

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

WE Are SAA

Dr. Meredith R. Evans

Dr. Meredith Evans served as the seventy-fourth president of the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 2018–2020. Her presidential address was delivered via tele-conference on August 7, 2020, during ARCHIVES*RECORDS 2020, the virtual Annual Meeting of SAA.

Greetings. I am Dr. Meredith Evans, seventy-fourth president of the Society of American Archivists, I identify as she/her/hers. I am a daughter, sister, mother, ex-wife, friend, and colleague. I am a New Yorker who moved down South. I am a woman of faith, a black woman, a descendant of slaves. I am an American. I am an extrovert and part of the GLAM community (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums). I have degrees in history, library, and archival sciences, and I am an experienced manager overseeing an archive and a museum. I am also a proud member of the Society of American Archivists. Our SAA.

I don't say this to make you uncomfortable or to be judged. I am very aware that I don't fit in most people's boxes. I say this because I refuse to be enemies with anyone. I say this so that you can see the archival thread of my personal and professional experience and know / anticipate what biases I might bring to the table.

I have spent my tenure as president thinking about the future of our profession—thinking about our practice, our people, and our organization. And, in the midst of COVID-19 and a racially charged nation, the future of the archival profession is worthy of our attention.

As I was preparing for this talk, I returned to a statement James Baldwin made in the August 1965 special issue of *Ebony Magazine*.¹ For those who may not know, *Ebony* was and is a popular magazine focused on Black culture, founded by and produced for Black people. The 1965 special issue is full of writings by

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renowned scholars and journalists responding to the assassination of Malcolm X in New York City; the march in Selma, Alabama, also known as Bloody Sunday; and the Watts riots in Los Angeles, California. It seems very much like today: social discourse and racial unrest across the nation, state brutality, and citizens clamoring to be heard. In this special issue, Baldwin, a gay Black man, wrote about the impact of history. He wrote, and I am paraphrasing him:

History . . . is not just something to be read. And it does not just refer to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, and are unconsciously controlled by it. History is present in all that we do. It frames our references, our identities, and our aspirations. History causes people to battle with the creation of history itself.

Baldwin goes on to admit that his point of view is formed by his own history and writes that it is probable that only a person despised by history finds history a questionable matter. The people who history flatters become incapable of seeing or changing themselves, or the world.

His words moved me to think about the history of our profession and to contemplate the future of archives in three ways: practice, people, and organization.

The Future of Archives Is Our Practice

It is the records, documents, digital objects, collections that we steward that support the history that Baldwin described. Our role as archivists in managing and making accessible this supporting evidence for historic discourse must be examined, creatively implemented, fine-tuned, and at times reimagined. This is the material that supports our rights, accountability of person, place, organizations, and social systems. We use these materials to analyze our past and all things that relate to the human race and ecosystems that allow us to exist. The historical discourse is often based on what archivists keep, describe, and make accessible. You've heard the sayings, "you have to know the past to understand the present" or "to know your future, you must know your past." These speak to what archivists do. We collect with the future in mind. We determine the value of materials. We do this by seeing how and what the materials show us about decision-making processes of a person or organization. How do these documents unveil people's lives, businesses, and institutions? Can we get a glimpse of how things were done and are being done? We also recognize that what we collect is often biased toward the important and powerful people in our society, which is why we are moving toward documenting movements, not just people and institutions. We are moving toward helping others maintain their own histories rather than taking it from them. We are sharing our skills

and knowledge in support of community archiving and are supporting small archival operations.

Regardless of the format they are in, we are responsible for the accurate rendering of authenticated content over time. Version control and preserving records so that one can piece a story back together or at the very least provide a glimpse into the life of a person, place, or event is our role and responsibility. We, along with the creator, must maintain the integrity of the original document or record.

With the exponential growth of print and digital content, we are often challenged by the complexity of licensing, rights, and permissions. Archivists are challenged by the use and future accessibility of emerging and quickly obsolete technologies. And, while our profession has been disrupted by these changes, our future remains bright as we adjust and increase our skill sets. We continue to rise to the occasion and ensure that the historical record, regardless of format, will be available for generations. We are stewards of any and all formatted materials; all inform how history is written. We are multidisciplinary specialists, masters of both print, audiovisual, and digital content. We are creative instructors, educators, and sources of trust. We are SAA.

The Future of Our Archives Is People

I have learned that we reconcile differences and situations through our own worldview. This is where it is important to strive for equity. We must gain an understanding of the origins of the disparities within our communities. We must continue to be open and learn more about other people and situations that we may not understand or encounter daily. The way to know and understand these disparities is to ensure fairness within our procedures and practices such as physical access, description, collection development, and hiring. We must continue to diversify our profession, which will diversify our records and ensure that we improve our practice and develop equitable procedures. People, procedure, and practice must be developed regardless of age, race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, veteran or disability status, or where you live or what you wear. Everyone wants to be and should be valued! We must strive to reflect what we want our practice and workplaces to be.

Thinking about the future—in terms of people, procedures, and practice—is an opportunity to honor those whose voices and lives have been denied, lost, or ignored through our work. We can confront and maybe even correct the skewed systems and conditions in which we live, work, and play until these silenced voices receive the respect and inherent dignity we all rightly deserve. On a practical level, we can collect and apply vocabularies that are more appropriate

and respectful to underrepresented or marginalized communities and can make them feel more welcome when they come to see our collections.

And, while I think equity is and will be a journey for some time, I am certain our profession will be better for it. I will be better for it and so will you. Therefore, I have to believe it's possible.

The Future of Archives Is Our Organization

SAA is a network of colleagues who volunteer in their spare time to help archivists be successful. I believe the leadership and staff of SAA are making good on our commitment to listen and act on what we hear. We've had tough discourse and I heard you. We heard you.

As president, I have been cognizant of the fact that I have not led alone with my own ideas or by my own merit, but through the initiative of members, leadership, and Council and with the support of the SAA staff. Our governance structure ensures "WE" lead—not the president or Council alone. I learned that the broadness of our bylaws and constitution is a blessing and a curse. Short terms for leadership positions mean that the demands are relatively limited, but they also challenge our abilities to make change and shepherd the initiatives we campaigned on. I was lucky to serve an additional year. However, the existing governance provides the flexibility to adjust and adapt. In the past year, members have advocated for change: petitioning to allow every member a chance to run for office; raising funds to support our colleagues and ensure they can participate in times of financial stress; taking advantage of the flexibility of SAA and all it has to offer. Most important, voting and electing members to Council and empowering the nominating and appointments committee. WE serve YOU.

The member-produced monographs, journal articles, newsletters, blog posts, and podcasts that highlight our colleagues and practices have contributed to a renewed focus on our publications with two new editors, an energized Editorial Board, an increased number of peer reviewers, formation of a virtual writing group, and a new digital platform providing more opportunities to publish.

We successfully sought outside funding to offset costs of programming for our members and fulfill our commitment to a management training program. In addition to generous sponsors like Preservica and others, we were awarded grants from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) to develop management training courses and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) to initiate a second round of the A*Census. Beyond support for existing SAA Foundation funds, we have seen remarkable member-driven initiatives in support of our colleagues including the #52Fund (a response to the petition to add a third vice presidential candidate to the 2020 ballot), the

Archival Workers Emergency Fund (support of those who financially struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic), and individual examples of support that we have all witnessed.

With the creation of the Committee on Research Data and Assessment (CORDA) along with the Salary Taskforce, we have groups to create, support, and sustain pertinent data that will inform our profession. The IMLS Leadership grant provides the Association with \$250K to partner with Ithaka S+R to conduct another A*Census. The A*Census, published in 2006, was the first comprehensive nationwide survey of the archival profession. We are positioned to collect the data needed to inform employment databases and hiring managers, to promote appropriate classification and equitable compensation for our professional work. The formation of these committees and the success of A*Census II will lay a firm foundation for our association to replicate a salary survey with more frequency in the future and help us as a profession and organization to identify the needs that demand action.

The Crisis, Disaster, and Tragedy Response Working Group (formerly the Tragedy Response Initiative Taskforce) will develop ongoing partnerships to ensure there are resources and support for repositories and archivists in times of need. Focused on relief efforts, cultural stewardship, and preservation, they will develop and provide ongoing resources and assistance to archivists, allied cultural heritage professionals, and their communities in times of tragedies, disasters, or other crises.

We have pushed forward with technology as an organization with a new association management system, virtual meeting software, and vendors to assist with live streaming at Annual Meetings.

We have introduced listening forums to be more transparent and to effectively communicate with our membership. These sessions have been followed up with action. The Community Reflection on Black Lives and Archives forum was followed by the Black Lives Matter Strategy Listening Session. After receiving many questions about the budget, we followed up with a forum called Investing in Your Membership.

We have more work to do, but I am so proud of the tangible outcomes that we have witnessed that come directly from activating our strategic plan, upholding our core values, and listening to our members. We must welcome members' participation at any stage in their development or involvement. And we must continue to value legacy and organizational knowledge while embracing new ideas and taking on new initiatives.

SAA is a strong network of archival workers, and, if we believe in the future of our profession, then we must continue to believe and support our organization. The Society of American Archivists, SAA, will remain a relevant global leader in and about our profession. We are SAA.

It has been an honor to serve as your president for these past two years. I would be remiss not to take this time to publicly thank Executive Director Nancy Beaumont for her outstanding leadership and support; the SAA staff who ensure things are running smoothly and that all questions get answered; and each elected and appointed member who served with me especially those on Council. To my seasoned archivists, Brenda Banks, Thomas Battle, Danna Bell, Karen Jefferson, Wilda Logan, Deborra Richardson: thank you for paving the way. Thank you to my ride-or-die archival colleagues who continuously hold me up while holding me accountable (you know who you are). Finally, I'd like to thank my staff at the Carter Presidential Library and my colleagues at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) for their support and patience. Serving in this role has made me a better manager and colleague. Thank you all.

NOTE

- ¹ James Baldwin, "The White Problem in America," *Ebony Magazine* 20, no. 10, Special Issue, August 1965 47–48.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Meredith R. Evans is the seventy-fourth president of the Society of American Archivists and the director of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum in Atlanta, Georgia, administered by the National Archives and Records Administration. She is an experienced archivist and manager of cultural institutions and often writes about the role and value of archives, libraries, and museums archives in the community.