Digital Feminist Care Ethics

Assessing the Web of Archival Relationships

Michelle Caswell

Feminist care ethics teach us that digitizing archival collections is just the first step in series of ongoing relationships. Research at two different digital community archives—the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) and the Texas After Violence Project (TAVP)—reveals that the impact of archives goes well beyond academic researchers, catalyzing profound emotional shifts in record creators, storytellers, community members, and future communities.

# Feminist Archival Ethics: The History of a Concept

Historically, archivists trained in the dominant Western bureaucratic tradition saw themselves as neutral protectors of records whose main ethical obligation was to safeguard authenticity and provide equal access. Yet in the past 25 years, dominant Western archival studies has undergone a transformation. In a 2016 *Archivaria* article, «From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives», Marika Cifor and I proposed a feminist care ethics for archives. 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?[1] An ethics of care, which we situated under the larger tent of feminist ethics, stresses the ways people are linked to each other and larger communities through webs of responsibilities. This feminist approach to ethics emphasizes specificity, relationality, and context rather than abstract moral principles. It rejects liberal moral assumptions about individual choice and free will in favor of empathy in the face of situational demands, and it draws to the fore women's lived experiences as caregivers. We were very careful in this article to clarify that women are *socialized* into caregiving roles, that we were not talking about essential or biological truths. And we were also very careful about addressing and incorporating critiques of how care is racialized and classed and how our approach to feminist care ethics centered questions of power and oppression and all its intersecting vectors. We did not want important distinctions based on intersecting vectors of oppression to be collapsed into the white feminist oversimplified exhortation to just ‹be kind›. Kindness is always expected, demanded and performed in the context of power relationships. There is not an equal distribution of expectation, demand, or performance here; those already marginalized by gender, race, and class are even further marginalized by having to care for those who oppress them. Yet feminist care ethics should interrogate power; it does not elide it.

Three years later, in a 2019 chapter in *The Routledge International Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums, and Heritage Sites,* Marika and I applied this argument specifically to digital archives.[2] Digital archives often obscure relationships between people—who are the users of archives and how can archivists have a relationship with them, one might ask, if archivists never see them face to face? We argued that feminist care ethics in digital archives position digitization as only one step in an always-unfolding relationship between records creators, subjects, users, and communities. Digital archives should provide affordances and possibilities for cultivating these relationships, rather than obfuscating, flattening, or severing them. Furthermore, digital archives should not merely replicate the inequities reflected in the original records; they should interrogate, interrupt and repair those structural inequities through their architecture, metadata, and access policies.[3] As Black feminists like Tonia Sutherland and Jessica Marie Johnson have theorized, for example, merely digitizing the archival detritus of enslavement without an adequate intervention in liberatory redescription and access reproduces the original violence in the digital realm.[4]

Two years after that, in 2021, Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly A. Smith edited a special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* in which they built on Rachel Mattson's work proposing a fifth archival relationship—that of archivist to archivist—(adding to the first four proposed relationships between records' creators, the records' subjects, the records' users, and larger communities) and contextualized archival care ethics in the midst of the pandemic, and the Movement for Black Lives.[5] In that same special issue, Marika and I revisited our original framework and stressed:

1. Care work is more important than ever.
2. Care work is more undervalued than ever.
3. Radical empathy demands a power analysis.
4. Feminist ethics are both personal and structural.[6]

Now, three years after that, in 2024, the need to hold vulnerable people at the center of digital archives is more urgent than ever. As AI has enabled new modes of describing and discovering minoritized people in archival collections, it has also generated new unprecedented possibilities for surveillance, extraction, appropriation, and misinformation. The rush to document ongoing violence in Palestine and on college campuses has also underscored the need for archival practices that do not further jeopardize disenfranchised people.[7] Now more than ever, we need a power analysis, a renewed commitment to the principles of care, transparency, reciprocity, relationality, autonomy, contextualization, long-term investment, equity, and repair. We can all look to the liberatory theories and practices of community archives for ways to infuse archival practices with these principles.
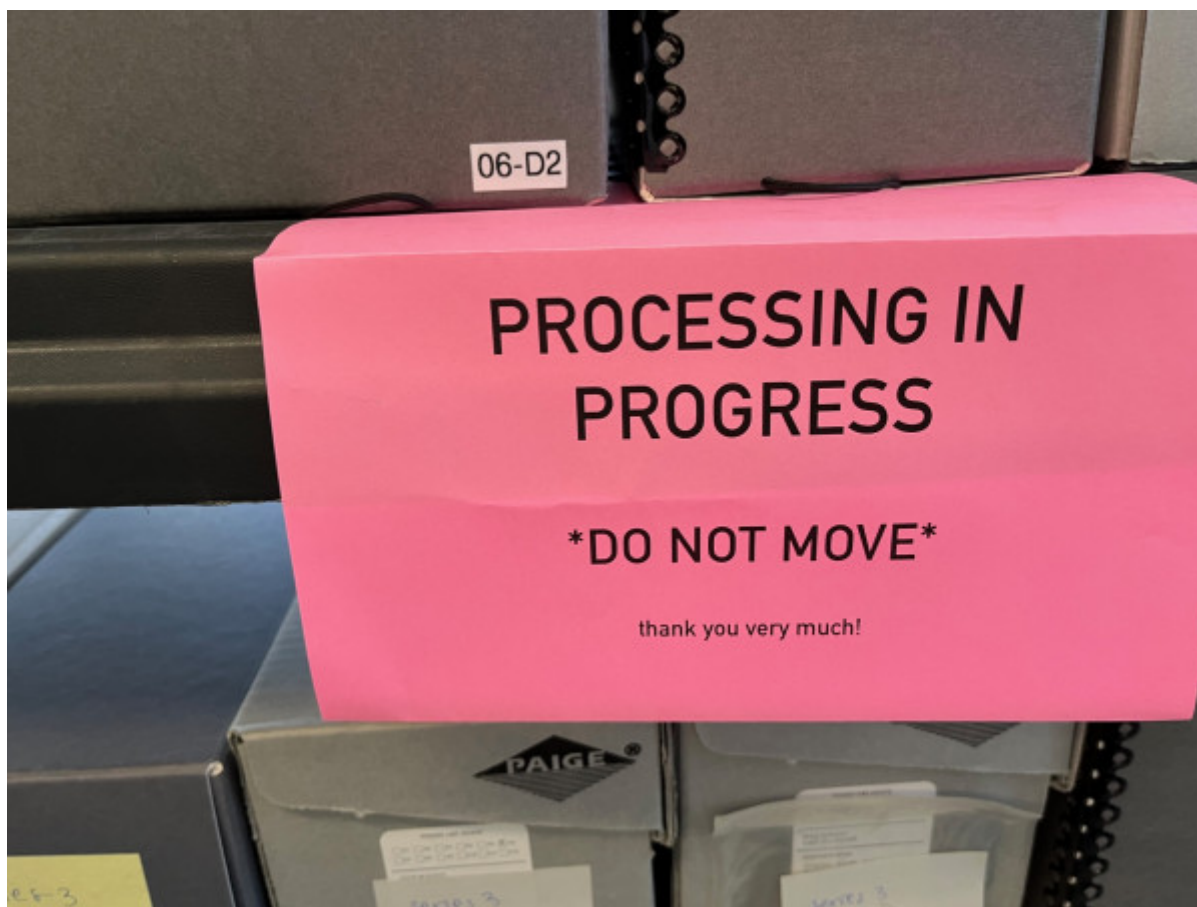
Processing in Progress. Photo: Michelle Caswell

Feeling Archives

For the past three years, UCLA doctoral candidate Anna Robinson-Sweet and I have been working with a team of community-based archivists at the Texas After Violence Project [https://texasafterviolence.org/] (TAVP) and the South Asian American Digital Archive [https://www.saada.org/] (SAADA) on the Virtual Belonging Project [https://texasafterviolence.org/virtual-belonging/].[8] The collaborative project investigates the emotional impact of digital storytelling on record creators, listeners, and archivists. How does it feel to share your life story? Does it matter who is listening? What motivates storytellers?Across both organizations, narrators describe the life-changing impact of sharing

their stories with peers. Words like «affirming» and «validating» emerge time and time again in our interviews. Several spoke about how telling their stories to a like-minded listener helped them process the grief and trauma they had been holding for years. At TAVP, one narrator spoke about how important it was to tell his own story as a way of wresting narrative control away from dehumanizing police and prison records. At SAADA, one narrator reported applying for asylum status after being interviewed by another queer Bangladeshi asylum seeker. Narrators at both TAVP and SAADA told us about profound shifts, both internal and external, that were catalyzed by the simple acts of listening and creating a record.

What we have found affirms that the stakes of telling and listening across space and time are magnified for vulnerable people. Archival practices that center dignity and care are crucial for supporting the narrative autonomy of people who are too often talked about rather than listened to. These practices rooted in care ethics have to be baked into every stage of the digital archival process and not sprinkled on top at the end. They must be embedded from the start, long before the record or scan button is pressed, and long after the digital file is accessible online. These two organizations model ways that a feminist ethics of care can be made integral to the processes of archival decision-making, from invitation to participate to consent as a relational practice to self-description and imagining future uses.

TAVP is a public memory archive that fosters deeper understandings of the impacts of state violence on individuals, families, and communities. Their community partners are majority BIPOC people who are directly impacted by state violence and the criminal punishment system. Because poor and working-class communities of color are disproportionately impacted by state violence, TAVP ensures these communities are decision makers in their projects at every stage. The majority of participants in this research shared their stories as part of the Visions After Violence Community Fellowship program, a nine-month fellowship in which those directly impacted by state violence design oral history projects, conduct and record interviews with people from their community, and creatively activate their work for the public. Other participants shared their stories with TAVP staff members and fellows from the Sheltering Justice program, a documentation initiative to responsibly and ethically archive the stories of people impacted by the dual scourge of COVID-19 and mass incarceration.
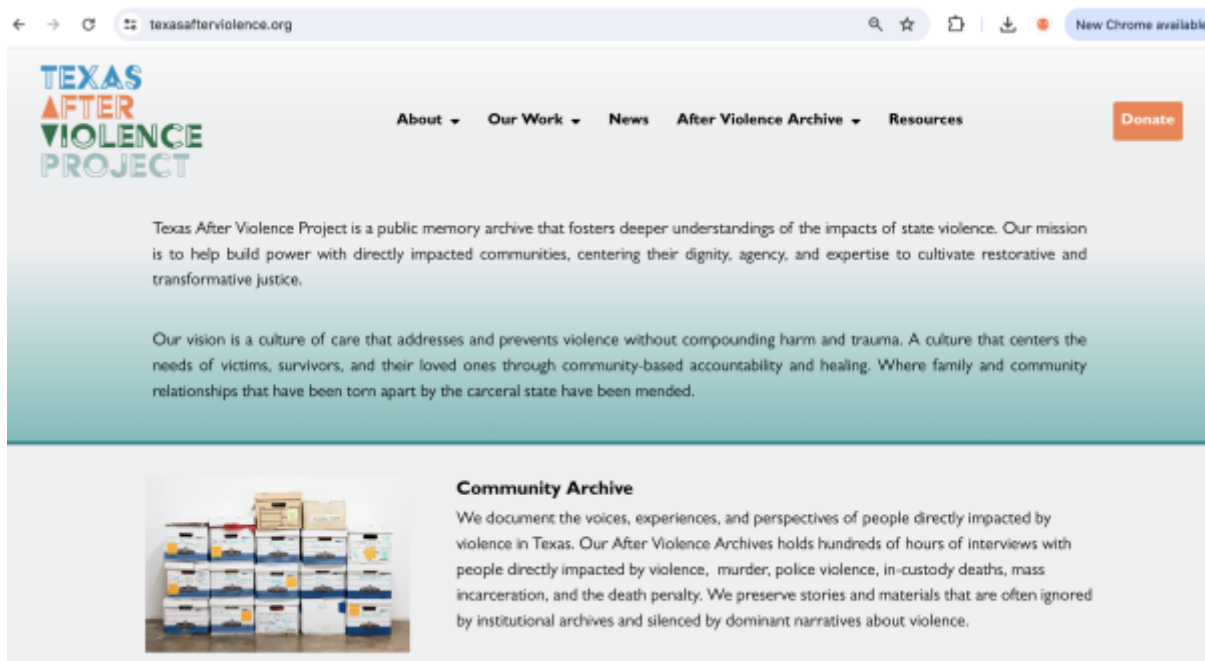
Texas After Violence Project. Screenshot: Michelle Caswell

SAADA collects, preserves, and shares stories of South Asian Americans, and through its

post-custodial digital archives, participatory storytelling initiatives, and educational outreach, shapes public understanding about the more than 6.1 million people in the U.S. who identify as South Asian American. Participants in this research who shared their stories with SAADA were interviewed by SAADA's Archival Creators Fellows. The Archival Creators Fellowship supports community members in becoming active participants in proposing, designing, appraising, curating, and creating archival collections that reflect the histories and perspectives of the most marginalized groups within the South Asian American community. The participants include community members who are working class, undocumented, LGBTQ+, Dalit, Indo-Caribbean, and from other groups that have been traditionally excluded from dominant narratives. Because there is a lack of pre-existing accurate documentation of these communities, many Archival Creators projects feature oral histories.

Both TAVP and SAADA administer what we call peer-to-peer oral history programs, in which members of vulnerable communities interview people who share similar positionalities or identities. Both organizations ensure directly impacted communities are decision makers in their projects at every stage. At TAVP, an advisory board of directly impacted people determines the scope and policy of the Visions After Violence project. Similarly, at SAADA, staff and board members who are part of the community being documented are key decisionmakers. Before oral histories are recorded, both organizations thoughtfully select a cohort of fellows who learn from each other and build on their own relationships to recruit oral history narrators. Fellows have multiple conversations with potential narrators, giving them time and space to make informed decisions about participation. Most oral histories are then recorded via Zoom, in private spaces where both narrator and interviewer feel safe and comfortable. After the oral history is recorded, participants are given transcripts and files to review and edit. They may change their mind at any time, and opt not to make their stories available. Given the nature of many of the oral histories at TAVP, recordings there undergo legal review, so that narrators are not incriminating themselves. Also at TAVP, support structures like therapy are available to narrators, so that they can work through some of the trauma that gets reactivated in sharing their story. Both organizations describe the materials with a controlled vocabulary co-developed with community members in-house, reflecting the terms community members use to describe their own experiences. Then, once recordings are made public, both organizations host community events, in person and over Zoom, where interviewers and narrators discuss their stories with the public.

These oral histories inaugurate and nurture relationships—relationships between archivist and interviewer, interviewer and narrator, narrator and listener, and between archivists as we all learn from these practices. These relationships of care cross space and time, building webs of responsibility where we hold and uphold each other through archival care practices. They point all archives towards new directions and help us envision a future in which archives of all kinds center people over records.

South Asian American Digital Archive. Screenshot: Michelle Caswell

Holistic Feminist Impact Assessment

Based on these feminist care practices, we need new holistic models for assessing archival impact, models that go beyond assessing the experiences of users alone. For centuries, dominant Western archival studies were focused almost exclusively on the stuff, with archivists concentrating on protecting records from the deterioration of use. The past two decades have seen a shift in the field towards addressing the concerns of users, assessing the impact of archives on users, and encouraging use through marketing and outreach. This shift in focus towards users is important, but it is not telling the full story of how archives impact people. After speaking with dozens of storytellers at both TAVP and SAADA, it is clear that peer-to-peer oral histories impact storytellers and interviewers first and foremost, followed by archivists and staff, before they are ever made accessible to users online. Our current models of assessing archival impact, in which users are counted or interviewed, do not adequately reflect the web of relationships inaugurated by digital record creation. In the attempts of the past decade to prove the value of archives to users, we have missed seeing just how wide-ranging archival impact really is. We have also missed identifying where archival impact is in fact harmful to communities and individuals being represented in records.

Here is where assessment is important and here is where our attempt to assess the impact of digital archival work has fallen short. We as a field, including and especially my own past work on how dominant archives symbolically annihilate marginalized communities and community archives promote representational belonging, have focused too exclusively on users. Understanding users of digital records is important, especially since archivists don't have that same face-to-face contact. But they are only one contact point in the web of affective relationships. Archivists need to be assessing the impact of our projects across the web of relationships, on the record creator, on the subject of the record, on the donor of the material, on the archivist, on the user, and on the larger community being represented, even if they don't set foot in archives or visit digital archives online. Archivists need a feminist care web of assessment that values emotions and relationships, that provides a more holistic view of our impact. Archivists also need an honest accounting of when and how archival work has caused harm so that we can do better in the future.

We are building digital archives one story at a time, but we are also inaugurating webs of relationships that have implications well beyond the digital realm and well beyond our current moment. The sooner we have a model of understanding impact that holistically reflects the complexity of these relationships, the better we can advocate for the urgently important work of archives.

[1] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, «From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,» in *Archivaria*, 81, 2016, p.25.

[2] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, «Neither a Beginning Nor an End: Applying an Ethics of Care to Digital Archival Collections,» in *The Routledge International Handbook of New Digital Practices in Galleries, Libraries, Archives, Museums, and Heritage Sites,* edited by Hannah Lewi et al., Routledge 2019, pp. 159–168.

[3] See for example Tonia Sutherland and Alyssa Purcell, «A Weapon and a Tool: Decolonizing Description and Embracing Redescription as Liberatory Archival Praxis,» in International Journal of Information, Diversity, and Inclusion 5 (1), 2021, as well as Jessica Marie Johnson, «Markup Bodies: Black [Life] Studies and Slavery [Death] Studies at the Digital Crossroads,» in Social Text, 36 (4), 2018, pp. 57–79.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, & Holly A. Smith, «An Introduction to Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,» in *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies,* 3 (2), 2021, https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/171

[6] Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, «Revisiting a Feminist Ethics of Care in Archives,» in *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies,* 3 (2), 2021, https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/162

[7] For a fantastic resource on how to do this, see: Bergis Jules, «Archiving Protests, Protecting Activists,» 2020

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