

# Radical Welcome in the Archives: What Does It Really Mean to Say “You’re Welcome Here”?

Rachel Vagts

The Society of American Archivists held its Annual Meeting virtually in 2021. President Rachel Vagts delivered her address in person in July at the Denver Public Library in front of a small group of family, friends, and colleagues, and the recording was shared with attendees during the conference in August. Vagts was introduced by Sasha Griffin, university archivist and special collections librarian at Denison University in Granville, Ohio. Griffin’s introduction precedes Vagts’ address.

## INTRODUCTION BY SASHA GRIFFIN

*I’m so honored to give the introduction to someone who actually needs very little introduction. However, I wouldn’t be joining you today if I didn’t have something to say, and, for those of you who know me, I always have something to say.*

*I’ve known Rachel for eleven years. She was my first supervisor, my first mentor, and my first entry point into the professional archives world. She taught me what it means to be a leader, both in words and in actions.*

*During our shared time at Luther College, Rachel actively guided me through the ins and outs of archival professional organizations. In 2011, she encouraged me to host an Archon user group for the Midwest Archives Conference, even though it was really all Rachel behind the scenes proofreading my emails, giving me constructive feedback, and showing me how to organize a group of people.*

*I didn’t realize it at the time, but Rachel’s guidance completely shaped my entire career. She showed me that I had the self-agency and the ability to lead others, even as a “baby archivist.” Bolstered by her support and active mentorship, I wrote to the newly formed SAA Students and New Archives Professionals Section listserv that new graduates need only to be proactive to be successful. I*

*felt (naively) that it was so easy to become a leader in the profession—all you need to do is act. However, as I continued talking to my peers, it was eye-opening to hear the ways that new professionals struggle with navigating the waters of professionalism without having a strong mentor to light the path for them. I realized then just how incredibly lucky I was to have Rachel at the helm of my professional development and just how crucial her role was in my career.*

*As we continued working together, Rachel helped me grow as an archivist, while she also grew as a mentor. It's no surprise that Rachel's next career step was taking on the role of director of the Archives Leadership Institute. From 2012 to 2018, Rachel helped more than a hundred of our colleagues discover their own definitions of leadership. She has inspired so many of us to continue advancing the archival profession in our own ways.*

*With that, I'm pleased to be able to introduce to you my friend, my mentor, and our SAA president, Rachel Vagts.*

I am delighted to welcome you all to the Denver Public Library and, more specifically, to the Gates Reading Room in the Western History and Genealogy Department on the fifth floor of the Central Library. I do wish we were *all* together in Anaheim, California—the initial location of the 2021 SAA Annual Meeting. The silver lining is that I get to welcome you to our library.

I want to start with a couple of thank-yous. First of all, my deep thanks to Sasha Griffin for her wonderful introduction. I've been lucky in my career as an archivist to have had many teachers and mentors. Sasha is a significant one of them. I spent more than ten years working as a solitary archivist before she joined me at Luther, and she reminded me of the power of a team. I often told our director that having two of us didn't double our impact—rather the impact was exponential.

I also want to thank my fantastic colleagues here at the Denver Public Library and especially the folks in our Special Collections and Digital Archives department. I have deeply appreciated your support of my work as SAA president this year. And a particular thank-you to my boss, the amazing Rachel Fewell, who, every time I said, "I have an SAA thing," she said, "okay . . . sounds good." I promise we're getting close to the end now!

Well . . . this has been a year. And, for SAA, it wasn't just about a global pandemic, renewed calls for racial justice, and financial worries. It has also been a year in which we faced challenging issues and prepared ourselves for a major shift in our executive leadership. Nancy, your leadership of SAA has been absolutely remarkable.<sup>1</sup> It's been my great honor to work alongside you. And I am equally honored to have been part of the process that brought Jackie Price Osafo to us as our new executive director.<sup>2</sup> Jackie, we are so excited to welcome you to SAA.

When you are elected president of SAA, you learn pretty early on that you will be giving a speech to the membership at the Annual Meeting. I started thinking about what I wanted to talk about approximately ten minutes after Nancy called me with the news. And what I want to talk about today is something radical.

I want to talk about radical welcome.

“Radical” has four primary definitions. Two are adjectives, two are nouns. But the one I’m focusing on for the purpose of this talk is the first adjective definition: (especially of change or action) relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something; far-reaching or thorough.<sup>3</sup>

Although I will admit that the second noun definition does sound a bit like the definition of fons: “a group of atoms behaving as a unit in a number of compounds.”<sup>4</sup>

But back to radical welcome . . .

When I was invited to interview for my current position here at the Denver Public Library, I spent a lot of time on the website, doing my research, trying to learn as much as I could about the special collections, the organization, the people, and the community that the library serves. After more than twenty years in higher education, it was a bit of a mind shift to think about what it would be like to be an archivist at a large urban public library.

What caught my eye first was the banner at the top of the website. It had a simple message: “You’re Welcome Here.”

That simple but explicit statement reminds me of a story my sister tells about an experience my family had a number of years ago. My brother’s housemates had invited us to their wedding. My parents, sister, and I were all really pleased to be included. I’m not quite sure if I remember at what point we learned that the invitation included helping my brother and sister-in-law in preparing and serving the rehearsal dinner. But my family likes a good party, and we had fun with the task.

When it was time to go out to the wedding location, a small guest ranch, the wedding couple said that we should plan to use their cabin—they had planned to spend the night in a tent away from the rest of the guests, and they wanted to thank us for our efforts at the dinner. It was a thoughtful offer, and we were grateful for the generosity of their gift.

But when we got to the ranch and looked at the cabins, it wasn’t totally clear which one was ours. They told us it was the last cabin down the road, and when we got to the last cabin, it was empty and open with a vase of flowers on the table. But it also didn’t have our name on the door. There wasn’t anything explicitly saying that we were welcome there.

We moved our things in feeling a little sheepish, wondering if someone might show up and we'd find out we were in the wrong place. Of course we were in the right place, but we needed our hosts to say, "You're Welcome Here."

Archives and archivists carry this same responsibility to provide radical welcome. How can we make sure that our customers know that they are welcome here?

It can be the words we use and the judgments we make. Take for instance, the term "serious researchers." Through all the years that I've worked in archives, I've rarely, if ever, visited one as a researcher let alone a "serious researcher." As someone who understands how the process works, I can only imagine how intimidating it feels to someone who hasn't ever visited one of our reading rooms or collections. What if, in addition to the lockers, forms, and rules, someone asked me if I was a serious researcher or appeared to be evaluating my need to be there at all? I imagine it would make any of us feel very unwelcome.

The graphic titled "Identifying and Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives," developed by University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) professor Michelle Caswell's fall 2016 Archives, Records and Memory class,<sup>5</sup> challenges us to look at some of our traditional practices in our reading rooms and how we work with our customers.

How many of us have security cameras? Ask our users for identification before we let them look at our collections? What is hanging on the walls of our spaces? Do we consider how these things can create a sense of distrust rather than serving as an invitation?

Here at the Denver Public Library, our manuscript room features a large oil painting of the white man for whom the room is named. The other walls display beautiful, but very traditional landscapes, primarily painted by white men. If this was all you ever saw, you might presume that our collections are largely homogenous rather than representing the diversity of our city and region.

In a session that my Special Collections colleagues and I prepared for the canceled spring 2020 Western Archives Meeting, we planned to share our process for discussing and making changes in our space—changes that would acknowledge the vast contributions of individuals beyond the man in the portrait and the landscape artists who are currently featured. We began to explore replacing those landscapes with modern, colorful, eye-catching works created primarily by women, who are actually well represented in our art collection. Our plans have been delayed by a pandemic and a library renovation project, but we continue to talk about what changes we will make to both the physical space and the customer experience when we reopen.

More recently, we have been conducting a diversity audit of our manuscript collections. Understanding that our catalog records might not fully represent the information we need to understand the diversity of our collection, we wanted

to assess for representation of race, gender identity, ableness, language, era/timespan of the records, and more. Our intent is to use the information to help us make decisions about future collecting, digitization, and cataloging efforts. We also want to be able to talk in more specific terms about our collection, to connect with our customers when they do see themselves in the collections, and to make our case with new donors if we find parts of our community not adequately represented in the collection.

In the same graphic from UCLA, the class identified one sign of privilege as “When I go into an archive, no one questions why I am there.” This is a bias that we as archivists have to recognize within ourselves. I know I’ve made assumptions about someone’s purpose based on their appearance or even the scope or type of research request they’ve made.

Years ago, I found myself in a conference session listening to a presentation by a colleague who was expressing great frustration with people who just wanted to come in and look at things. The archives they worked at held the papers of a famous author. And they had customers who came in to see the author’s handwritten manuscript for themselves.

It’s true that we sometimes have to balance the competing needs of a busy reading room. But I hope that we also never lose sight of the feeling of joy that a first-time visitor experiences when they see their favorite author’s handwriting, or that first map of the neighborhood they live in, or the photo of a relative.

It reminds me of my first day of work at Luther College, when a couple came in shortly before lunch. The woman asked for information about her father. He was quite a bit older when she was born and died when she was still young. She knew nothing about his college years and had come to see where he had gone to school. At that point, I had no clue what was in our collection, but with the assistance of an amazing student worker, we helped them find a student record for the woman’s father.

Feeling slightly disappointed that we hadn’t been able to find more about her dad, I went across campus to lunch. Shortly after I sat down, the couple came in and sat at another table. I was just finishing up when the husband called me over. His wife was standing in front of one of the historic photos that decorated the wall. It was a group of students engaged in a tug of war. She pointed at the photo, tears in her eyes—“That’s my dad!”

I would be lying if I said I didn’t start crying as well. And, thankfully, we knew where the negative was and made her a copy!

I don’t mean to imply that I’m somehow the perfect, welcoming archivist. . . . I also have internally (or sometimes visibly) rolled my eyes at a research request. I was particularly challenged in my early years at Luther College by genealogy requests. My first “line of defense” was: “Is your family’s name on a building here?” Then, after I learned more of the college’s history and

the extent of the collection, it was: “Did your family member go to school here? Were they on the faculty?” But then I started to learn enough Norwegian to explore the records we held from the numerous small churches that had been started in the county by the same Norwegian immigrants who had founded the college.

When I started my new job here in April 2019, I quickly learned that even in Special Collections we would be called upon to welcome people who many of us don’t usually see in our spaces. Each day, Denver Public Library welcomes a large number of people who come to use our building for things that many of us take for granted. They come for access to the internet. They come to use the bathroom. They come for a place to sit down for a few hours that isn’t too cold in the winter or too hot in the summer.

It’s one thing to understand this in theory and another to experience it in practice. Some days, it’s rewarding and you learn something that you didn’t expect from a customer who doesn’t look or act like the people you expect to walk through the door. Other days, it’s challenging—and can be very hard for frontline staff, who spend many more hours in public-serving roles. In his recent movie, *The Public*, Emilio Estevez uses the public library setting to tell some of these stories, although I will ask you to watch with the same grain of salt that you hope people use when they watch *National Treasure*.

Like most of you, we closed our doors in March 2020 and went home for what was to be no less than thirty days. We made the pivot to working in our homes, and we watched as our city really struggled. First with the shutdown, then with protests, and more recently (here in Denver) with a more visible presence of neighbors who are experiencing homelessness.<sup>6</sup> It became increasingly hard to figure out how to say “you’re welcome here” when the doors were closed. As we worked on new ways to be accessible to our customers, we changed our welcome to “We’re Still Here.”

That closure lasted a lot longer than any of us thought it would.<sup>7</sup> And I’m really proud of what our Special Collections folks here in the Western History and Genealogy Department and Blair Caldwell African American Research Library have done: We made incredible progress on a data migration project. We answered thousands of reference questions that came in via phone calls and email. We did our best to work with urgent research requests via virtual reference visits. And we even ran a national search to hire a gifted new archivist to work on our IMLS-funded Preserving Black Western Legacies digitization project.<sup>8</sup>

But I think we all recognize that despite the wins for metadata (I mean, did anything come out better during the pandemic than metadata?), this has all been really hard. In early June 2021, SAA hosted a Zoom forum organized by Council member Melissa Gonzales to address the challenges of returning to work in our

offices and buildings. Much like the webcasts that were organized early in the pandemic about how to manage teams working from home, financial planning in uncertain times, and career pivot strategies, our members and experts from other fields came together to help support our work and well-being. This, too, is critically important, as we need to make sure that our fellow archivists also know that they are welcome here.

Mentorship has long been a way of extending a welcome in the archives profession. SAA has had a formal mentorship program for more than twenty-five years, but, for many of us, our mentors have come through both formal and informal routes. I’ve been fortunate to have had great mentors during graduate school and throughout my career. Rick Pifer, my professor and boss at the Wisconsin Historical Society, was my first mentor. He taught me many things, most important of which was how critical professional organizations like SAA would be as I was developing a network of colleagues.

In the past, year we’ve lost four of our SAA past presidents, all of whom were mentors to so many of us. Although I never worked with Phil Mason, Bill Joyce, or Jerry Ham, I’ve read many heartfelt tributes about each from people whom I respect in this field. But I was very lucky to work directly with a great leader and champion of our profession, David B. Gracy II. Dr. Gracy was an enthusiastic supporter of all things archival and a teacher and mentor to many of us in the field. It was my pleasure to witness that mentorship during the four years that he joined the faculty at the Archives Leadership Institute. I feel very lucky to have had those opportunities to catch his enthusiasm for our work and to truly appreciate what it means to go “into the breach”!

And, while I still believe in the power of mentors and providing support for our graduate students and early career archivists, the time has come for us to be creative as we explore new ways to remove the systemic barriers that have prevented us from being a more diverse and inclusive profession.

What if there was a new way to extend radical welcome to our profession?

As more graduate schools have moved to online programs, we have all seen the large expansion of required internships to provide a practical training experience. Tuition costs coupled with unpaid internships have put our profession out of reach for many, and the long-term impact of student loan debt has led to others leaving the profession prematurely.

For the nearly 500 archivists who filled out a salary transparency spreadsheet after the 2019 Annual Meeting, the accumulated debt was about \$13.7 million. And for everyone who was able to report that their loans were paid off, there was usually someone who still owed more than \$100,000.

So, what do we do about this? Is there a way for new archives workers to receive the necessary education and training without burdening themselves with crippling debt?



During an SAA Council diversity and inclusion workshop with DeEtta Jones in November 2016, the Council had an extended conversation about what were the continuing barriers to the diversification of our profession. That is the first time I remember us talking about the concept of an apprenticeship as an entry to the field. Apprenticeships are not a new model of training, although they are not as common in our field as they are in others.

This spring, I was finally able to craft a formal proposal that addresses the thoughts that have been swirling around in my head since 2016. With the help of colleagues here at the Denver Public Library and some great grant writers, we developed a program that would invite new college graduates to apply to our two-year apprentice program in Special Collections.<sup>9</sup>

The intent of the program is to reach out to people who remain underrepresented in our field and to offer them an opportunity to learn our craft. We have designed a program that begins with an expanded version of SAA education courses to give them basic tools to begin understanding arrangement and description and then pair them with an archivist mentor. With that mentor, they will work on collections that connect with their existing skills or a subject matter with which they feel a connection or a curiosity.

I hope that this pilot project helps explore a few questions. First: Does an apprenticeship help potential archivists explore the field in a way that provides a living and doesn't increase student debt? Second: Would an apprenticeship help those who are underrepresented in our field to gain access to school and foundation funding? Finally: Will this program equip and prepare those who are looking for a nondegreed career in archives?

It will also be critical to understand what the impact of a paradigm shift like this would have on our field. Over the history of the profession, there have been many different ways to become educated in the theory and trained in the practice. It is only really in the past thirty years that archival education has been so solidly rooted in library and information studies programs. And that might still be the best way to do it, but it is an approach with a very academic focus.

After twenty years working in academic archives, I have transitioned to a large public library. When I first started the position, a friend asked me how a public library job compares to working in a small liberal arts college. I thought for a minute and then responded that although the total number of employees is about the same, instead of being a small part—the archives—of a small part—the library—of the campus staff and faculty, now everyone works in the library, and it feels like our Special Collections has a larger impact organizationally as well as with many of our customers.

As I've grown into the job and begun to understand more about our organization, our customers, and our place in the city, I would say I have a slightly different answer, but while the work is pretty much the same, I am



fascinated by this experience of being an archivist at a public library. We have a great responsibility to the residents of this city and region to preserve, interpret, and make accessible their history. This became even more apparent during the public health crisis when we had to find new ways to engage with the public. I did breathe a deep sigh of relief when Ancestry announced it would allow customers to access its database from home with a library card rather than only on-site. But even with resources like Ancestry and our large digital collections, we found ourselves constantly struggling to keep up with the requests for information. We had to find new ways of doing old things. I believe that developing a formal apprentice program could also become a new way of doing an old thing.

In addition to welcoming archivists in new ways, we have to continue to work to help everyone feel welcome, both in our profession and in our professional organization. SAA has been working in two related and important ways to try to improve that welcome. The Archival Compensation Task Force<sup>10</sup> has been looking at issues surrounding fair compensation for all in our profession. And that work can be hard as we challenge social norms like telling people how much you are actually willing to pay for a job or what your salaries are.

At its May meeting, the SAA Council voted to act on the task force’s interim recommendation that we require salary information on SAA’s job board. In some ways, that’s an easy yes because it has been proven that salary transparency can do a great deal to prevent inequality in wages based on race and/or gender. But it will take even more work to advocate for salary equity, including learning how to advocate internally, making sure that archivists are truly represented in the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and continuing to make a strong and understandable case for the breadth of work that we do. The data that we will collect during the A\*CENSUS II survey will create the foundation for helping us begin that work.

What continues to be critically important is that we remember that we come from many backgrounds and experiences, which can make any of us feel welcome or unwelcome—a member of the clique while feeling overwhelmed with impostor syndrome. Each of us must extend radical welcome—in our sections and our appointed groups, through our elections and our task forces and special projects.

We must remember that we are the ones who can make that welcome explicit. We are the ones who must say “you ARE welcome here.” As I said in my candidate statement two-and-half years ago (and a few times before and since!) . . . we are the Society OF American Archivists, not the Society FOR American Archivists. We are the ones who can make our welcome explicit, who can open the gates and create space for all who wish to join us. It’s not easy. Sometimes we don’t have the same agenda, we make mistakes, we’ve been told

we don't belong. But I believe that if we work toward extending radical welcome, there will be a place for each of us to truly believe that we belong where we are.

Thank you!

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "radical," Oxford University Press, [https://premium.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/radical](https://premium.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/radical), accessed via Oxford Dictionaries Online on April 18, 2022.
- <sup>2</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "radical."
- <sup>3</sup> Nancy Perkins Beaumont served as the SAA executive director from 2003 to 2021.
- <sup>4</sup> See Society of American Archivists, "Jacqueline Price Osafo Appointed SAA Executive Director," June 9, 2021, <https://www2.archivists.org/news/2021/jacqueline-price-osafo-appointed-saa-executive-director>, captured at <https://perma.cc/S7QE-NUVM>.
- <sup>5</sup> See UCLA Previously Published Works, "Easy to Print: Identifying and Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives," 2017, <https://escholarship.org/content/qt0zn923k8/qt0zn923k8.pdf?t=oydlbw> for the related poster designed by Gracen Brilmyer.
- <sup>6</sup> See David Sachs and Esteban L. Hernandez, "As Night Fell, Protests and Chaos Continued in Denver over George Floyd's Death," *Denverite*, May 28, 2020, <https://denverite.com/2020/05/28/denver-police-confirm-shots-fired-at-colfax-and-15th-street>, captured at <https://perma.cc/Y39S-443F>; and Donna Bryson, "People Experiencing Homelessness in Denver Can Expect a Series of Large Clean-ups over the Next Week," *Denverite*, May 13, 2020, <https://denverite.com/2020/05/13/people-experiencing-homelessness-in-denver-can-expect-a-series-of-large-clean-ups-over-the-next-week>, captured at <https://perma.cc/VV79-NCJ8>.
- <sup>7</sup> Denver Public Library's Central Library was closed March 16, 2020, to July 18, 2021.
- <sup>8</sup> See Institute of Museum and Library Services, "Denver Public Library (Blair-Caldwell African American Research Library)," 2020, <https://www.imls.gov/grants/awarded/mh-245578-oms-20>, captured at <https://perma.cc/VFX4-58RB>.
- <sup>9</sup> In January 2022, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded the Denver Public Library a Preservation Education and Training grant for \$266,467 to pilot a two-year apprenticeship program beginning in summer 2022.
- <sup>10</sup> See Society of American Archivists, "Archival Compensation Task Force to Begin Work," March 23, 2020, <https://www2.archivists.org/news/2020/archival-compensation-task-force-to-begin-work>, captured at <https://perma.cc/CE4A-89WC>.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Rachel Vagts** is the manager of Special Collections and Digital Archives at the Denver Public Library in Denver, Colorado. She was the seventy-fifth president of the Society of American Archivists from 2020 to 2021, is a Distinguished Fellow of the Society, and served as director of the Archives Leadership Institute from 2013 to 2018. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin–Madison School of Library and Information Studies (now iSchool), she previously held positions at the Wisconsin Historical Society, the University of Maryland, Luther College, and Berea College.