

Writing as an Act of Community

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Writing is an act of community. It is a letter, it is comforting, consoling, helping, advising on our part, as well as asking it on yours. It is a part of our human association with each other. It is an expression of our love and concern for each other.

—Dorothy Day

American Archivist is the written record of ongoing discussions within the professional archival community. As I read this quote by Dorothy Day, I immediately thought that writing, as an act of community, is the goal of *American Archivist*. Although *American Archivist* primarily addresses an American profession, our journal also engages international voices in its community. Through research, practice, and perspective, we ask questions, we advise, and in some cases we even console each other as we work through concerns via our professional literature. Our concern—for history, for others, for our profession—is broadly visible in our journal. This issue, with its special section and additional articles, asks us to reflect on the communities that we, as archivists, inhabit.

The first community of writers in this issue deserves special thanks—the Design Records Section and guest editor Karen Trivette. The work they have invested in this issue’s Special Section on Design Records brings us a better understanding of an important segment of archives. These articles advise, help, and contextualize the contemporary issues about this group of records. The articles clearly show archivists working in all types of archives how we can benefit from the ideas and practices that professionals bring to bear on these more specialized records. The special section is not only instructive and useful—taken together, the articles in this section are a fascinating read. Throughout the editorial process, I was impressed not only with the authors’ engagement with challenges and responses to practice, but also with the application of

theory underpinning that practice. Regardless of whether their work is specific to design records, all readers will benefit from—and I expect will enjoy—this section.

Beyond the considerations of design records, this issue also offers a handful of articles that reflect on the archives community writ large, as well as on archivists themselves. To begin, we feature two pieces tied together by the consideration of “wicked problems.”¹ Both Eliot Wilczek and Greg Bak consider wicked problems in the context of the impact of archives on society. Wilczek addresses wicked problems directly, defining them and exploring how they manifest in the framework of archival practice. He also considers the broader impact of recordkeeping itself on wicked problems. Wilczek observes that our profession “has long been engaged in the challenges of managing and engaging with multiple and often contradictory narratives, evidence, records, and record-keeping systems. Building on the foundational theory of the records continuum and the archival multiverse—as well as other concepts such as multiple provenance—has deepened [our] engagement and comfort with these contradictions and multitudes” (p. 487). I agree that archivists have been involved in deepening our engagement with our professional place in society and the impact of our work for decades,² and Wilczek’s broader consideration of how we continue to work through these issues helps us understand the context of this ongoing conversation.

Greg Bak’s article presents a precise and focused discussion of Helen Samuels’s archival theory and its ongoing value. Bak argues that “Samuels was part of a shift in thinking in the 1980s and 1990s around the social license that archivists implicitly draw upon when doing their work. Scholarship by Raymond Frogner, Jarrett Drake, Jamila Ghaddar, Mario Ramirez, Ricardo Punzalan, Michelle Caswell, and others today demonstrate that the social license for archival work, including appraisal, once again is in need of renewal” (p. 422). Bak explores this social license through the lens of a case involving the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the records of Canada’s Indigenous communities. Questions that focus on the role of the archival record in support of reconciliation are critical, and considerations of how archives can and should engage their work to support societal decolonization are currently among our most important professional issues. I expect these to be the source of extremely thoughtful scholarship and dialogue in the literature for years to come.

While these articles focus on the archival record, two additional articles in this issue focus on archivists themselves and on the personal costs of doing archival work. Chinery and Casey’s “Archivists at Work: Stress and Mood Effects in a Gendered Profession” provides a well-researched consideration of gender, stress, and the work culture of archivists. This piece begins to fill a gap in the literature, contextualizing the emotional response to archival work and throwing

light on the mental costs of the archives as workplace. The authors observe that, twenty-five years after Charles Schultz considered the makeup of the archives profession, we are beginning to address critical issues that put archivists at risk of depression. As they note, “Institutions, administrators, and individual archivists all have a role to play in shaping workplace health” (p. 462). It is fitting, then, that this article is complimented by the work of April K. Anderson-Zorn and colleagues, whose *Perspectives* piece considers impostor syndrome in the archival profession. The article, which was the result of two well-received conference presentations on the topic, provides excellent definition and explanation of impostor syndrome, considers how this phenomenon has manifested for individual archivists who have decided to speak about their experiences, and suggests resources for archivists who may be exploring the impact of impostor syndrome in their own work lives.

Ultimately, the articles in this issue do more than simply instruct us. They meet Dorothy Day’s definition of writing as an act of community. They ask us to engage with their concepts, whether those are offering us fresh ideas for practice, informing our ongoing understanding of the social responsibility of archival practice, or beginning to address the emotional investment of archival workers. The depth of the work in this issue is profound, and I am continually humbled by the work of everyone who contributes to this journal. Our guest editor and all of the contributing authors explore our professional association, our human association, and even our love and concern for each other. I write this having just attended the 2021 SAA Annual Meeting, where I could hear many of these same concerns addressed in presentations, sections, and committee meetings. This issue of *American Archivist* shows the archival literature as our mirror and our guide. There is no more powerful statement for why we, as a profession, need the authors among us to keep moving our literature forward. *American Archivist* manifests our act of community as a profession. Thank you all for your engagement and keep writing!

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NOTES

¹ Stony Brook University offers a good definition of wicked problems at <https://www.stonybrook.edu/commcms/wicked-problem/about/What-is-a-wicked-problem>, citing Rittel and Webber, whose definition dominates other articles on the issue.

² Consider archivists writing about social memory in the late 1990s, which fed into the exploration of archives and power dynamics in the early 2000s.