

## FORUM

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## A Brief Preliminary Comment on “Being Assumed Not to Be”<sup>1</sup>—And a Pledge This Will Not Become *Ad Hominem* *Ad Infinitum*

### To the Editor:

Let a man rather cast himself into a fiery furnace than shame his fellow in public. . . . Stealing money from a man is less severe than stealing his good name, because the money can be repaid in full but even if the wrongdoer atones and tries to compensate the victim the shame can never be completely undone.

—*The Babylonian Talmud*, Baba Metzia (page 59a)<sup>2</sup>

I was not raised in a religious household, but I was, I suppose, acculturated as a Jewish male, including having been bar mitzvah-ed to please my maternal grandfather. That acculturation has included some interest in the Talmud. The Talmud is an analysis, disputation, and explanation of the Old Testament by Judaism’s most revered rabbis over the course of centuries. I cite a quotation of rabbinic wisdom because I have been admonished by friends and colleagues not to respond to Mario Ramirez’s personal shaming attack on me in his article earlier in this issue of the journal.<sup>3</sup>

Walking away is hard, but it is the right thing to do. Why? There are several reasons.<sup>4</sup> But the most important is that such a rejoinder would simply continue, as I believe his original *ad hominem* defamations have already begun, to take focus and energy off the true concern, which is the task we as a profession face in defining and then implementing true and enduring change in our profession and professional organizations in matters of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and all the other “isms” that infect how we do our jobs, how we run our organizations, how we manage our institutions, and how we develop our up-and-coming cohorts. We need to get to work on intellectually “unpacking” the densely woven skeins of history, culture, privilege, oppression of many kinds and against many “others,” self-analysis and locating our own individual places in the present relationships in our culture, and what each of us has done, could/should have been expected to do, and still might be able to

do to help improve certain things in our profession. I don't happen to believe that those "things" revolve solely around race, though race is the most momentous single Rubik's Cube that has to be straightened out.

After accepting, editing, and setting type for Ramirez's article, *The American Archivist* offered me space in the Forum in the same issue and thirty days to organize my thoughts and write a response.<sup>5</sup> It was my intent to create a full reply to Ramirez's article. But researching, discussing, writing, and revising an article on privilege and oppression in our profession—in our collections, in our ranks, in our consciousness—could not be accomplished within the month allotted to me. My health, unfortunately but incontrovertibly, is making it much harder for me to research and write as I once did. You can well imagine that it is an unspeakable frustration for an opinionated loudmouth like me to be forced to, as the movies on television say, be edited for length (and let's face it, sometimes for content—that's the importance of having friends who are willing to tell me if/when I've crossed a line).

While I do intend to give it another go in a future issue of *The American Archivist*, I would certainly be pleased if other archivists would take up the topic with or even before me. We have to accept the ineluctable fact that to have the hard discussions and decisions effect true alterations in attitude and action and in devising new avenues to cause and cement change is going to take the proverbial village. In the November/December 2012 *Archival Outlook*, for example, Adrienne Harling published a short but provocative article titled "What to Do about Privilege?: Reflections on Diversity from One Archivist's 'Beyond Borders' Experience." She noted, among several other important ideas relatively new to her, that "*Passive discovery of the archives profession is not enough to increase diversity among archivists*. Increasing diversity among archival professionals requires active recruitment of individuals with diverse backgrounds into the archival field."<sup>6</sup> It is essential that such recruitment be a responsibility of every repository, perhaps every professional—SAA as an organization can never succeed in such a goal alone. In 2008, the SAA College and University Archives Section proposed exactly this type of action by individual repositories and archivists as important in achieving the profession's diversity goals.<sup>7</sup>

We also need (and I hope to suggest in the near future) some preliminary proposals for *making a difference*—here is where we always seem to run aground; even Ramirez's article gives the smallest amount of space to how we should or can start succeeding to accomplish change. In the meantime, articles, sessions, unit initiatives, repository programs, and more, about race and racism, about privilege and oppression, about identity and invisibility,<sup>8</sup> all need to happen always, undertaken by far more of us, and with the energy we might exert in pursuing higher salaries, a goal many of us find quite important. These issues,

this change, is essential to our profession as it is ultimately essential to our society. We don't control society, but we do control our profession. Let's get at it.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Mario H. Ramirez, "Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative," *The American Archivist* 78 (Fall/Winter, 2015): 2–18.
- <sup>2</sup> American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, Jewish Virtual Library, The Library, Religion, *The Babylonian Talmud*, trans. Michael L. Rodkinson (1918), 59a, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/FullTalmud.pdf>.
- <sup>3</sup> These friends and colleagues include Rand Jimerson, with whom I've been friends for decades. I came to admire him as chair of SAA's now defunct Committee on Education and Professional Development. He did not feel that my critique of his plea for a social justice imperative for our profession included any *ad hominem* attacks; however, although he agrees with many of Ramirez's concerns, he believes that Ramirez's article *does* descend to personal attacks. Randall Jimerson, email to author, September 4, 2015. Other friends, among them four past SAA presidents, both men and women, members of at least three races, and adherents to an unknown number of faiths . . . provided me with feedback to ensure that I was not imagining that the arguments in the Ramirez article sank to the level of *ad hominem* attacks. These same colleagues assisted me with immeasurably improving this short piece, though of course the final product is my responsibility alone.
- <sup>4</sup> It is certainly not because I haven't any basis upon which to defend myself. I have been not only speaking out and publishing about the archival profession's critical need to improve diversity of collections and of its membership ranks for almost a quarter of a century, I have been *accomplishing* changes for that long as well. Every careful reader of my publication record will know this.
- <sup>5</sup> FYI, after I submitted my critique of the social justice imperative to the journal, I was informed that it would be accepted *on condition* that I agree to have Rand Jimerson publish a rebuttal not only in the same issue but also immediately after my article in sequence. Ramirez was not compelled to permit me to rebut his article, this despite its arguably *ad hominem* content. Only after the conference in Cleveland was I offered the opportunity to respond to his piece, in the same issue, but not sequentially—my response would be placed in the "Forum" section, toward the end of the journal.
- <sup>6</sup> Adrienne Harling, "What to Do about Privilege?: Reflections on Diversity from One Archivist's 'Beyond Borders' Experience," *Archival Outlook* (November/December 2012): 31. "Beyond Borders" was that year's annual conference title. Emphasis in original.
- <sup>7</sup> Betsy Pittman, email message to author, April 25, 2008. The section was responding to a call originally issued by SAA president Elizabeth Adkins in her presidential address. Adkins, "Our Journey Toward Diversity—and a Call to (More) Action," *The American Archivist* 71 (Spring/Summer 2008): 42–43.
- <sup>8</sup> If anyone wishes to experience invisibility for an hour or two, try visiting a supermarket in a wheelchair, particularly when it comes to finding a checkout line wide enough to accommodate you and your hardware.