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Abstract

In this transcript from a Zoom interview, Assistant Professor in the Information School at University of Washington and adjunct faculty member in Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies Marika Cifor tackles critical issues in the cultural heritage space by striving for a balance between professional ideals and practical circumstances. The conversation delves into complex topics like radical care and empathy, attunement to power and moving away from Anglocentricity, privatization of information and social media engagement, and archives as grief work requiring trauma-informed approaches. While Cifor's research is rooted in archival practice, she evokes diverse information spaces, including prison libraries, public libraries, digital community archives, and academic special collections.

Keywords

Advocacy, metadata, social networking, social media, archives, community archives, radical care, social justice.

Author Bio

Marika Cifor is Assistant Professor in the Information School and adjunct faculty in Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. She is a feminist scholar of archival studies and digital studies. Her research investigates how individuals and communities marginalized by gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and HIV-status are represented and how they document and represent themselves in archives and digital cultures.

Sara Schumacher is the Architecture Image Librarian in the Architecture Library at Texas Tech University Libraries.

Marika Cifor is an Assistant Professor in the Information School at the University of Washington and an adjunct faculty member in Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies who applies feminist theory and research practices to archival and digital studies. Her research and publications delve into aspects of archival practice from description to community archives, placing justice and activism at the forefront. In publications like *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS* (2022), Cifor challenges information professionals to consider new visions for how communities and collections could look and act within archival practice.

In this interview, Cifor states, “I don’t have any good answers, just lots of questions and lots of fantastic people to think with.” This statement belies the power of those questions to conceptualize new realities for our profession and seek new collaborators and communities that share our values. Despite the professional adversities mentioned in this interview, including censorship and insufficient funding, Cifor expresses excitement for the potential futures within the archival field. From observations on the social justice mindset of new information professionals to emerging research focusing on the role of grief and trauma in archival practice, visual resources professionals will find many new avenues to consider and pursue in this transcript from a Zoom conversation between Marika Cifor and Sara Schumacher.

Sara Schumacher (SS): First question: If time and money were not factors, what would you want to learn how to do?

Marika Cifor (MC): Oh, I think there’s, I mean, so many things, right? I think there are a million things that I would love to learn.

Whole cuisines I would love to learn to cook, particularly Vietnamese. I love Vietnamese food but have yet to replicate anything similar. And then I think the other thing would be languages to learn. I know one of your questions is about the Homosaurus project and I am one of the few people on the project who doesn’t speak Spanish or at least, not very much Spanish. I would love to speak multiple languages, but especially Spanish. So maybe one day; perhaps that’s a good sabbatical goal.

SS: It’s interesting. So, you know, food and languages, the cultural aspects.

MC: Absolutely yes. Things oriented towards travel and towards connecting with people. I think food is obviously such an important part of our cultures, as is language.

SS: Second question: What characteristics, dispositions, or learned practices make information professionals successful in care work?

MC: I think you might be gesturing towards the *Archivaria* piece I wrote with Michelle Caswell a number of years ago on a feminist ethics of care.¹ And I think what we (you know, you’re always a critic of your own work as well)—well, what wasn’t explicit enough in that piece and that thinking is how important an attunement to power is in thinking about radical empathy and thinking about care.

We’re never going to do anything perfectly and we’re going to make mistakes. But I think an attunement to power is the most important piece for me in thinking about how we do care better in

¹ Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81, no. 1 (2016): 23-43.

cultural heritage spaces. And especially I think in that piece, we thought about different kinds of relationships that archivists have, whether it's to the records, the people who created the records, the people whose lives are implicated in the records, or the bigger communities around those records. Other folks have added other kinds of relationships – thinking about relationships with donors, thinking about relationships with other archivists – and this relationality applies to cultural heritage and information workers more broadly.

In all of those kinds of relationships, it is an attunement to power [that] allows us to enact care in a, hopefully, more equitable way. I want us to think about care in the kind of sense that we talked a bit about in that piece, but also with others who are thinking about notions of not just radical empathy, but of radical care. And I think what makes care radical is its opposition to structural oppression and injustice. That's what makes the kind of care work we might do as information professionals have the potential to be powerful as well. And again, we're going to make mistakes and we're going to have to own up to them. But thinking about power might allow us to minimize some of those mistakes or minimize at least some of the harms that we might perpetuate.

SS: Really interesting. And I was wondering if, off the top of your head, you have any resources or recommendations for people that are trying to unpack that power?

MC: There are many tools. I do think that calling attention to power has to be broken down into thinking about different kinds of power. I think a great starting point is—there's a really beautiful issue of the [Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies](#) (an Open Access journal which in 2021 put out an issue on radical empathy). It was put together by a set of really fantastic archivists, Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly A. Smith, who gathered together all kinds of work, mostly by folks who are practicing archivists and librarians who are thinking about radical empathy and care work in all of the different kinds of spaces and relationships they develop.

There [are] also some other great resources. Michelle Caswell and Gracen Brilmyer together developed a [framework](#) for thinking about and visualizing white supremacy's manifestation in archives and how we might dismantle it. And then there [are] other more practical resources; I always think about the [Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia's project](#) on resources for doing anti-racist description. Within those resources, they have a guide to working particularly with materials documenting slavery and the Black experience, and to thinking about how we counter anti-Blackness and racism in archives more broadly. They offer both a set of practical resources for how do we answer these kinds of questions in a particular area of our work – description – and a set of resources for doing broader critical thinking.

And so, I think we need a combination of things that offer critical questions and frameworks and things that offer practical examples of how we've actually begun to do this critical practice. I think description has been a particularly fruitful area because it's so obvious – the language, the racist language, the sexist language, other kinds of oppressive language we've enacted there, in the past in our descriptions. But that's often been a starting point for those conversations. And again, we can talk more about this project, but that's where resources like the Homosaurus come into this – thinking about the kinds of harm that are perpetuated through description, either intentionally or unintentionally, by just using the systems that we have in place uncritically.

SS: I found how you phrased it really interesting: Description being very forward-facing but also digging into that makes it a little more accessible to understand the real-world ramifications.

MC: Yes. And I think, right, we need both. That's where I often think about my position in this field and I think being a faculty member in this space gives me the space to do that thinking at a broader level. Whereas I think many folks on the ground are interested in just as many critical approaches and issues, but are often caught up in the day-to-day and overwhelmed by the sheer number of kind of demands on their time already, right? And they don't get the space and time to do some of the broader level thinking. And I think that's part of the privilege of being a faculty member in an information school, but also having still close ties to the professional world and to training the future professionals in the field.

SS: I think that is an interesting segue into the next question, which is: In this increasingly politically charged environment, how do you navigate being an activist and an advocate with your scholarly and professional pursuits?

MC: Yeah. I think these are really challenging questions for all of [us] and really challenging questions as someone in the kind of privileged place I'm in, right? I work in a university where I'm allowed certain kinds of academic freedom, and I live in a state (Washington) in which some of those freedoms are better protected than for many others in the academy.

My students are thinking deeply about these questions, especially my MLIS students. I get to teach a community engagement class. And particularly there, many of the students are not necessarily thinking about archives or cultural heritage especially. They're often interested in public library work and I think public libraries are often on the very forefront of these kinds of questions in their day-to-day lives. Public librarians face these kinds of questions every day. Most of my students, I think, have an orientation towards their work that's grounded in social justice, grounded in service, and grounded in wanting to create access, and wanting to of course empower people who have been historically denied resources and access to information. And yet, they also want to bring together the whole community and to serve their whole community.

We had an important opportunity to address this last spring. I think one of the greatest parts of teaching that community engagement course is that I get to bring other folks into the conversation, and my students actually suggested thinking about prison librarianship as a space for community engagement, prison librarianship being perhaps even more at the forefront of these kinds of issues, given the realities of our criminal justice system. And many of my students come from an abolitionist critical perspective on the prison industrial complex but also desire to serve folks who are incarcerated and to provide the information and resources that they need inside and as they hopefully move back into the broader society. We were privileged enough to hear both from a librarian within the Washington State Libraries, which works closely with the correctional facilities here in Washington, and then from folks who work on the [JSTOR Access in Prisons Initiative](#) [Ryan McCarthy and Stacy Burnett]. And they are, I think, both in different ways—those practitioners offered us critical ways of thinking about how you work both within and outside the systems simultaneously. You can forefront your own professional ethics and desires for access and for equity, but also you learn to navigate the power systems that are there, right?

How do you present the case to correctional institutions, for instance, that these kinds of resources are necessary? And then how do you actually provide this information and have you work

in the systems that exist while also trying to kind of expand, [and] move beyond some of those harmful systems. Librarians in those spaces are thinking critically about issues and really kind of, again, balancing those theoretical and critical interests. Sometimes we're privileged in archives to not have as—it's both, I think, a blessing and a curse, right, sometimes to be less well known, to be less visible to and understood by the parts of the conservative public or the conservative politicians, at least. We are not always placed immediately under the same kind of scrutiny as our public library colleagues. But any threat to information access is a threat to archives as well. Archives, like public libraries, can be an important space for doing work that brings together folks across different kinds of lines. Information spaces are some of the few spaces we have in our society where we can actually, perhaps, even bring together folks for conversation and to talk and to learn across difference.

Of course, we're always figuring out how to do so and to do so in ways that prioritize the safety and equity of all in our communities. So, I don't have any good answers, just lots of questions and lots of fantastic people to think with. I'm always very heartened to see the ways in which my students are thinking about and navigating these lines as they move into the profession. My students bring a really fantastic set of critical tools [to] thinking about how [you do] social justice work while also balancing your commitments when working in a public institution. I am really heartened by the fact that they go into their careers thinking so critically about these issues and thinking about how they want to navigate them as professionals; it gives me hope for what our field will look like moving forward.

SS: Well, I think you did kick down to our last question, so I'll skip down there with you: Is there anything else that you're excited about for that next generation of information professionals?

MC: I'm always excited to see what they're interested in and committed to, and teaching is always a process of learning, you know, from my students and from my colleagues as well. I'm really excited. Historically, I work in an information school where archives [haven't] been necessarily the primary avenue which our MLIS students are interested in pursuing. I'm excited by the fact that every year we see more and more students who are interested in archives and cultural heritage work and who see the field as an important space for doing critical social justice work.

Even over the decade in which I've been doing this work, I've really seen my students come more and more deeply committed to thinking about community archives, to thinking about how to equitably serve their diverse communities in really thoughtful and responsible ways. I think even just within that decade in which I've taught, I've seen this shift towards people entering our profession with the kind of commitments I hope to see. My students have moved past debates around the desirability or possibility of neutrality to already thinking critically and thinking broadly about what counts as an archive, what kinds of materials, and who we should be serving, and how we should do our work, and who we should collaborate with. My students are entering already with this kind of expansive notion of archives and the power they might have, and that excites me very much.

I'm always excited to get to teach our archives course in the spring quarter, because I get to listen and learn and hear what folks are interested in and excited about. Even for my students who are new to MLIS and new to the field, they're already entering with this critical perspective and commitment that is exciting and they're excited to learn and to grow as professionals. They learn the standards and systems and processes by which we work, but also to think critically about them at the

same time. And for me, that's a really exciting development and gives me lots of hope for the kinds of work the profession can do. New professionals bring new energy and ideas and resources to their work and the way in which they're expanding and thinking about the field is exciting.

SS: I think that that is very exciting, especially considering that opening of what an archive is and what it does. And that definitely goes into the question that I had after reading your book, *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS*. I really enjoyed how you looked at social media like Tumblr and Instagram. I was just curious: How do you recommend informational professionals try to balance the potential [of] social media with connecting with communities, with having more community archives, with the ethical concerns with the companies that run them?

MC: Yeah. That's part of the challenge – they do offer these perhaps very democratic possibilities for creating and circulating content and for building our own archives, and for activating communities who perhaps don't have the time and resources or the connections for institutional access; so, there's exciting possibilities there. But of course, most of this work has been done on private platforms where that isn't—they don't have the same kind of priorities or ethics that information organizations and institutions have. Most of them are not devoted to the public good, right? They're responsible [for] generating profit and to working for their shareholders. They often are invested in regimes of datafication that perpetuate harm. And so, I think there's both realities. We have to engage and mobilize with those kinds of platforms, but I also hope that we can think about alternative ways to do the work, to do the same kind of expansion and democratization of who creates archives, and who accesses them, and how they're used and engaged with but on platforms that are not privately held, and that actually exemplify our values as information professionals.

I always think about Sophia Noble's work in *Algorithms of Oppression*. She talks about how libraries might actually be on the forefront of developing search engines that are not Google, that are not privately owned, and that might actually mobilize the values that our profession has in their operations. I would hope for something similar for us to develop our own platforms and do better with them – embody those values and those practices that prioritize the needs of communities rather than the needs of corporate shareholders. But how we actually do that, I think, is a bigger question. I mean, some of the archives that I've been fortunate enough to work with do, for instance, kind of move back and forth between those two things. [Visual AIDS](#), for example, has its own digital archive that's hosted on its website, and you can create collections and exhibitions as a user within your account, and that's how they have guest curators engage [with] pieces. But they also, of course, post things on Instagram and engage people that way. So, I think, at least in the short term, we need to work within the platforms where people already are.

But I hope that we can mobilize folks to different kinds of spaces and to different kinds of platforms. I know that some of my more maker-oriented colleagues are thinking about how we actually create platforms that have different kinds of values within them and how we actually bring people to them and the ways that we might use them to do engagement work. That is what's exciting.

SS: And I think that there is, because I—I see both going forward, I see the huge Open Access movement, Open Access software and creation moving forward. But then you also

see a commodification of libraries and archives and museums, with these big companies, big publishing companies dominating.

MC: Absolutely right. We're, of course, always navigating questions around how do we make our materials more accessible with the reality that I can't think of a single archive, even very well resourced ones, that actually has adequate funding and support to do everything it wishes it could do. I wrote a little bit in the book *Viral Cultures* about how publishing platforms like Gale put certain kinds of resources behind paywalls. Maybe the questions are: how do we navigate and work together to argue for better access, for more kinds of freely available resources, while also now getting the reality that we often don't have the institutional resources to do that kind of work ourselves? And that we want our collections to be digitized and to be accessible, but we're always balancing these different realities. What I hope to see is more kinds of conversation and collaboration across different areas of our field, across different institutions, so that we can at least be getting the best possible deal in imperfect circumstances and that we can be advocating for better resources for all different kinds of institutions so that we don't have to make these kinds of choices in the future. But that kind of organizing – it's hard, everybody already is overtaxed and under-resourced, so building those kinds of collaborations is also challenging.

SS: The next question, I was curious. Working in collections and working with collections, is there a particular piece from the archives that you've researched for a project that has really stuck with you, in maybe an unexpected or emotional way?

MC: One of the greatest privileges of doing the work I do is actually getting to—I mean, I think like all people trained as archivists, right, we love getting to actually touch and engage with these really powerful and diverse objects. And for me, it's that thinking about, thinking with, objects – that is often where I begin, and where I do more theoretical work is often grounded those in particular objects. The [Lives and Legacies of the Visual AIDS Archive](#) event at the Whitney has got me thinking again about the archive project zine that the co-founder of the Visual AIDS archive, Frank Moore, created.

It's a piece I keep coming back to because it's—I spent, when I was writing *Viral Cultures*, a good deal of time kind of looking through Frank Moore's papers, which are at New York University in the Fales Library and Special Collections within the Downtown Collection. It encapsulates Visual AIDS's own kind of documentation of its history. I had really hoped to find even more reflection in writing from Frank Moore and others who are no longer living about their experience of creating the Archive. I couldn't find a great deal of writing from Frank Moore; I found bits and pieces. But I did find his zine and I think as someone who is a visual artist, right, those kinds of creative reflections are maybe even more important than his reflections in words. His zine talks about, makes a commentary on, what the experience of being an artist living with HIV in the early 90s was like and what it was like to be part of the community of artists living with HIV in that moment and about what it was like to do that kind of archival work then. There's a page in that zine in particular that I always think about that depicts, quite literally, the archive's stacks. He annotates the different boxes in them with different words for dead and dying and thinking about what it actually means to archive.

As archivists, we are so often working with the materials of the dead and the dying, but what does it mean to do so in the context of epidemic, where the process is so devastating and unrelenting, and what the experience of actually doing archival work is like. That always brings me

around to some of my favorite archival scholarship, that of Jennifer Douglas, who's a faculty member at the University of British Columbia. She has been working on a project over the last few years on grief and recordkeeping, both the way in which, for example, bereaved parents create archives in memory of the children they've lost, or the way in which archivists themselves are engaged with donors who are dying or with the family members of those who have already passed, and the way in which doing archival work can be a kind of grief work, right? And so, I think, in conversation with those items, larger dialogues are unfolding in archival studies.

I always come back to Moore's zine as such a beautiful documentation of why and how he was laying out the Archive and what his aspirations for this project were. Because he died in the early 2000s, I did not get to interview him for the book. Sometimes those kinds of records are our best access to somebody's thought process and engagement in the work they wanted to do. For me, the zine is [a] powerful object. Every time I get to do archival research, there's something that gets under my skin. I always tell students that some projects can start with a theoretical idea that you're interested in exploring, a concept or method, but for me, most projects start with some kind of object, and then I figure out why and how that object is so fascinating or troubling or interesting to me and I go from there. Every time I do archival research, there's some object that moves me even if I'm not quite sure why in that moment.

SS: I really enjoyed the arc of that question and the thoughts of how archivists deal with their own personal emotions within the work.

MC: Yeah, and I think that's something we've anecdotally talked about for a very long time, right? Because it's always been true of doing archival work or other kinds of cultural heritage work, but it's only in the last decade, or less even, that there's been space for that kind of professional conversation and research.

I hope that's very empowering to professionals who've been thinking about that and professionals particularly who are personally affected by the kinds of materials that they work with. I'm hoping that as researchers on affect, that we've given language and validity and offered new kinds of resources. I know there's emergent work thinking about how we do trauma-informed approaches to archives, and that effort is both for the folks we serve but also for archivists themselves, right? How do we provide trauma-informed approaches to doing our work?

SS: Well, I just have one more question. We kind of touched on it earlier, but you recently received grant funding with K.J. Rawson to develop a freestanding, Spanish language Homosaurus. Can you discuss anything particular about the project planning, either in terms of foundational concepts, practices, or ethical considerations that you had going in?

MC: K.J. is one of my favorite collaborators. He and I have long worked together on the [Homosaurus](#) in English. The Homosaurus is the thesaurus for describing LGBT resources and collections in libraries, museums, and archives, and it's used already by everything from small community-based archives to big public library systems and academic library systems.

It began, actually, in Dutch and English because it was created by an LGBT archive in the Netherlands. So, it's always had some dual language foundations, but the majority of the recent work on it has focused on English language description and creating a supplement for, say, describing resources using Library of Congress subject headings. And, of course, information work and systems are very Anglocentric, right? Even in parts of the world where English might not be a dominant

language. The Library of Congress subject headings, for instance, are the most broadly used subject description standards worldwide. And our hope – we’ve increasingly been seeing efforts to create translations of the Homosaurus – is to create other kinds of resources that might improve the description of LGBT resources in multiple languages.

We were very, very fortunate to receive a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to do this long-term, thoughtful work. We are not just creat[ing] a direct translation of the Homosaurus that exists in English; instead, how do we develop a [full, freestanding Homosaurus in Spanish](#)? This is needed because direct translation is not adequate to what we actually want to do. There are, of course, concepts that exist in both English and Spanish thinking about LGBTQ lives and experiences and identities, but there are also concepts that only exist in one or the other language, terms that only exist or have nuance in how that language is used and understood. A direct translation can’t actually [do] what we hope to do in English, which is create a vocabulary that is reflective of the communities’ needs and priorities.

Our hope in creating a Spanish language version is that we reflect the needs and desires of Spanish-speaking LGBTQ communities, whether in the United States or elsewhere. We’re really fortunate enough to be engaged in this process with not just the current Homosaurus board and K.J. and myself in particular, but also with three library partners. Our three partners, the San Francisco Public Library, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Chicano Studies Research Center and Library, and the Arizona Queer Archives, represent some of the diversity of people who use – institutions that use – the Homosaurus already: a public library, a research-focused archive within an academic context, and a community-based archive. All three of our partners have collections and other resources that they’ve identified as resources that would benefit from Spanish language metadata. Some of these collections are exclusively in Spanish or are bilingual, or they just want those collections to be more accessible to the Spanish speakers that they serve. We’ll be working with them over the next three years to use their collections as the starting point for developing the Spanish-language Homosaurus.

Some of the project will be direct translation work that we’ve already begun from the English to the Spanish. But the rest will be based on collections and conversations between folks at these different institutions as a starting point. Then, in the third year and beyond, we hope to expand out from there and to build the Spanish language Homosaurus into a living, constantly evolving document, the way [the] English language Homosaurus works. We’re constantly adding terms, and revising terms and scope notes, and thinking about the relationships between terms. With NEH support, we’re very privileged to get to do that multi-language work in a very deliberate, long-term way. Hopefully, in three years, we will have a robust, if never actually fully complete, Homosaurus in Spanish as well.

For us, Spanish was a priority. We would love to see versions in many other languages, but especially here in the US, where most of the Homosaurus board members live and work, we don’t have an official language and Spanish speakers are a huge part of our population and our LGBT populations, and we want to make sure we’re doing a better job serving diverse communities and moving away from the Anglocentricity of our systems. We’re also laying some groundwork in this project for the Homosaurus to have the technical capacity to support many, many languages. We hope that this is a model for others who want to do community-based descriptive work, who want to do multi-language description. We aspire not just to create better resources for doing that kind of work for LGBT collections, but also for other historically marginalized communities.

Further Reading

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