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# Images, Silences, and the Archival Record

## An Interview with Michelle Caswell

Interviewers: Harrison Cole and Zachary Griffith  
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*Dr. Michelle Caswell is an Associate Professor of Archival Studies in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she is also an affiliated faculty member with the Department of Asian American Studies and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies. Her book, Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia (2014), which explores the role of archives and records in the construction of memory about the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia through a collection of mug shots taken at Tuol Sleng prison, won the 2015 Waldo Grifford Leland award for Best Publication from the Society of American Archivists. Caswell is also the co-founder of the South Asian American Digital Archive, an online repository which documents and provides access to the diverse stories of South Asian Americans.*

**Zach Griffith (ZG):** Can you tell us about your origin story as an academic? What is your background? What have you studied?

**Michelle Caswell (Caswell):** I'm a sort of Frankensteinian amalgamation. I come from a working-class background, neither of my parents graduated from high school. I'm from Chicago and attended Chicago Public Schools. I was always bused in to magnet schools outside of my neighborhood that were much more diverse—I grew up in a white neighborhood—and I attended a public high school on the south side of Chicago that was predominately African American. From there, I went on to complete an undergraduate degree at Columbia University in New York. I wound up being a religion major, which was not something I had anticipated. I had fantastic professors who sparked my interest and I ended up taking a significant amount of coursework in what was called Middle Eastern and Asian Languages and Cultures (MEALAC). I thought that I might be a professor of South Asian studies or religion but having come from a working-class background, I had no guidance or role model

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about picking a practical profession for this religion degree.

I wound up earning a master's degree in Theological Studies at Harvard Divinity School, focusing on world religions and South Asia. I had all these jarring educational experiences where what I was learning in the classroom was so different from my own lived experiences. I'm an atheist and I'm Jewish and here I was in a Christian divinity school studying Hinduism. After I graduated with that master's degree, I didn't want to be in academia anymore and got a job at the Asia Society Museum in New York as the Arts and Culture Website Producer. I interviewed visiting artists and speakers who came through the museum and published that information online. Then, I started working in non-profit marketing and decided to move back to Chicago and got a job as the Development Director for the Vietnamese Association of Illinois, which is a refugee-based social service agency. I moved around to other organizations doing non-profit fundraising and marketing. It felt like I was doing some good in the world but the work wasn't my own. It didn't feel like I had a career. I looked around and noticed that my friends who were librarians seemed to be happy with their jobs. I decided that I would go back to school to earn a master's degree in Library and Information Studies to become a librarian. I earned my master's at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee while working part-time as the assistant bibliographer for South Asia at the University of Chicago. As I was working on the degree, I realized that I loved doing research and writing. I had found my passion. I then went on to earn my Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a minor in Language and Culture of Asia.

While I was working for the University of Chicago library, I met Samip Mallick, now a very close friend, who was working as the South Asian Outreach coordinator in the International Center at the University of Chicago. We were working on a memorial service for a faculty member and as we were going through this person's papers in the University of Chicago Archives, we started talking and Samip asked, "Well, who is collecting records documenting South Asian American history?" I answered, "I have actually done that research and nobody is." Collecting South Asian American history was not a priority for anybody. Always the go-getter, Samip responded, "Let's just do it. Let's start that project." So, we started the South Asian American Digital Archive. Originally, we thought that it would be a project at the University of Chicago. However, like most archives, it has a huge backlog of materials that are unprocessed and there is no way to sort of jump the queue unless you have money, which we did not. We decided to go out on our own and created a digital-only archive. We received pushback and were told that digital archives were not archives. We were also told that there were no community archives in the United States, yet, we were founding one.

We founded what is called a post-custodial archive. Most archives accept physical custody of materials and then take care of, or steward, those materials. We knew we didn't have the money for a physical space, and we both knew we wouldn't be in Chicago for much longer. Instead, we created an online-only, post-custodial repository, which meant we borrowed materials from donors, individuals, families, organizations, and archives. These materials were then digitized, described using terminology the community uses to describe itself, published online, and, finally, returned to the owners. The South Asian American Digital Archive has been around for nine years [10 years now] but we have no physical space, although it obviously requires material infrastructure to run a digital archive. Samip has since moved to Philadelphia and he is the executive director and our only paid full-time employee. My background in marketing and fundraising has been useful because I now

spend a lot of my time marketing and writing grant applications for the organization. It's been a labor of love. It's been a lot of work but it has been a way for me to make sense of these disparate pieces of my background and I use it as a lab, of sorts, for my research. I'm now an associate professor of archival studies in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA, and I teach courses on community-based archives. I'm constantly drawing on examples from the South Asian American Digital Archive in my classes and I write about it constantly.

**ZG:** How do you define the archive or the *archives*?

**Caswell:** I always use the 's'. I say archives to distinguish between what archival studies scholars study and where archivists work versus how humanities scholars think of "the archive" in this kind of Derridean or Foucauldian metaphor, the first law of what can or cannot be said. That's not how archivists conceive of archives. Archivists conceive of archives as collections of materials, collections of records—*record* is a key concept for archivists and archival studies scholars—collections of records that are stewarded across space and time. What's interesting about that definition is that every single one of those words is contested, which is what I like about it. My favorite definition of record is based on Geoffrey Yeo's definition of record which is 'a persistent representation of human activity that travels across space and time.' A record does not have to be material in that definition. Older definitions, the Society of American Archivists' definition of record, involves materiality, but I think it is important to recognize oral records as records or kinetic records as records. A dance can be a record. I try to expand the canon of archival theory, which was based on dominant Western ways of being and knowing the world, to include other ways of being and knowing the world.

If archives are collections of records, I think there's also a component of preservation to make something an archives. This notion of stewarding something across space and time is a commitment to stewarding that material through preservation. It does not mean forever; it does not mean in perpetuity, but through some period of space and time. When people throw up a website and say that it's an archive, it's the kind of thing that drives archivists crazy, and that's one of the reasons—there is no commitment to stewarding it into the future. I think another key element that makes something an archives is description: creating metadata so that the materials are findable. I want to acknowledge that this definition is rooted in my own experience as someone who is trained in the dominant Western paradigm and that there are many other definitions of what an archives is. I run into this interesting rhetorical battle where, on the one hand, I'm defending the concept of the archives from these humanists, but at the same time critiquing that standard definition. I'm on doing work on both of those fronts.

**ZG:** How do you see the archives intersecting with social justice?

**Caswell:** I think there's a 100% overlap. For me, the work of archives is the work of social justice and this can take many different forms. It can be advocating for the use of records for social justice aims. For instance, collecting records that you know can be used for human rights claims, land dispute claims, legal claims, or claims about representation. Claims that communities have been here, that communities have existed. Fundamentally to me, the act of remembering and forgetting is about creating a future in which resources are more

equitably distributed. For me, archival labor should be infused with a social justice ethics. When making appraisal decisions about which materials to keep and which not to keep, archivists should be thinking about representation and who matters and whose stories are worth documenting. There has been a lack of care among archivists when it comes to documenting communities of color, LGBTQ communities, and people who are marginalized due to beliefs, geography, and social class. I think we have an obligation to center those people who have been marginalized in our appraisal decisions moving forward. When we are describing records after we have acquired them, it's important to use the same languages that communities use to describe themselves. Epistemic violence happens when you go to look for yourself or your community in an archive and the language that's used is a racial slur or is offensive. Describing materials accurately using language that is emic to the communities they belong to is important. Once the materials are described, promoting their use for social justice aims is important. Traditionally, archivists have not been able to conceive who their users are beyond academics. It used to be just historians and maybe genealogists. A way to expand this narrow notion of who uses the archives, particularly when it comes to human rights concerns, is to create what I call a survivor-centered approach to those records, which is centering survivors in these decision processes, and I think that's also true about digitization. Ethics should permeate every aspect of the archival process as well as archival education. They're inseparable.

**ZG:** Are there any scholars whose work has informed the way you think about archives?

**Caswell:** Yes. The most important theorist for me is Verne Harris who's a South African archivist who's the Director of Memory and Dialogue at the Nelson Mandela Centre for Memory in Johannesburg. His work is what enabled me to be in this field. We read his work on the last day of class in my MLIS program and it opened a world of possibilities in terms of my commitment to ethics, my commitment to social justice, and my commitment to marginalized communities. Verne's work is influenced by Derrida and he thinks that we have a commitment to what he says is to heed the call of social justice. For Harris, the act of archiving is political by definition and there's no way for anyone to keep their hands clean in the archive. He's been inspirational and he's a beautiful writer. What I also find to be incredibly exciting are younger archivists. Jarrett Drake, who is a digital archivist at Princeton [he is now an anthropology doctoral student at Harvard], is one of the founders of this project called the People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland. After the shooting of Tamir Rice, he got a group of volunteer archivists to go around Cleveland and start collecting oral histories of people who have been impacted by police violence. That project has now turned into a community based project that's been handed over to local activists who are working for prison evolution and against police violence. Jarrett is a brilliant thinker and writes incessantly. I love that there's an activist/practical component to his work.

**Harrison Cole (HC):** You mentioned that you developed a post-custodial archive for SAADA. Is this something that you would like to see more widely applied to other archives? What types of archives might benefit from this model?

**Caswell:** It's a very particular model that works well for us but it doesn't work for everybody.

It's a good question because I don't want to promote open access as a universal solution. It works for us because of these practical reasons—that we knew we would not be in Chicago forever and we did not have any money. It also worked for our communities because there is no single South Asian American community. Additionally, the owners of the records we work with have intense sentimental value associated with them and would not want to give them up. I would say, too, that part of our mission is to uncover lost histories and promote them. It makes access—universal access to the materials—foundational to the work that we do. This is certainly not the case for many communities. I know that Kim Christen was here a couple of weeks ago talking about Indigenous records where the notion of universal open access to those materials is quite damaging to those communities. In that case, a universally accessible post custodial archive wouldn't work as a model for that community since it doesn't reflect the community's values. It's important to think about the ways that these values are embedded in technical decisions and make sure that those values reflect the community.

SAADA just received a grant from GIZ, which is a German government funding agency, to start a new project documenting Islamophobia. We don't know how to do that; we've been stuck. We've felt stuck as an organization. What the grant will enable us to do is assemble a board of advisers to figure out what the project will look like, how to collect these materials without exposing that community to further surveillance, and whether we should be collecting the materials at all. It's of extreme concern to us that the records we collect do not harm the community. At the end of this project, after we've assembled the board and the meetings have convened, the answer might be that this isn't a good project or that it's not the right time to do this project. It may even be that this is the right time to collect these materials but it's not the right time to make them accessible. We have to be prepared for all possibilities.

**HC:** I wonder if you could speak to the micro history projects in the context of traditional archival practices and if there are any precedents for this and how you would like to see it evolve.

**Caswell:** Well, the First Days Project is a project run by SAADA in which immigrants are able to record brief narratives about their first 24 hours or 48 hours in the United States. It began as a project focusing only on South Asian American immigrants because that's the focus of our collection. But we received such an outpouring of interest from immigrants from other parts of the world that we decided to open it up. We had a long discussion as a board about making it a separate project and whether it diverged from our mission of documenting South Asian American history. In the end, we decided to move forward with it. It's quite a departure from a standard traditional archives and I'm glad that you noticed that because we're compelling people to record their stories, to create their records. Most people walking down the street don't care about that distinction, but in the archival world, it's a big distinction. Dominant western modes still see records as neutral byproducts of activity and according to this more traditional Western version of archival theory, records are supposed to be impartial, which means that the people creating them should have no notion of how they might wind up in an archives in the future. When I first wrote an article on the First Days project and submitted it for publication, one of the reviewers said in the review that it was an interesting project, but, essentially, it was not an archival project. I responded that

these are records because they are documenting the function of SAADA trying to document immigrant histories. The editor was satisfied with that rhetorical move. I think that this is true for any kind of oral history project. The more conservative archival theorists working in the dominant western paradigm think oral histories are not records for the same reason: they are artificial; they are not impartial because they are created purposefully for creating the records, not for fulfilling other functions.

**HC:** In some communities, there's a tendency to twist or spin or even omit their more troubled or troubling facets. I wonder, in your experience, how people have grappled with these uncomfortable moments especially when people might be implicated in them.

**Caswell:** It's a huge issue for us with SAADA. Until recently, South Asian immigrants were seen as model minorities. The myth of the model minority is that South Asians come to the U.S., they're highly educated, they make a lot of money, they assimilate, and they don't get involved in politics. Seemingly, it's a model that's held out for other minority groups to attain, which in reality masks anti-black racism. What we're trying to do is document this century-old history of South Asians coming to the United States and being incredibly politically active. I'm talking about the history of the Ghaddar Party. Ghaddar means revolt or revolution in Urdu, which was a political party of activists trying to overthrow colonial rule in India by any means necessary. In fact, there was the Hindu-German conspiracy trial in 1917 in which there were South Asian immigrants to the United States who were laundering money and arms from the German government in order to take those arms up against the British. The history is more complicated than the dominant narrative and I think that we must be very careful about it. Many archives are documenting immigrant and refugee histories that only document the success stories, stories of achieving the American dream. Yet it's also important to document political activism, resistance, and failure as well. How we do that is tricky but essential.

**ZG:** Why are images of particular interest to you, especially in relation to your book *Archiving the Unspeakable*? What does the study of images offer that studying other archival materials or artifacts does not?

**Caswell:** There's something about photographs that speak to us very deeply. I think it's particularly true when you're studying cultures whose languages you cannot read. There's something incredible haunting about those Tuol Sleng photographs. They leave such an impact. The manner in which they're viewed at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is so jarring. It's such a haunted space and the ways in which they're on display for foreign tourists now is so striking. Originally, after the Khmer Rouge were overthrown by the Vietnamese, the Vietnamese quickly turned the Tuol Sleng prison site which had previously been a high school into a museum because they recognized the importance of that site for controlling the narrative about who the Khmer Rouge were and who was responsible and why. They turned it into a narrative that justified their own overthrow of the regime based on humanitarian grounds—they had their own political agenda there. There was also a practical agenda where people didn't know if their loved ones had been killed at Tuol Sleng or not. There's something about those records as photographic records that's haunting, that the texts don't

convey and it's perhaps because I don't read the language. I also think it's necessary to have an intervention in this discussion about the ethics of viewing images from an archival studies perspective. If we see photographs as records, first and foremost, not as aesthetic objects or art, then we tie them to the context of their creation. You cannot view that photograph or interpret it without knowing that it was taken by the Khmer Rouge regime. It's only when we see them as art objects and we put them on display at a museum without context that we do a real injustice to the victims and our looking is no longer grounded in ethics, it's grounded in spectacle.

**ZG:** Can you talk a little bit about the power, and even the politics of silences, within the archives? What work do silences do within the archives, and once identified, what work can and maybe should be done to address them?

**Caswell:** I think it depends on the nature of the silence; there are so many different types of silence. There's a silence that's done on purpose that needs to be respected and there's a silence that's done because of white supremacist attitudes from archivists about what's important to collect. To me, these are two of the major forms of silences, the latter of which needs to be addressed immediately by archivists—at all kinds of institutions and all levels. I think we need to train archivists to start questioning these notions of what's important and what our role is and what the ethics are from the very start in their master's programs. I think we need to shift our notion of what's important from the "stuff" (objects, things) to the people, to the relationships. That's actually what's more important. It's a huge shift for us because we've been so focused as a field on the stuff. The stuff is great but the stuff is great only in so much as it enables you to tell stories about the people.