

“What if we began to see archivists not just as guardians of the authenticity of the records in their collections, but as centerpieces in an ever-changing web of responsibility through which they are connected to records’ creators, records’ subjects, records’ users, and larger communities? What happens when we scratch beneath the surface of the veneer of detached professionalism and start to think of record keepers and archivists... as caregivers?”

Caswell, M. and Cifor, M. (2016). From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives. Archivar, 81, pp. 23-43.

# RADICAL

# EMPATHY

# IN ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

**about:**  
 This poster and accompanying postcards were created by Gracen Brillmyer for the Journal of Critical Library and Information Science (JCLIS) special issue on Radical Empathy in Archival Practice. The poster and postcards visualize and embody the four archival relationships proposed by Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor in their 2016 article, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives” in addition to three new relationships proposed by others:

- Record creators
- Users
- Communities
- Other archivists\*
- Donors\*
- What other archival relationships have you experienced?\*

This poster contains 7 illustrations that represent each of these archival relationships. You are encouraged to complete this poster by:

1. Filling in each of the 7 illustrated relationships (dotted line box) on postcards
2. Mailing postcards to someone who embodies this relationship
3. Appending the postcards to the poster, or writing in the relationships

\* Credit to Rachel Mattson and Jasmine Jones for proposing the archivist-archivist relationship in 2017; Issa Jabrail for writing about the donor-archivist relationship in this special issue and Gracen Brillmyer's creativity to leave space for more relationships.

**empathy:** “the ability and willingness to place oneself in the perceptions and viewpoints of others”  
 empathy is **radical** if it critically and consciously shifts existing power relations in favor of those who are marginalized

**what's wrong with rights-based approaches to archives?**

- based on individual rights rather than collective responsibilities
- based on legal rather than ethical frameworks
- strives for equality rather than equity
- positions archivists as de-contextualized enforcers of rights rather than as people with positionalities, identities, and communities
- positions users as de-contextualized subjects entitled to rights rather than full people with positionalities, identities, and communities
- defaults to western and white conceptualizations of ownership rather than honoring and supporting the self determination of vulnerable subjects and the collective rights of communities of color by giving care to culturally sensitive information

**examples of rights-based archival practices:**

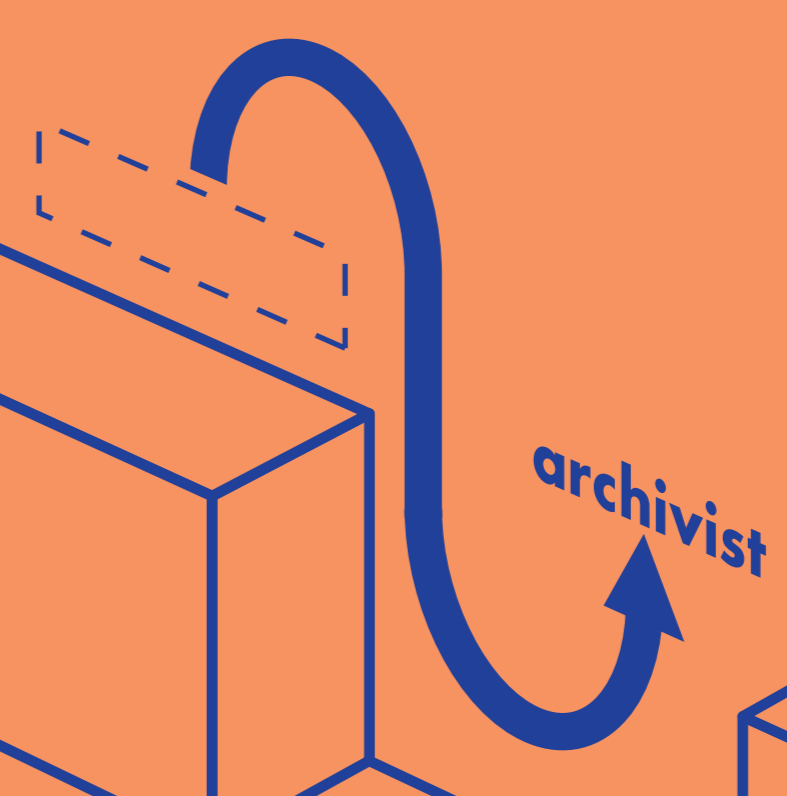
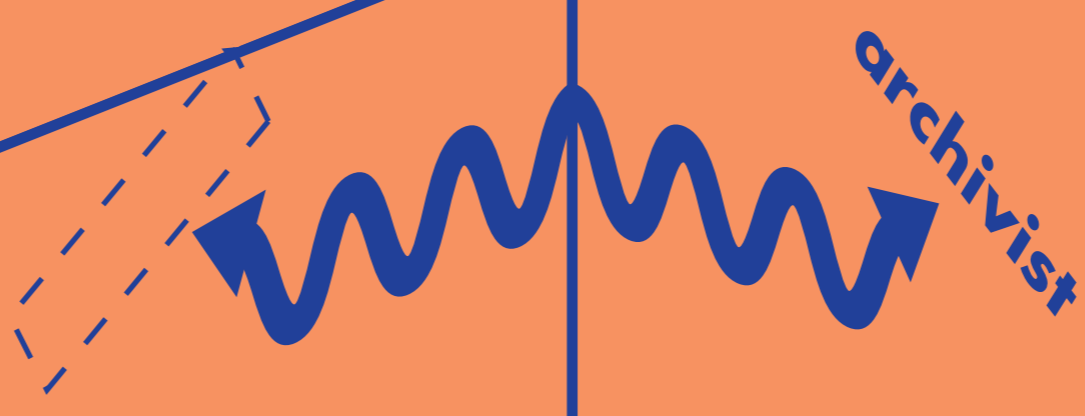
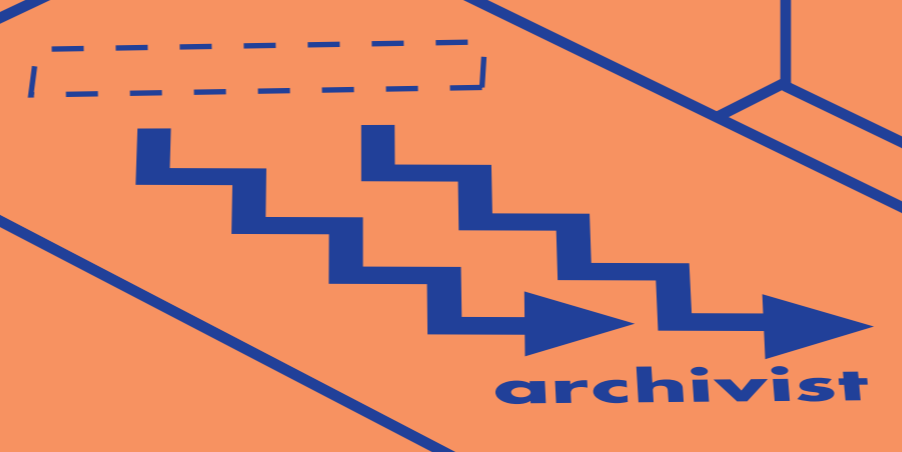
- focus on credentialed academics as main user base
- a culture of hyper security in the reading room that alienates users
- privileging unmediated access over protection of vulnerable subjects or culturally sensitive information
- perpetuation of race / social / class / gender / sexual / ability hierarchies in collection development policies by having a narrow focus on what is “notable”
- prioritizing efficiencies that potentially forsake crucial information about cultures and identities
- feigned neutral role of archivists which limits their role with record creators, donors, subjects, users, communities, and each other

**what are feminist ethics?**

- overturns assumptions about the universality of masculinist morality
- dependent on culture and context
- rejects liberal moral assumptions about individual choice & free will
- centers concepts of care
- emphasizes particularity, connection, context over abstract moral principles
- highlights empathy in the face of situational demands
- draws to the fore women's lived experiences as caregivers

**feminist ethics is both personal & structural**

- interrogates intersecting structures of violence & views injustice as structural & personal, public & private, always already political
- refuses neoliberalist rhetoric that sees individuals as free agents in a market economy
- focuses on systemic oppression
- resists use of underfunding, disaster, privatization as excuses for
- makes labor visible



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