

REFLECTION



Diversity's discontents: in search of an archive of the oppressed

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ABSTRACT

Australian and US-based archivists have recently begun to confront their complicity in a documentary landscape that excludes and erases the voices and views of minority, oppressed and poor communities. Archival professional organisations in both countries attempt to confront this issue by focusing on the homogeneity of the profession, specifically through using the discourse of diversity. Thus, this keynote address, delivered at the 2017 conference of the Australian Society of Archivists in Melbourne, explores the following question: how, if at all, does diversity form part of the solution for dismantling the white supremacy of archives? It begins this inquiry by recounting the author's participation and experience with diversity projects of the Society of American Archivists, before speculating how archivists might transition away from the language of diversity and towards the language of liberation through the concept of an archive of the oppressed. The central argument of the address is that dismantling white supremacy in archives requires archivists abandon the neoliberal discourse of diversity and adopt an archive of the oppressed, or a cooperative approach in which oppressed peoples are positioned as subjects in our own liberation.

KEYWORDS

Diversity; oppression; neoliberalism; archival profession

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Yesterday (26 September 2017) marked three months exactly since I announced my breakup from the archival profession, and I have to admit that leaving was the biggest mistake of my life.

Just joking.

But every joke, they say, has a bit of truth to it. In the last three months, I have attended two professional archivists' conferences on two continents, so evidently I miss you all, right? Not in the least. Since packing up my apartment in Philadelphia and moving to Cambridge, Massachusetts, I've had a new lease on life. I changed my diet. I started exercising more. I ride my bike to the grocery store and the barbershop. I lost 15–20 pounds. I bought a new bed. I read three life-changing books. I still don't have a grown-up beard, but besides that I'm basically living the life of an ex-girlfriend or ex-boyfriend who got dumped and is now giving motivational talks about self-care and how that person never deserved you in the first place.

You may be asking: ‘why is he opening the closing keynote with a relationship metaphor? Did he get dumped in real life?’ No, thank the Lord, and my beautiful, wonderful partner is here in the audience today. Let’s clap it up for her and the emotional labour she exerts being around me on the regular and being around y’all on the regular. She’s been to her fair share of these things now – three of them in three different countries – and not once has she fallen asleep. That’s love, for real for real.

So no, I didn’t get dumped, but I use the relationship metaphor because when I announced my departure, a great many archivists, some of whom I’d never met, reacted as if I had broken up with them personally and professionally. Some expressed shock. Others confusion. And, of course, others spread the occasional ‘hateration’ and ‘holleration’. You’re lame for that, and you get one bar. While I did receive well wishes on the whole, the conversation on Twitter and in-person at the Society of American Archivists annual meeting in Portland, Oregon, this past July returned to one question: ‘as a profession, what could we have done to keep you?’

And the straight-up truth is: nothing! To further the relationship metaphor, this breakup wasn’t about you, it was about me. It was about what I needed and wanted in life. We had some good times and we made history together, literally, but it was time for me to move on. To see new people. To read new books. To engage new ideas.

Perhaps a bigger question is, why did ‘keeping me’ mean so much to so many of you? Let’s momentarily ignore the latent anti-blackness laced within the capitalist and property-based notions of ‘keeping’; after all, archivists keep files, records and other inanimate commodities that can be traded in the hopes of producing a surplus value, material or otherwise, so what are we to make of this idea of ‘keeping’ black people? What value is provided by this keeping, for whom and to what end?

As a black, cisgendered, heterosexual man with an advanced degree, I became keenly aware of the value, utility and purpose proffered from my keeping. My positionality and proximity to patriarchy – via my gender, sexuality and educational pedigree – simultaneously signalled a safety and security to white liberalism; a safety that I would have more to lose than to gain by disrupting patriarchy and a security that my presence assuaged the anti-black attitudes of white people in my workplace, professional societies and the like. Yes, I am assured that I excelled in my job as Princeton University’s first-ever digital archivist. Yet, I am also assured that my excellence accrued an unearned currency that does not accrue for black women, queer folks, and those archivists who attended or worked at less prestigious institutions – academia’s not-so-coded language for white and wealthy – and thus don’t project or protect whiteness via the intersecting identities they present. Both of the preceding sentences are simultaneously true.

The latter sentence remained apparent throughout my archival career, as numerous people attempted to erase the labour done by people like Stacie Williams, Jasmine Jones, Melissa Hubbard, Rossy Mendez, Elena Colón-Marrero, Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez and Lynn Durgin, to name a small few, from projects with which I had been associated. Quite literally, *nothing* ‘I’ ‘accomplished’ in my career came without the intense involvement if not direction of one of those aforementioned names. Their erasure, though, served a political project, and in addition to being sick of that shit, I knew that this project wouldn’t get any of us any closer to freedom. It may have given me prestige, power, or even a pedestal, but that’s not the purpose with which I pursued a career in

archives. In addition to failing to bring any of us *closer* to freedom, the political project of their erasure actually brings all of us *further* from freedom.

I provide this context to foreground my closing address at the 2017 Australian Society of Archivists conference because your theme – Diverse People, Diverse Collections and Diverse Worlds – needs a provocation, which is my personal pastime. I spent the formative years of my career learning the art and science of provocation from Verne Harris, who opened with yesterday's keynote, so I hope I do justice by him with my remarks. Given the woefully white worlds of archives in the US and Australia, Katherine Howard – let's give a round of applause to her and the other conference organisers – asked me to speak this afternoon on the topic of diversifying the archival profession, specifically, in her words, 'as a solution to reducing the "whiteness" of archives'.

I hope she'll permit me to push back on two parts of her diction. Firstly, I am not interested in 'reducing' whiteness, no more than I am interested in 'reducing' oppression, 'reducing' capitalism or 'reducing' prison populations. I am interested – first, foremost and last – in all of their abolition. And while abolition is an ongoing process and a praxis with no finite stopping point, I want to go on record as claiming that any reduction of those concepts in which I engage is in service to their eventual abolition. Secondly, whiteness, of all concepts in the world, is the one least deserving of scare quotes. Whiteness is real, and this room and the collections you maintain are testaments to that whiteness. Whiteness isn't a figment or a fiction. Whiteness is key to understanding the way of the world.

I genuinely appreciate the invitation to speak before you today, and because of that appreciation, I will slightly amend Katherine's question, if I might, in order to align it with more precise language. I derive the precision of this language from Michelle Caswell and the work she and many others have done in the previous year around dismantling white supremacy in archives.¹ So, to unite the two streams of the initial invitation and this more precise language, the question I hope to consider before you today is: how, if at all, does diversity form part of the solution for dismantling the white supremacy of archives? By pulling from my direct experience within the sphere of archives in the United States and using a dialectical approach to yield productive contradictions from the Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire, I will argue that dismantling white supremacy in archives requires archivists abandon the legalistic discourse of diversity and adopt an archive of the oppressed, a working concept of archives that foregrounds black feminist analyses and praxis as foundational for any future of archives claiming to be just, inclusive and liberatory.

Abandon

Allow me to start this diatribe on diversity by stating that during my six years in the world of archives – two as a student, four as a professional – I have benefitted both materially and immaterially from many diversity programs and initiatives, including ones led by the Society of American Archivists (SAA), which is the largest professional organisation of archivists in North America. It's important that I qualify my positionality here because I offer the following critique not because diversity efforts didn't benefit me personally; in fact, they did benefit me. So it is in fact against my personal, financial and egotistical best interests to argue in opposition to diversity initiatives that have rewarded me in those realms. But I do so with humility and dignity, with

humbleness and pride. I know my capabilities as well as my limitations and I am comfortable and confident admitting to both.

With that qualification on the record, I will offer a concise account of my involvement in helping to conceptualise and plan SAA's first-ever Liberated Archive forum, which occurred two months ago at the Society's annual meeting in Portland, Oregon. I offer this account because of all my frustrations with SAA's attempt at diversity over the years – and trust me, I have plenty of frustrations – this attempt is not only the most recent but also the one within SAA in which I have been most intertwined as an organiser and planner. Because of that intimacy with this forum, it feels most palpable and proximate. From that palpability and proximity, I am able to describe in detail where diversity falls apart, who gets most impacted by this falling apart, and what organisations that claim to want more diversity should be mindful of.

The planning for this then-unnamed idea started in earnest during the summer of 2016. I had, by this point in my career, given up on professionalism and the organisations clinging to it. Just a year prior, I was part of a group of archivists and community activists that pulled off a Herculean task of creating and publishing an archive of police violence, a task we explicitly executed outside the official bounds of SAA, despite the fact that we used the convenience of that year's annual meeting to collect a great deal of content for the archive. Next week (October 2017), I'll be giving a talk at my current university in which I talk more about this choice in detail, but suffice it to say here that the archivists and the activists had every reason to believe SAA would water down if not completely sabotage our project. In a sense, we didn't give SAA a chance, by using its deceptive defence of diversity, to fuck this up for the people in Cleveland or for the culture.²

So it was amidst this lack of faith in SAA and professional organisations at large that I agreed to help plan a new addition to the SAA program for its 2017 conference. In addition to having a world of trust in and love for the person who asked me to join, I also tried to adhere to the concern that Ricky Punzalan asked yesterday after Verne's keynote: how should those who remain in professional organisations make the change happen that we want to see? Surely, if all of us vacate, what will happen to the work and, more importantly, what will happen to the people most directly impacted by the work?

With these two considerations and questions in my mind, I joined the planning team with the understanding that I and two other amazing archivists would have autonomy to carve out a new type of experience during the SAA meeting; one free of the same old formats featuring the same old speakers talking about the same old shit. I didn't know the other two archivists very well, but their reputations preceded them and I felt honoured to have the chance to work alongside them on such a pioneering project. I also saw this as a chance to put into practice some of what I learned in helping to plan, under the direction of Dr Mary Rizzo, an annual public history unconference held in New Jersey that Dr Rizzo started in 2015.

So after a few conference calls with the two other archivists and the original person who brought us together, on 21 July 2016, the four of us settled on naming this event 'The Liberated Archive: A Forum for Envisioning and Implementing a

Community-Based Approach to Archives’. Our original description of the forum, which I read in full, read:

The purpose of this forum is to convene community members, organizers, activists, archives, archivists, and allies to engage each other as equal partners in the pursuit of **justice, freedom, and liberation work**. Topics addressed at the forum might include but are not limited to the role of records, documentation, and archives as they relate to human **rights**, gender **equality**, civil rights, **indigenous** rights, **postcolonial** struggles, immigrant rights, **state violence**, **environmental justice**, **LGBTQIA** rights, etc. The desired environment of the forum is inclusive, respectful, accessible, and **anti-oppressive**.

That has all the emoji flames, right? It was, as we say in American, lit. It was live. It was crunk. It was cracking. It also never saw the light of day. The description of the forum, after several revisions from the SAA general program committee and SAA council, changed to read:

The Forum will bring together archivists from around the country and members of communities in the Portland metro area (and beyond!) to envision how archivists might partner with the public to repurpose the archive as a site of social transformation and radical inclusion. There are two goals for the Forum: To provide community members with tools, techniques, and human connections that they can use to transform themselves as they need and desire, and To provide archivists with tools, techniques, and human connections that they can use in their own communities to transform the way in which the human record is documented.³

Below the published description, which you can read for yourself once I post the text of this talk to my Medium page, are examples of subjects that prospective presenters – again, originally not part of the plan and generally antithetical to an unconference spirit – might address. The most potent words that formed part of the original description were now gone.

Freedom. Liberation. Rights. Indigenous. Postcolonial. State violence. Environmental justice. LGBTQIA. Anti-oppressive.

All these words, over the course of the year, were stripped from the description and replaced with gentler language that could fall comfortably on white liberal ears and not too harshly on white conservative ones. You may wonder: ‘how and when did such a stark switch happen?’ To be quite honest, I don’t know the concrete answer to that. That information is above my paygrade. But I do know that SAA intertwined itself more and more into the direction of the forum, much to my chagrin, often in ways that weren’t entirely transparent to me. I also know that I experienced quite a few seismic developments in my personal life – admission to graduate school, a serious health scare and a life-altering car accident – that led me to withdraw my active participation in the forum planning.

That said, it wasn’t until preparing for this address that I looked back at our original description from July of 2016 and compared it to the final version. The gulf between the spirit of the two descriptions substantiates the frustration and unfamiliarity I felt while attending the forum on 29 July 2017, at the Oregon Convention Center. The vision, the fire and fury with which we originally formulated the forum fell mostly flat, in my view. The tone and tenor of the sessions resembled too closely the tone and tenor of regular SAA sessions. The shades of the people in the room resembled too closely the shades in the room at regular SAA sessions. This is a difficult realisation to reach, and this is not to negate the connection building and learning that did occur that day. But this realisation serves to remind me that the radical freedom that birthed the idea had all

but vanished. What remained was a remnant of that ‘social transformation’ and ‘radical inclusion’ we sought to cultivate.

The best way I can reconcile this result is that SAA simply did what organisations do while they profess their devotion to diversity: they simultaneously undermine potentially transformative, if flawed, projects in order to manage – not eradicate or eliminate – existing inequalities. The British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed describes this phenomenon perfectly in her 2012 book *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* about colleges and universities. Ahmed writes:

What is problematic about diversity, by implication, is that it can be ‘cut off’ from the programs that seek to challenge inequalities within organizations and might even take the place of such programs in defining the social mission of universities ... the institutional preference for the term ‘diversity’ is a sign of the lack of commitment to change and might even allow organizations such as universities to conceal the operation of systematic inequalities ... Diversity can thus function as a containment strategy.⁴

To be clear, one can read SAA as a prototypical professional organisation with its overstatements to diversity. I do not have the evidence to maintain that anything about it is different from others in the United States. But I do have the evidence that if you go to the SAA website, archivists.org, and you enter the word ‘diversity’ into the search box, 9520 results appear. One of those results points to the organisation’s Statement on Diversity and Inclusion, which indicates that SAA interprets diversity to include two types of factors: (1) socio-cultural and (2) professional and geographic. Time will not permit for a thorough interrogation of the problematic adjoining of the second type, but let us look for a moment at the socio-cultural factors of diversity that SAA delineates.

SAA defines socio-cultural diversity in its Equal Opportunity/Non-Discrimination Policy, drafted in 1992 and reviewed most recently in May of 2016. In the policy, SAA defines 14 bases on which it will not discriminate.⁵ Expected bases on this list include race, religion, national origin, gender, sex and sexual preference. Unexpected if not ambiguous bases on this list include individual life style, family relationship and veteran status. It is important to note that these bases largely satisfy the statutory requirements outlined in the series of US federal anti-discrimination laws passed from the 1960s until the 1990s. In legal lingo, this means that SAA through its policy merely affirms its commitment to ‘protected groups’, which are classes of people in the United States that federal lawmakers deem must be protected from discrimination in the realm of employment and services. One can probably just as easily find a similar statement on the website of a large bank or university. The SAA policy, then, says less about the organisation’s genuine interest in equity and says more about its willingness to adhere to the statutory definitions of diversity so as to avoid litigation. In other words, it does the bare minimum and nothing further.

For instance, the organisation could have expanded its policy to protect poor people and people with criminal convictions, which are two classes of the US population in which black and other people of colour are disproportionately represented. US federal law allows for discrimination against these communities and, because it approaches diversity from a legalistic lens, so does SAA. The organisation, then, has professed not to discriminate along lines of race and gender but has not afforded that same protection to poor people and people returning from prison, two communities that, through the

making of white supremacist American capitalism, experience explicit and endless forms of discrimination not only in employment but in education and housing.⁶

The omission of poor people and formerly incarcerated people – a common absence in many American organisations, to be sure – constitutes the danger, delusion, and in my view disingenuous nature of diversity programs. In addition to prioritising cosmetic changes over cultural ones, diversity attempts aim to cure symptoms while ignoring sicknesses. The symptom, low minority representation in the archival profession and in archival collections, subsists from the sickness: white supremacist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchy. The sickness begets the symptom, not the other way around. Absent any acknowledgement or action about white supremacy and the capitalist exploitation to which it is intimately wedded, at best diversity is an incomplete and insufficient bandage on a gushing and deep flesh wound. Thus, those archivists and archives that are interested in diversity as a legal and juridical concept should recognise its impotence at dismantling white supremacy in archives and seriously consider its abandonment.

Adopt

That abandonment of the cosmetic and legalistic language of diversity might lead us to a more just journey towards an archive of the oppressed. This phrase, of course, invokes the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire and his love letter to liberation, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire in this book primarily concerns himself with the process of revolutionary struggle, specifically the means and ends of liberation for oppressed peoples. He defines a pedagogy of the oppressed as ‘an instrument for [oppressed peoples] critical discovery that both they and their oppressors are manifestations of dehumanization’ and argues, most centrally, that the pedagogy – this liberatory instrument – must be created and practised *with*, not *for*, oppressed peoples.⁷

It is not readily obvious from the beginning of the book how or why Freire’s words matter for archives and archivists, but the connection is clarified once he describes the traditional and dominant modes of schooling; what he calls the ‘banking’ model of education, in which teachers, as operatives of the oppressors, deposit facts and information into the minds of the students whose oppression is entrenched as a result of this formulaic pedagogy.⁸ Knowledge, in this modality, becomes an inert, one-way commodity that at once stifles students’ creativity, while preventing their ability to reveal the terms of their oppression and transform the structures shaping their circumstances. This characterisation of the banking model of teaching corresponds with critiques I and others in this room have made about the commodification of the archival record as well as the power dynamics imposed by the omnipotent archivist on the disempowered researcher.⁹ The archivist, via appraisal, acquisition and description, assembles bodies of documents that they have deemed, often inconsistently, to have enduring value. The user requests some subset of these documents and dutifully mines the archive like miners for gold but is rarely able, via the violence and silence of the archive, to reveal and thus transform the world around them.¹⁰ The OAIS reference model reinforces this process and quite fittingly uses the neoliberal language of producer, manager and consumer to describe it all. The development of digital *asset* management systems and the theories that undergird them further extend the money metaphor.¹¹

While not a perfect analogy, Freire's critique of the banking model of education can bring insight into the ways in which the dominant mode of archives, as technologies and sites of power, operate as instruments of oppression rather than instruments for liberation.¹² His text powerfully illustrates what the librarian, poet, teacher and activist Audre Lorde would later describe as the 'master's tool' and their inadequacy at ushering revolutionary change.¹³ One is tempted, then, after reading Freire to adopt his solution wholesale – pardon the neoliberal language – into the realm of archives. Yet an unresolved tension in the text that prevents, in my view, such an adoption is the rigid binary that Freire erects between the oppressed and the oppressors as two discrete, immutable and easily identifiable classes; similar to the classic Marxist divide between the bourgeoisie class of exploiters and the proletarian class of the exploited. Freire's strict split between the oppressed and the oppressors constitutes a major premise of his analysis, for it is the oppressed, he argues, who must develop the conviction to fight for their liberation and lead the pedagogy integral to its attainment. Freire emphasises that the pedagogy of the oppressed cannot be executed by the oppressors, for to do so would be a contradiction in terms.¹⁴

It is at this juncture in the journey towards an 'archive of the oppressed' that archivists and archival organisations would do well to learn from the legion of black feminist theorists and activists writing about oppression through more nuanced and, I argue, more liberatory lenses. The aforementioned Audre Lorde was one of a number of African Diasporic women who in the 1970s created the Combahee River Collective, which authored the seminal Combahee River Collective (CRC) Statement in 1977. Since its publication, the statement has undergirded dozens of organising initiatives, liberation efforts, and indeed the subsequent black feminist literature that would soon follow. The statement's reach stems from its crystallisation of the problem:

... we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.¹⁵

Unlike Freire, who writes of 'the oppressed' as a monolithic class with shared class interests, the CRC Statement aptly names the many simultaneous identities people hold and introduces the critical concept of 'interlocking oppressions'. Not only do the authors describe oppression as a web woven of multiple, interdependent strands, they also pluralise oppression to reflect this reality. To singularise oppression is to replicate the inequities that oppressions produce, a point that the political scientist Cathy Cohen echoes in her analysis of queer politics in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s. Cohen contends that queer studies, as a discipline, largely missed its moment to articulate a radical politics because of the field's unilateral obsession with opposing heteronormativity, thereby failing to see that not all heterosexual people benefit from heteronormativity and, for those who do, very rarely do they benefit equally or in the same ways.¹⁶

The Dutch anthropologist Gloria Wekker would continue Cohen's critique, writing in 2006 that she rejects the label of queer studies for her ethnography of same-sex relationships in Suriname because the field had yet to align its (legitimate) critique of heteronormativity with anti-colonial and anti-racist projects that, at once, aimed to assail the myriad of oppressions faced by women and queer people in the Global

South.¹⁷ This approach – tackling oppression one category at a time – pervades and indeed dooms many potentially emancipatory projects. This is not limited to the field of queer studies. The anthropologist Jafari Allen in his ethnography on erotic subjectivity in contemporary Cuba notes that the Cuban Revolution of 1959, for all it did to abolish the economic exploitation on the island, did little to disrupt racism, sexism, homophobia or patriarchy, but rather further retrenched these systems of oppression.¹⁸

Thus, it stands to reason that an approximation of an archive of the oppressed must embrace black feminism as an analytic and praxis. It requires a reckoning with the reality, stated by the legal historian Imani Perry, that: ‘We are not all subjugated in the same way, but the interrelationship of forms of subjugation ideally forge creative pathways toward alliance rather than competition.’¹⁹ Diversity from a legalistic framework fails to capture this complexity. In preference of the maintenance of the status quo and a furtherance of state dominion, the common organisational efforts at diversity fail to change, in structural ways, the conditions and circumstances that make intentional remedial efforts necessary to begin with. To be clear, I do not advocate wholesale (apologies) withdrawal of inclusion initiatives among archival organisations in the US or Australia. The chief problem with these schemes is not that they go too far; it is precisely that they do not go far enough.

As such, to practise an archive of the oppressed requires not only a cooperative commitment to collective liberation for all but also a constant self-reflection by all actors of the ways in which the oppressor manifests itself within each of us, as well as the ways those manifestations impede larger liberation projects. It follows, then, that an archive of the oppressed requires rethinking and reimagining all dynamics of the archival process alongside oppressed peoples, positioning our collections materials for their usage in a way that aids them in coming into complete consciousness about the contours of their oppressions. An archive of the oppressed reminds us of a reality that discourses on diversity demolish; the reality that *they* are *us* and *we* are *them*, such that we will all live free or all perish imprisoned.

Notes

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