

# **Radical Love: Documenting Underrepresented Communities Using Principles of Radical Empathy**

by Holly A. Smith

## **Abstract**

This article is taken from a keynote lecture given at the 2018 Society of North Carolina Archivists Annual Meeting, the theme being "Navigating the Web of Community: Archivists and the Ethics of Care." The article focuses on Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor's concept of radical empathy in archives and how archivists can employ these principles, particularly in working with historically marginalized communities.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to be here with you all today. It is truly an honor and a privilege to be a part of this conversation, and to be back with so many dear friends in North Carolina. I extend my profound gratitude to my friend and archival comrades Marcellaus Joiner, Kelly Wooten, Libby Coyner and the Program Committee for the 2018 Society of North Carolina Archivists Conference for this generous invitation to be here with you all today. I would like to thank my family and friends for their continued love and support. Last but not least, I would like to offer a moment of silent recognition for the ancestors who have gone on before us but who are still present in our minds and hearts. A West African proverb states no one is truly dead until they are forgotten. Let us ensure they are not forgotten as we take this pause to remember them and invite them to this conversation.

I grew up in Hampton, Virginia, which—contrary to popular belief by some—is the south. I was fortunate enough to know my grandparents and I treasured the opportunity to sit at their bedside and listen to stories of them growing up in rural North Carolina. My grandfather Percy Hicks had an impeccable memory and would regale me with tales of

growing up in Hertford County, going to the swimming hole with his nine siblings, preparing hogs for the slaughter, and courting my grandmother—whom he had known all his life. My grandmother Beatrice Hicks talked lovingly of picking corn in the summer, sleeping in the attic with her sisters, and how when Papa came to court her, he would spend hours chatting with her father in the den. She would have to call him out to the porch where he could actually "pay a call."

Their memory and stories remain present with me even now and I was blessed to grow up with an expansive concept of history. Another major influence was working as a junior interpreter at the African American Interpretation Program in Colonial Williamsburg. Along with other eager young history lovers—or kids whose parents made them come on a Saturday morning—we learned African folktales, sang African songs, and learned to play music on African-created instruments like the shakere and banjar (the African antecedent to the banjo). We learned stories that enslaved communities shared and practiced dances created on American soil but with African ancestral memory. We saw documents outlining the sale of men, women, and children like cattle and runaway ads where people chose to "steal" themselves into the liberty they were denied. These types of primary documents helped me understand the experiences of black people from the Diaspora but also how those documents can be shaped by who is creating them. The documents during the colonial era were typically not created by black people themselves. In school we discussed the history of enslaved people, Native Americans, women and the working class as tangential to the stories of the Founding Fathers and military victories. What about the people behind these key historical moments, and what are their stories?

History and memory are layered and complex and are seen through a number of lenses. At that young age I felt like the experiences of some communities were not part of our school discussions, or only treated as footnotes to the broader concept of American and global history. From the stories of my grandparents that were not in school books to

the lack of voices from people of color in the curriculum, I developed a strong passion for history and especially the communities I identified with. I wanted to tell these stories that I felt people would not know. I came to love history in a way that felt very personal to me. Before I had the language and praxis to describe it, or the profession to practice it, I had long ago started to ingrain principles of radical empathy in regard to my passion to tell the stories of historically under-documented communities.

I was introduced to the concept of radical empathy by my archival comrades and sisters during preparation for the call for proposals for the 2017 Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting in Portland, Oregon. Presenting with my archival sister-comrades Shannon O'Neil, Kelly Wooten, Dinah Handel, Giordana Mecagni, Rachel Mattson, Jasmine Jones, Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, and Molly Brown, we represented a cross section of the profession— students, mid-career professionals—and shared specific examples of how we put theories of radical empathy into practice by weaving feminist ethics of care into our relationships with diverse audiences, collaborators, and archival materials".

In their ground-breaking article Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor discuss how radical empathy as theory and practice can be activated in archives. Radical empathy is defined as "the ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experiences, etc." Situated within a feminist ethics approach, archivists are seen as

caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual effective responsibility...The proposed care ethics framework sits firmly within the social justice tradition in archival studies even as it critiques and shifts it; in particular the concerns over power differentials and inequities that are central to social justice oriented scholarship.<sup>1</sup>

Caswell and Cifor outline four key archival relationships that a feminist ethics of care centered in radical empathy could

shift. The first relationship is the relationship between the archivist and the record creator. The archivist enters into an "affective bond" with the creators of the materials the archivist is stewarding. The second relationship is the relationship between the archivist and the subject of the records. In this affective relationship the archivist empathizes with the people and communities about whom records are created. The third relationship relates to the archivist and the user. This affective relationship acknowledges the deep connections that users have with records, and those interactions can be deeply meaningful considering what people find or don't find in archives. The fourth relationship is between the archives and the larger community. Here the archivist "has an ethical obligation to empathize with all parties impacted by archival use—the communities for whom justice or impunity has lasting consequences, the community of people for whom representation—or silencing—matter." <sup>2</sup> My colleagues and I also discussed the idea of a fifth affective relationship—that of archivists to each other. Archivists must consider how we empathize and communicate with each other. Our multi-layered and intersectional identities can be just as complex as the records we steward and we must be cognizant of how we support, challenge, and advocate for each other professionally and personally.

After the lightning talks, the presenters served as facilitators for small groups, where participants discussed ways to activate radical empathy in their own institutions and archival practice. It felt effective and engaging to actually have conversations around this topic, and to think of tangible actions we could enact once we left the conference. It was particularly timely to have this discussion during the first year of the Liberated Archive Unconference. Following the traditional SAA meeting, the Unconference was facilitated to "explore how archivists might partner with the public to repurpose the archive as a site of social transformation and radical inclusion,"<sup>3</sup> Community members, activists, archivists, and others came together to discuss partnerships,

resources, collaborations, and avoiding co-operations. Professor-activist-writer Walidah Imarisha set the tone with an outstanding keynote situating the importance of community archives and memory in telling more equitable and comprehensive stories, particularly related to historically marginalized and under-documented communities. Her work on the pioneering Afro-futurist writer Octavia Butler brought me to a frame of mind where we as a society can utilize the past to envision and create the future we want to live in. Activating and practicing concepts of radical empathy in the archive are a way of securing rich, complex visions of those futures.

It was the many evenings spent fellowshipping at the feet of the elders in my family and learning stories of enslaved and free people of color in Williamsburg that allowed me to expand my notions of history, archives, and community. I was able to see my experiences reflected in my grandparents' stories and to see also myself connected to ancestors generations before me. I realized this process was bigger than myself and it was not just a passion but a personal calling to engage in black memory work. My personal theoretical framework is rooted in black feminist theory, particularly the idea that feminism is rooted in the systematic destruction of oppression for all systems of subjection—racism, sexism, colonization, imperialism.

The founding core of Spelman's special collections is rooted in black feminist practices. Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, the founding director of Spelman's Women's Center, envisioned the college archives as a space of intellectual inquiry that celebrates research by and about black women. Whereas mainstream archivists at predominantly white universities might not have documented black women through apathetic neglect or intentional erasure, institutions like Spelman and other historically black colleges and institutions centralize the women of the African Diaspora and the communities and identities which they inhabit. There is not a question that black women's diverse experiences are important. However, being at a historically black college or

university (HBCU) archive does not mean that collection policies, access procedures, and advocacy strategies do not need to be reexamined and refined over the years. We, too, must be careful not to create master narratives of black women's history.

The concepts of self-awareness, openness, and community engagement have guided my archival practice and personal convictions. However I have often found professional challenges in articulating and activating these philosophies. There is a culture in archives that claims we are neutral and our collection philosophies are apolitical. There at times seems to be a negative connotation to connecting your identity and emotions to your work, unless of course you are a person of color. There is the assumption that black people have no problem and in fact are obviously inherently qualified to work with black archives and in black communities. The same goes for indigenous archivists working with indigenous collections, Latinx archivists working with Latinx collections, LGBTQ archivists with LGBTQ collections, and so on. Archivists of underrepresented groups inhabit multiple complex identities. This is where that fifth affective relationship is so critical—building supportive networks among archivists so we can provide empathy among each other in the profession.

I was fortunate to collaborate on a panel proposal with three other sister archival colleagues, Shanee' Murrain, Chaitra Powell, and Skyla Hearn, at the National Conference of African American Librarians outlining particular challenges we face as African American women archivists working with African American-related archives in predominantly African American communities. Some of these concerns include the risk of losing the materials or communities themselves; partnering with organizations and administrations with differing, and perhaps conflicting agendas; working on projects with limited or term funding; and the emotional labor of being a person of color in a predominantly white field trying to support communities that can often reflect our own experiences. We wanted to

emphasize in this panel that as black women archivists, we inhabit intersectional identities and bring diverse experiences to our careers. We advocate for the historically marginalized communities we discussed previously, and we also support one another dealing with professional microaggressions, institutional roadblocks, and recognizing the emotional labor we expend as black women in memory work. We want to be good stewards and serve as a bridge between communities and institutions, while being careful not to feel co-opted or to serve as a representative in any way as the sole black person speaking for an organization, or to allow African American communities to serve as props or have stories co-opted and used to further an institution's agenda.

What happens when archivists are not interested or invested in connecting with the communities they serve and document in a way to make communities feel valued or heard? Or when the archivists themselves feel they are being compromised in a certain way? How can we recognize our privilege in inherent ways? As archivists, we first must have a fundamental understanding and frankly, a reimagining of what we are doing. Archivists are not apolitical, passive keepers of dead records of the elite. Archivists actively shape history and memory by what we choose or do not choose to collect, and the meaning and context of archives can shift with time and memory. We should see ourselves as one of many stewards of records in collaboration with many stakeholders.

We must also understand and situate ourselves where we are. What types of institutions do we work with? What communities are we surrounded by, what types of stakeholders do we work with? How does this affect collection development policies, appraisal decisions, public programming, and advocacy efforts? Are we reaching the patrons we seek to serve, or are we privileging certain users? Are we privileging more traditional ways of understanding archives, and not considering the truth within oral traditions, stories, artifacts, and historical landscapes that are not part of the written record? How can we effectively activate practices

of radical empathy into our institutions, relationships, and frame of being? How can this praxis serve as our reference point for documenting communities, particularly those underrepresented in the archival record? I appreciate the notice of limitations on radical empathy in Caswell and Cifor's article to make sure empathy does not cross the lines into appropriation and assumptions.

I do not pretend to have all the answers or solutions—but based on my experiences and observations these are a few ways I think are critical for ethical archivists committed to principles of social justice, equity, access and connectivity. We first must be willing to engage in critical dialogue with archival theory and innovative, creative, and interdisciplinary forms of new scholarship. Archivists at predominantly white universities need to recognize the fraught, contentious relationship their institutions have historically had with marginalized communities within their organizations and in the surrounding communities. We need to build genuinely collaborative relationships with potential donors and partners, which starts by listening. We do not need to come to a community meeting with pre-determined agendas and ways to "help" communities, a mentality that is patriarchal and patronizing. Community partners bring wisdom, knowledge, and expertise of their neighborhoods, traditions, and memory. They do not need to see their collections and stories co-opted by any institution. We need to give donors, researchers, partners and ourselves the space to have emotion and feeling related to archival collections, especially those dealing with trauma or discomforting events and stories. It grounds us and keeps us connected to the humanity of the people we work with and who are or are not documented. I feel it actually frees us and allow us to build more authentic, genuine connections and to feel more aligned with our work. This is where I find radical empathy and the feminist ethics of care such a revolutionary and powerful practice—its the ability to bring your whole self to the work, and to see that as an asset and not a potential liability. It is the ability to examine our own thoughts,

feelings, biases, and privileges in relation to the collections we steward, the institutions where we are located, and the communities we do or do not engage with, and why.

The term "radical" typically has a negative connotation of unhinged or misdirected, but I feel radical relates more to revolutionary. Radical has the potential power to shift paradigm, to reshape mindsets, to encourage transparency. Embracing radical empathy in archival practice must be a radical reclamation of love. For I believe to truly want to change something I believe you have to love it in the first place.

As a child I always disliked accompanying my mom on most errands for one reason: She always stopped to talk to people, from the store manager to the janitor sweeping the floor. However, as I got older, I realized the important lesson my mother's interactions with others imparted on me, which is how to approach every person with a loving, open spirit. She treated everyone with the same courtesy and respect, no matter their race, age, gender, or class. My mother was the first person to show me the revolutionary power of walking in love, no matter what cause I'm fighting for or whom I'm interacting with. That love lesson continues to inspire me today, and I seek to treat every human being with love, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, or social status.

Archivists can shift repositories into these healing spaces where the power of "radical love" flourishes, where individuals and communities (particularly those that have been historically disempowered) can be renewed and nourished. To quote feminist (and former librarian) Audre Lorde, "It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences." I believe open, engaging dialog focused on recognizing and celebrating our global communities' collective differences can lead to powerful conversations and collective action to confront social justice issues that affect us all. As socially responsible archivists, we do not want to privilege someone's story over another's, but reaffirm that all

memories and stories are valid. Whether we are in the field building new relationships with marginalized communities or flagging important details in a biographical note—our work is improving the research landscape for future generations and fighting to preserve endangered knowledge and spaces.

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#### NOTES

1. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 82 (2016): 24, 25.
2. Ibid, 39.
3. "The Liberated Archive: A Forum For Envisioning And Implementing A Community-Based Approach To Archives," Archives 2017: Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting Program, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/am2017/program/liberated-archive-forum>.