

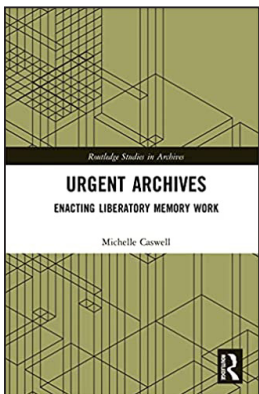
that are both immediately recognizable and refreshingly multidimensional. From the CEO of a start-up tech firm (“I don’t even know what government does. I just stay far from it.”), to the unhoused patrons in the library’s computer lab who’ve figured out how to game the reservation system, to the charter school teachers who model white-collar work for their students—these are the people navigating economies of scarcity on the ground, through which we learn the intricacies of how the access doctrine takes hold.

For Greene, the workplace philosophy of tech start-up firms coheres around the ability to thrive in an “environment of extreme uncertainty” through the proverbial *pivot*. Public institutions cannot pivot like tech firms do because they are bound to longstanding societal roles and lack the same control over choosing their clientele. That doesn’t stop schools and libraries from undertaking a process that Greene calls *bootstrapping*: when organizations remake their identities and operations to align with the access doctrine to secure funding, even if doing so calls the very purpose of the organization into question. When the tech-forward charter school is faced with a lower-than-expected graduation rate, teachers see the school’s core values compromised as they realign their work to meet the expectations of outside funders.

Librarians will of course be interested in the chapter on the MLK branch of the DCPL, and Greene offers a fair representation of professional debates as articulated by the library staff in his interviews and observations. It’s here that we see how libraries fit into a larger socioeconomic project; Greene’s analysis does not explain the entirety of libraries and their transformation in this crucial moment, nor should we expect it to. It does, however, help us better understand how the choices we make in determining whose support to garner and what new services to offer—and which values get left behind in the process—fit into this larger framework of placing the weight of structural problems on the shoulders of individuals.

*The Promise of Access* is an important contribution to our understanding of technosolutionism’s impact on public institutions and has much to offer library workers. Yet the most remarkable aspect of the work is how much it resonates with our current pandemic condition of extreme uncertainty, now that we have all been asked to “pivot” on a daily basis. As we move toward a postpandemic future, the lessons of Greene’s work should remain front and center while we reimagine, rethink, and reframe our institutional missions and professional priorities.—Roxanne Shirazi, *The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

**Michelle Caswell.** *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. Milton Park, Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2021. 142p. Hardcover, \$160.00 (ISBN 978-0367427276).



Michelle Caswell’s *Urgent Archives* is a powerfully persuasive book, challenging some of the most fundamental principles of Western archival tradition through a deep exploration of the theory and practice of community archives. Caswell is an archival studies scholar and a co-founder with Samip Mallick of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). These dual perspectives shape the book’s running themes as Caswell draws on her work with graduate students, her own evolving scholarly work, and her relationships with community archivists and archives users to develop her challenge to the Western archival tradition. The deep theoretical work of *Urgent Archives* is grounded throughout by descriptions of actual and potential ways that community archives constitute

profoundly important sites of liberation.

Community archives, particularly those “in which the history held in common coalesces around a shared history of oppression” (16), challenge the Western archival tradition. Caswell has explored the concept of “representational belonging” in her previous work, and in *Urgent Archives* she argues that representation is not all that these collections can do; community archives have significant potential to trouble concepts of time and authority. Thus, the records held by community archives can be activated for political resistance.

*Urgent Archives* is structured in four chapters. Chapter 1 examines concepts of temporality, the relationship of temporality to narratives of progress, and the ways Western archival tradition reinforces linear thinking. Chapter 2 reviews research from community archives focus groups conducted by Caswell and her graduate students shortly after the 2016 US Presidential election. Chapter 3 uses examples from SAADA’s work to demonstrate how archives can be activated for the political urgency of *now* (as opposed to a distant future). Chapter 4 concludes with an exploration of the temporal, affective, and material liberatory potential of archives and the role archivists can play in realizing this potential.

Chapter 1 introduces the most provocative argument at the center of *Urgent Archives*: challenging the dominance of linear time and progress narratives that promise a better future via clean breaks from the unfortunate past. Caswell links linear temporality with a white Christian heteropatriarchy that views time as a singular progression from a backward past to an ahistorical present to a future in which past and present challenges have been neatly resolved. In contrast to linear temporality, many cultures and communities conceive of time in very different ways. Caswell uses examples from Hindu, Indigenous, critical race, Afrofuturist, and queer temporalities.

Caswell convincingly argues that Western archival tradition is inextricably linked to linear temporality and its assumptions about the certainty of progressive futurity. She argues that one of the most common tropes of archival work and archivists’ collective identity—that we preserve the past for the future—embeds the idea of linear time into our work. Caswell argues that this conception of linear time and progress lulls archivists into a sense of complacency:

Not only does this construction assume a straight line between past, present, and future, it also assumes that the real issue society faces is ignorance and not maldistribution of power; if only we learned from the mistakes of the past by engaging with our history, our future society would be (magically, somehow) more just, the logic asserts. As such, the societal role of the archivist is to preserve traces of the past and encourage educational use of those traces; it is not to fundamentally shift power structures. (38)

Caswell invokes the term *chronoviolence* to describe the ways in which linear temporality can harm communities. A sense of time that imagines things are always getting better denies the documented and lived realities of those who experience cyclical forms of violence and erasure. Caswell writes, “[C]hronoviolence gaslights members of oppressed communities who insist that what has been constructed as oppression of the past is indeed not past, but ongoing.” (40)

In chapter 2, Caswell recounts findings from community archives focus groups in southern California (the Lambda Archives, La Historia Society, the Southeastern Asian Archive at UC-Irvine, and the Little Tokyo Historical Society). This work was conducted shortly after the 2016 Presidential election, deeply shaping the discussions among participants. Caswell describes how focus group participants frequently discussed the cyclical nature of oppression and how this is reflected in archival records cared for by community archives. The chapter ends

with a challenging insight into the limits of empathy and education to effect political change.

Chapter 3 focuses on SAADA's efforts to activate archival records on behalf of political resistance through three recent projects. The first project asked users to write letters in the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic and then sent the letters back to their writers a year later. The second project explored the complex history of the South Asian community with the Black community. A third project activated South Asian political experiences and memory for 2020 election voter mobilization. Caswell explores the limits of representation as the *raison d'être* for community archives, arguing that, while the role of representation and affect is deeply important, archives also have to be activated to realize their liberatory potential in the present. An emphasis solely on representation can easily veer into assimilationism or respectability politics.

Chapter 4 weaves together the themes of the previous chapters as Caswell envisions what archives could be and how archivists might activate archival records to resist the many injustices that exist today. Caswell outlines three avenues of liberatory memory work: temporal, affective, and material. Enacting temporal liberatory memory work envisions a shift from chronoviolence to chronoautonomy. Affective work recognizes the importance of representational belonging. Material liberatory memory work calls on archivists to mobilize records to counteract the violent white supremacist foundations of the United States, using records to support Indigenous land sovereignty and reclamation and reparations for the descendants of enslaved Africans.

*Urgent Archives* falters when Caswell describes the role of mainstream archives in relation to community archives. Caswell's argument that archivists working at mainstream archives should leave community archives alone and/or learn from community archives practices in rethinking their own institutional work is well taken. However, Caswell tends to conflate mainstream archives with those that have significant financial resources or political capital. There is only a brief acknowledgment of the precarity of the many mainstream archives located in local governments with diverse constituencies or in poorly resourced public universities that serve large numbers of first-generation and BIPOC students. These archives often steward very different records and serve very different audiences than elite white-centric, well-endowed research institutions. These archives have often faced crisis-level funding and staffing situations that were bad prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and have accelerated to even more severe material working conditions in its wake. Archivists who work in these nonelite yet mainstream institutions are often in a constant crisis management mode. Working conditions prevent these archivists from doing the methodical work that liberatory archival practice calls for due to understaffing, underresourcing, and/or threats of managerial retaliation.

As I have been contemplating this conundrum, I find myself returning to Caswell's term *chronoviolence* and its far-reaching applicability. Perhaps a version of chronoviolence might also include the experience of working conditions under austerity regimes in place at most mainstream archives, where workplace temporalities are measured with fast-paced metrics and "deliverables," as opposed to the slow and considerate work of revolutionizing archival practice to mitigate further harm associated with Western archival traditions. *Urgent Archives* is a timely book in every sense of the word, with its emphasis on rethinking temporalities and the use of archives for today's urgent issues of political resistance. Archivists and all those who care about archives will gain much from Michelle Caswell's landmark contribution to archival theory.—Eira Tansey, *University of Cincinnati*