

# Listening to Each Other

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The interplay of individuality and unity is not one of uniformity and unanimity imposed from above but rather of conflict among diverse groupings that reach a dynamic consensus subject to questioning and criticism. As with a soloist in a jazz quartet, quintet or band, individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the creative tension with the group—a tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project.

—Cornel West<sup>1</sup>

Difference is messy; working with and through difference is even messier.

—Michelle Caswell<sup>2</sup>

Michelle Caswell makes a case for what she calls “archival pluralism,” which is “the acknowledgement of and engagement with, multiple coexisting archival realities.”<sup>3</sup> Drawing comparisons to religious pluralism, she argues that “we must construct archival pluralism in a way that welcomes dissent, embraces disagreement, and thrives on discord.”<sup>4</sup>

The archival enterprise is a complex undertaking involving numerous values, stakeholders, and perspectives. *American Archivist* aspires to reflect this complexity. Archivists face many contemporary issues that do not have simple answers. They will be best served by a journal that acknowledges, conveys, and engages competing viewpoints.

According to Margaret Hedstrom, “archivists encounter at least five levels of accountability: to the institutions that employ them; as citizens, to the society in which they live; to themselves and their own values and sense of morality; to users (present and future); and to the archival profession.”<sup>5</sup> Contributions to *American Archivist* over the past eighty-two years convey a wide array of positions on how best to balance and reconcile the various accountabilities. How highly should archivists weigh the mission and mandate of their employing institutions; their role as citizens within specific nations; their individual moral commitments (e.g., to family); the priorities/needs of current and potential

archives users; and advancing the archival profession (e.g., through promoting and attempting to conform to its code of ethics)? Thoughtful and dedicated archivists have, and will continue to, come down quite differently on these issues, both in general and across different situations.

The current issue of this journal reflects a controversy around an article by Frank Boles in which he contends, “The ideas that archivists should create a universal record of human activity, that social justice should inform archival selection decisions, and that archivists hold a unique form of power that can be exercised through appraisal . . . are generally not helpful to archivists.” Boles argues for archivists to base their activities on “local autonomy and unique archival missions.”

I have heard members of the profession express that the article dismisses their experiences and their work in making the Society of American Archivists (SAA) and the profession more equitable and that the article should not be published at all. I have heard others express significant concerns about withdrawing the article from publication and discussion. While I responded directly to many individuals who contacted me, I regret that I did not more quickly issue a public statement that we were hearing and reflecting on the concerns and taking steps to address them. I would like to convey my appreciation of the diverse and valuable perspectives shared with me and other members of the Editorial Board.

### Context of the Controversy<sup>6</sup>

Since 2012, each Annual Meeting of SAA has included a brown bag lunch discussion of an *American Archivist* article selected by the editor. The purpose of these discussions has been to allow members of the profession to preview and discuss one article from the forthcoming issue of the journal before it goes to press. Previous selections were:

- 2012: “‘Dust Clouds of Camels Shall Cover You’: Covenant and the Archival Endeavor” by Scott Cline<sup>7</sup>
- 2013: “A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We’re Doing That’s All That Important?” by Mark A. Greene<sup>8</sup>
- 2014: “Archival Diasporas: A Framework for Understanding the Complexities and Challenges of Dispersed Photographic Collections” by Ricardo Punzalan<sup>9</sup>
- 2015: “Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative” by Mario H. Ramirez<sup>10</sup>
- 2016: “Filling the Gaps: Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in *The American Archivist*, 1938–2011” by Jessica Wagner Webster<sup>11</sup>

- 2017: “Surveying Archivists and Their Work toward Advocacy and Management, or ‘Enterprise Archiving’” by Sarah Buchanan, Jane Gruning, Ayse Gursoy, and Lecia Barker<sup>12</sup>
- 2018: “‘Be Damned Pushy at Times’: The Committee on the Status for Women and Feminism in the Archival Profession, 1972–1998” by Alex Poole<sup>13</sup>

As I have expressed since taking the position of editor in 2018, I believe that it is vital for our journal to reflect the profession’s wider dialogue around inclusion, diversity, and social justice. The Boles piece was the only one in the forthcoming issue of the journal directly on this topic, and I selected it to provide one venue for discussing the place, importance, and meaning of social justice as it relates to archives, archivists, and records. The goal of the brown bag lunch has always been to provide a venue for dialogue; it is not intended to endorse or advocate for any specific positions taken by an author.

SAA provided the usual advance notice of the brown bag lunch discussion. On June 19, SAA added an item to the *ARCHIVES\*RECORDS 2019* schedule about the event. SAA also included information about it in *In the Loop* beginning with the July 17 issue. As in previous years, the initial announcements did not yet include a link to the piece because the publisher, Allen Press, was still in the process of generating the page proof.

At its August 1 meeting during *ARCHIVES\*RECORDS 2019*, the SAA Council voted to cancel the scheduled *American Archivist* brown bag lunch discussion about the Boles article during the conference. The following day, August 2, the Council issued a statement indicating, “The Council believes that giving a platform to the article noted above at this conference contradicts this effort to be inclusive.”<sup>14</sup> In a later statement on August 15, the Council expressed that creating a “welcoming and safe environment . . . is of paramount concern to this Council and is at the forefront of our considerations. In cancelling the brown bag lunch discussion, we took an action that all of us felt necessary in the context of the Austin conference. We agree with many that the ideas put forward in the article warrant a vigorous professional conversation, and it was not our intent to limit that.”<sup>15</sup>

Social media was the chief outlet through which individuals expressed concerns about the Boles article and the brown bag lunch event, with posts first appearing on July 31. Several individuals also contacted me directly through my editor email account. In addition, I had many conversations on-site at the conference. The concerns expressed included forthcoming publication of the article in the journal, selection of the article for the brown bag lunch discussion, the RSVP item, and the timing of the event.

I selected the article for the brown bag event to further professional dialogue and not to endorse a viewpoint. However, I recognize that this may

sound like an artificial distinction to those who are troubled by SAA providing a visible platform for discussing the piece.

The RSVP is a standard protocol used by SAA. Although it did not do so in 2019, some previous brown bag lunch announcements indicated “pre-registration required” or “limited enrollment.” The announcement has always included an RSVP for two reasons. First, producing the page proof in time for the discussion is always tight. We did not know if we would be able to post it online when we announced the event, so we wanted a way to alert people of its availability. Second, we also wanted to know approximately how many people would attend and plan for logistics such as whether everyone would fit in the room. This has never precluded others from showing up for the event. Luckily, Allen Press was able to generate the preprint quickly, and we added a link to the document from the online schedule on July 10 and added it to the *In the Loop* announcement on July 31.

Several people brought to our attention that the brown bag lunch discussion unfortunately was scheduled at the same time as an Annual Meeting forum about transgender identity organized by the SAA Diversity Committee. The Annual Meeting planners do their best to balance the schedule, but regrettable conflicts always occur. Brown bag lunches have traditionally always been held at the same time as the forums.

### **American Archivist Peer Review Process**

As with all other articles submitted to *American Archivist*, Boles’s manuscript was subject to a double-blind peer review process. This means that we do not reflect the identity of authors to reviewers, nor do we reflect the identity of reviewers to authors. All articles submitted to the journal receive three peer reviews: one from a member of the Editorial Board and two from other members of the profession. We use a system called PeerTrack to administer this process. My predecessor, Greg Hunter, built a pool of potential reviewers by encouraging people to register with PeerTrack, and I have done the same. I continue to encourage people to become peer reviewers so the process can best reflect the rich array of expertise and perspectives within the profession. When creating an account, reviewers are able to indicate their areas of interest and expertise. Since reiterating this call for reviewers in my post to *Off the Record* in September 2019, we have gained 112 new reviewers!

When the journal receives a new submission, I first examine it to be sure it is complete and that the author has not inadvertently included identifying information in the text. I then invite three reviewers based on areas of expertise/interest and work-load considerations. After identifying individuals whose profiles indicate a match based on the topic of the manuscript, I check to see if

any of the prospects have performed a review recently. The goal is to consider the full set of prospective reviewers and not simply to return to the same ones. I have made it a particularly high priority to assign first-time reviewers to new submissions whenever a topic matches their expressed expertise and interest set.

Peer review for *American Archivist* is based on a rubric developed by the Editorial Board in 2012 that includes several factors including statement of problem or purpose, relevance of the topic, importance of the topic, contribution to the literature, organization, drawing and building upon relevant literature, methodology (considered broadly in perspective pieces), discussion, conclusion, and mechanics.

Once I receive the three reviews, I make a determination of “accept,” “reject,” or “revise” based on the feedback provided. The majority of submissions to *American Archivist* fall into the “revise” category, in which I convey comments and concerns that the author(s) should address for the manuscript to be published in the journal.

After completing the peer review process, I accepted Boles’s manuscript for publication in the journal. It is important to point out that publication of an article is not a formal endorsement of the author’s ideas. The peer review process is not designed to determine whether articles represent the consensus of the profession, nor does it indicate that the peer reviewer or Editorial Board agrees with the author. That would be impossible, given the complexity of the issues that archivists face and the diversity of views within the profession.

After articles are accepted for publication, we undertake a copyediting process and generate page proofs. There are often some changes after the proof stage, and these are usually based on issues noticed by the author or a member of the SAA publishing team. Because we disseminated a preprint of the Boles article, we had the benefit of an additional round of (more public) review not usually available at the proof stage. As a result, I was informed of concerns about specific statements, inaccuracies, and misattributions in the article. I was able to convey those concerns to Frank Boles so that he could address them.

## Listening and Planning

The Editorial Board has engaged in numerous activities related to the controversy raised by the Boles preprint. The most important of these activities has been doing a great deal of listening, both during and after the Annual Meeting, to the diverse and valuable perspectives shared. Our ultimate priority is to ensure that *American Archivist* is a welcoming venue that reflects a diversity of viewpoints.

The controversy was a major focus of discussion at our Editorial Board meeting in Austin on August 2. We have engaged in many further discussions, including several conference calls and an in-person meeting on October 27–29 in Chicago. We have been addressing engagement with the profession, enhancing guidance for and feedback to peer reviewers, author and editorial guidelines, and the processes for planning future brown bag lunch events, among other issues.<sup>16</sup> We will be sharing news of various actions and decisions in the year ahead.

## Contents of This Issue

In addition to the article by Frank Boles, this issue includes three letters to the editor—by Christine George, Harrison Inefuku, and Dani Stuchel—in response to the article and my decisions as editor. The Editorial Board felt it essential to solicit and include these letters to provide context, even if this meant delaying publication of the print edition of the journal. As reflected in the editorial policy, the journal has a long-standing tradition of receiving and publishing letters to the editor “commenting on recently published articles or other topics of interest to the profession.” I would like to express my gratitude to the authors for taking up my invitation to contribute to this issue. To minimize the impact on the authors of other articles and book reviews, we were able to implement our first-ever early online publication.

Four of the articles in this issue of *American Archivist* relate to the vital function of archival description. Jennifer G. Eidson and Christina J. Zamon discuss the evolution of Encoded Archival Description (EAD) and its adoption over the past twenty years. They also report the results of a survey asking US archivists about how, when, and why they have posted online finding aids. Eidson and Zamon report several factors that have inhibited EAD adoption: “lack of institutional support for new technology and resources for staff; the time and effort it takes to encode, or convert to, EAD; the need for knowledge and expertise to implement EAD; sensitive content closed to the public; a low comfort level with providing public access; and recent establishment.” Gregory Wiedeman also explores the history of finding aids in the United States, including the development and adoption of EAD. He argues that “finding aids have negatively colored how archivists have understood access” and “hindered the standardization of archival description as data.” Wiedeman suggests that access to archives would be better advanced through approaches that treat archival “description as data.” Michelle Sweetser and Alexandra A. A. Orchard explore the influence that Machine-Readable Cataloging (MARC) and other bibliographic description has had on “academic archival description as well as on the collaboration between traditional catalogers and archivists.” They conducted a survey of Association

of Research Libraries (ARL) members' practices related to MARC records, linked and embedded metadata, and authority records. One primary finding is that archivists generally engage directly in archival description (including MARC record creation) and planning rather than relying on "cataloging colleagues" or other third parties. Archivists "employ a mix of standards from both the archival and bibliographic traditions." Emily Vinson investigates archival processing of audiovisual (A/V) materials. She discusses past approaches and describes two related activities at the University of Houston Libraries (UHL) Special Collections: a department-wide survey and an item-level inventory. Vinson argues that many existing finding aids provide insufficient detail to inform A/V preservation and digitization. She elaborates potential benefits of reevaluating finding aids and conducting "item-level accounting" of A/V materials.

In addition to finding aids and catalog records, archivists increasingly rely on other tools to facilitate access and discovery. Samantha Abrams, Alexis Antracoli, Rachel Appel, Celia Caust-Ellenbogen, Sarah Denison, Sumitra Duncan, and Stefanie Ramsay report on a study in which fourteen participants completed four search tasks using the public Archive-It interface and the Wayback Machine. While participants "reported mildly positive impressions of the Archive-It public user interface," the authors identify several areas of potential improvement to Archive-It, including metadata options, terminology display, date indexing, and site search. Brady D. Lund and Shari Scribner report on the use of virtual reality technology to provide new forms of access to the May Massee Collection at Emporia State University. They discuss the design process, challenges, outcomes, and potential implications for other archives.

Promoting a broad and diverse documentary record requires archivists to engage with a wide (sometimes unexpected) set of stakeholders. Diana E. Marsh, Ricardo L. Punzalan, and Jesse A. Johnston discuss "the potential role of the Council for the Preservation of Anthropological Records (CoPAR) in the context of contemporary developments in anthropological research and archival practice." They report outcomes of a 2015 meeting and argue for "a revitalized CoPAR that will encourage life-cycle data thinking and more community-driven approaches to archival stewardship." Paul Conway and Robert B. Markum describe both the rich value and copyright challenges associated with at-risk audio recordings from The Ark, a folk music venue in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They convey results of interviews with folk music performers, arguing that "archives could embrace asynchronous digital streaming as an extension of the well-established folk process." April Karlene Anderson-Zorn discusses her efforts, as university archivist, to document and recover materials from two time capsules discovered at Illinois State University. She makes the case for time capsules as objects of collective memory, summarizes engagement with various stakeholders, and conveys a set of "Protocols for Found Time Capsules."



Kathryn G. Matheny discusses archivists' engagement in "instruction consultation, the process of negotiating a lesson plan with an instructor." She identifies four potential challenges: "the recent shift in archives education to active learning; the difficulty expert researchers have understanding the needs of novices; the complex nature of research requests, as exemplified by the reference transaction; and the uneasy relationship between librarians/archivists and teaching faculty." Matheny discusses implications of these challenges and potential areas of future research.

Marcella Huggard and Laura Uglean Jackson report results of a survey of US and Canadian archival institutions' reappraisal and deaccessioning practices. They found that reappraising and deaccessioning are common, and archivists perceive the activities to have positive outcomes. Huggard and Jackson identify some concerns about respondents' understanding of terminology (e.g., conflating "weeding" with "deaccessioning" and "deaccessioning" with "destruction") as well as the ethics of some reported practices.

As always, Bethany Anderson, reviews editor for *American Archivist*, has shepherded an excellent set of publication reviews.

*American Archivist* serves as one of many forums that SAA offers for engagement around vital issues. I hope that members of the profession will continue to express their views through those forums, including *American Archivist*. I also hope that the discussions inspired by the journal will advance the collective, shared endeavor to which archivists are so passionately dedicated. As Sara Ahmed tells us, "Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground."<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 150–51.

<sup>2</sup> Michelle Caswell, "On Archival Pluralism: What Religious Pluralism (and Its Critics) Can Teach Us about Archives," *Archival Science* 13 (2013): 286, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-012-9197-y>.

<sup>3</sup> Caswell, "On Archival Pluralism," 277.

<sup>4</sup> Caswell, "On Archival Pluralism," 287.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Hedstrom, "The Archivist's Creed: No Politics, No Religion, No Morals," *South African Society of Archivists Newsletter* (July–September 2002): 2, 5.

<sup>6</sup> For my earlier account of this process, see Christopher Lee, "Editor's Comments about Brown Bag Lunch Article Controversy at SAA Annual Meeting: Listening and Learning," *Off the Record*, September 11, 2019, <https://offtherecord.archivists.org/2019/09/11/editors-comments-about-brown-bag-lunch-article-controversy-at-saa-annual-meeting-listening-and-learning>.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Cline, "'Dust Clouds of Camels Shall Cover You': Covenant and the Archival Endeavor," *American Archivist* 75, no. 2 (2012): 282–96, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.75.2.03193j1517858r34>.



- <sup>8</sup> Mark A. Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We're Doing That's All That Important?," *American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 302–34, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.76.2.147441214663kw43>.
- <sup>9</sup> Ricardo Punzalan, "Archival Diasporas: A Framework for Understanding the Complexities and Challenges of Dispersed Photographic Collections," *American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (2014): 326–49, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.77.2.729766v886w16007>.
- <sup>10</sup> Mario H. Ramirez, "Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative," *American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015): 339–56, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.78.2.339>.
- <sup>11</sup> Jessica Wagner Webster, "'Filling the Gaps': Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in *The American Archivist*, 1938–2011," *American Archivist* 79, no. 2 (2016): 254–82, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-79.2.254>.
- <sup>12</sup> Sarah Buchanan, Jane Gruning, Ayse Gursoy, and Lecia Barker, "Surveying Archivists and Their Work toward Advocacy and Management, or 'Enterprise Archiving'," *American Archivist* 80, no. 2 (2017): 268–95, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-80.2.268>.
- <sup>13</sup> Alex H. Poole, "'Be Damned Pushy at Times': The Committee on the Status of Women and Feminism in the Archival Profession, 1972–1998," *American Archivist* 81, no. 2 (2018): 394–437, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-81.2.394>.
- <sup>14</sup> Council of the Society of American Archivists, "American Archivist Brown Bag Lunch Cancelled," August 2, 2019, <https://www2.archivists.org/news/2019/american-archivist-brown-bag-lunch-cancelled>.
- <sup>15</sup> Council of the Society of American Archivists, "Update on Cancellation of American Archivist Brown Bag Lunch Event," August 15, 2019, <https://www2.archivists.org/news/2019/from-the-saa-council-update-on-cancellation-of-american-archivist-brown-bag-lunch-event>.
- <sup>16</sup> See American Archivist Editorial Board, "American Archivist Editorial Board Responds to Article Controversy: Listening, Learning, and Building a Stronger, More Inclusive SAA," *Off the Record*, December 16, 2019, <https://offtherecord.archivists.org/2019/12/16/american-archivist-editorial-board-responds-to-article-controversy-listening-learning-and-building-a-stronger-more-inclusive-saa>.
- <sup>17</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 189.