

Radical Empathy in Archival Practice
session intro by Rosemary K. J. Davis
NEA Spring 2017 meeting, New Haven, CT

Good morning everyone!

My name is Rosemary Davis and I'd like to take a moment to welcome you all to Radical Empathy in Archival Practice. On behalf of all the speakers, we'd like to express our gratitude to the conference organizers from NEA and A.R.T., to all of the workers here at the Omni New Haven Hotel, and finally: to recognize and respect that this conference takes place on the land of indigenous people.

My role here today is to help give an extremely brief introduction in an effort to provide all of us some common ground for understanding—essentially I'll be giving you some food for thought, some ideas and questions to sit with as we progress through the rest of the session. In that light I think it's useful to start things off by looking at how Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor define the concept of radical empathy:

“radical empathy offers a way to engage with others’ experiences that involves discarding the assumption that we share with them the same space of belonging in the world.

“Our conception of empathy is radical in its openness and its call for a willingness to be affected, to be shaped by another’s experiences, without blurring the lines between the self and the other”.

I think it's very important to acknowledge that this is complicated, this effort to be open, to make space for experiences beyond your own without supplanting your personal feelings, biases, fears, and desires, but it's truly worth the work. And during today's talks and discussions, I urge you to focus on listening just as much as sharing, on accepting other people's experiences as valid and unique.

It's also important to note that Caswell and Cifor situate their concept of radical empathy within a feminist ethics of care, saying that we as archivists should work to resist “[erasure of] differences between bodies... turn[ing] a blind eye to power differentials, and...reinforc[ing] hierarchies.” In her introduction to last year's iteration of this panel at SAA, Shannon O'Neill, who is the Associate Director of Archives and Special Collections at Barnard College, noted this and presented a suggestion that I'd like to directly quote here:

While Caswell and Cifor are attuned to injustices wrought upon diverse bodies, I'd like to ask this room to pay careful attention to what we mean when we talk about “bodies.” Whose body do we speak of in a profession whose majority makeup represents privileged bodies that are white, cis-gender, conforming to society's standard of ability, and have access to monetary resources? (O'Neill)

O'Neill's call to bring a deep sense of reflection and perspective to our work here today is vital.

Another important element in Caswell and Cifor's article is the definition of four key archival relationships:

relationships between

- the archivist and the records creator
- the archivist and records' subject
- the archivist and user
- the archivist and larger communities

Building on Caswell and Cifor, Shannon O'Neill and the participants in this panel also suggest a fifth key relationship:

- the archivist and other archivists

Which brings us to today and this session. We're here together. And we have work to do.

I think that Caswell and Cifor put it so elegantly when they wrote:

- We are inextricably bound to one another through relationships.
- We live in complex relations to each other infused with power differences and inequities.
- We care about each other's well-being.

These words can guide us through today, and through our work ahead—they are reminders of our own humanity and the humanity of others.

So, let's turn to the order of the day and how this session will be structured. First off, we will have brief talks from our panelists. Each talk will delve into firsthand experiences of radical empathy in action. Next, we will move into groups to discuss a set of questions we have provided to you all. After the breakout session, we'll have a moment so each of you can reflect individually and collect your thoughts. Lastly, we'll have time for you all to share your reflections and questions with the whole room.

We urge you to all to bring as much generosity, kindness, and respect into this space as possible. On this slide and on your handout, you'll see this Code of Conduct. It is our goal to have productive conversations in a supportive and anti-oppressive environment. Each of the presenters will be functioning as facilitators for the breakout discussions—you can approach any one of us with issues and we will do our best to help and support you.

These talks are brief so we'd appreciate if you could all hold any applause until they are all completed. Note down your questions, bring them to the breakout sessions and the large group shareback at the end of the session. Also feel free to talk with any of us after the session is over.

Finally: thank you all for being here, for being open, and for doing this work with us. Let's get started!