38).

The second chapter, “Community archives interrupting time,” demonstrates how cyclical temporality in archives, or “corollary moments” of time swinging both back and forth, is manifested in corollary records which “[document] reoccurring moments in time in which the same or similar oppressions get repeated” (p. 53). This argument is supported by examples from empirical observations and transcripts of LGBTQ2+ and POC community archive focus group interviews (the Lambda Archives, La Historia Society, Little Tokyo Historical Society, and the Southeast Asian Archive). These excerpts reveal how outreach initiatives connect records to communities which can potentially build community between generations to interrupt these cycles of oppression and challenge the linear progress narratives often presented by archives.

To actually dismantle structures of oppression, the third chapter, titled “From representation to activation,” suggests framing archival operations in the pursuit of liberatory memory work. This is where Caswell connects her previous writings on “symbolic annihilation” and “representational belonging” to introduce “liberatory appraisal”: collecting records “to build political consciousness and action” (p. 81). Three of SAADA’s 2020 outreach initiatives related to the presidential election, the global social uprisings in support of Black Lives, and the crisis of the ongoing pandemic are provided as case studies to explain the impact of these abstract concepts.

In the final chapter, “Imagining liberatory memory work,” *Urgent Archives* leans on speculation as a research methodology to imagine a new world of archival practice that defies the trope of a passive, neutral archivist. Archivists must embody the role of liberatory memory workers and activate records, dismantle oppressive systems, and build liberatory futures (p. 93). Key aspects of this work include an ethical obligation to prioritize “*chronoautonomy* (the ability of minoritized communities to build archives based on their own temporalities), self-recognition (the affective response to seeing oneself robustly represented), and the redistribution of resources to repair ongoing harms” (p. 94).

With the breadth and nuanced topics covered in *Urgent Archives*, the book does its best to address any potential misinterpretations, concerns, and weaknesses. It includes definitions and rationales for selected terminology, such as “minoritized,” employed throughout the book. The power and privileges associated with the author’s positionality as a tenured, white scholar involved with community archives is problematized and contextualized; Caswell also recognizes the need to self-critique her writings that replicated linear and “future-oriented models of use” models (p. 38; p. 40). While the definition of urgency as a characteristic of white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021) is discussed in relation to the book’s urgent call to action, it ultimately left this reader wanting a little more. Additionally, Caswell acknowledges the disconnect between the communities represented in the methodological data throughout *Urgent Archives* and the temporal epistemologies highlighted in the first

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chapter. In this chapter, the author's attempt to balance covering the broad range of material and keeping the book's page length to a reasonable size is evident. This approach may have rendered some sections of the book more accessible to scholars, rather than practicing community and institutional archivists, who may pick up the book. Perhaps understanding this, Caswell provides introductory information where necessary to broaden her targeted audience. One should note that the findings derived from the California-centric data and reference material from the Global North, including the citations of many BIPOC and LGBTQ+ archivists, may not necessarily apply to their geopolitical locale.

While presumably written for the white gaze of the professional field, Caswell's message has the potential to further conservations (and action!) on reevaluating and repositioning the dominant ideologies that permeate a globalized Western archival theory. Minoritized archivists still in the process of unlearning might be interested in reading *Urgent Archives* to delve into critical archival studies. That said, readers should heed Caswell's reminders that education is not an end-goal and "instead positing that disrupting oppression in the now is its own reward" (p. 22).

### References

Okun, T. (2021). *Sense of urgency*. White Supremacy Culture.  
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(Originally published as: Okun, T., & Jones, K. (2000). White supremacy culture. *Dismantling racism: A workbook for social change groups*. Change Work.  
<https://resourcegeneration.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/2016-dRworks-workbook.pdf> )

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