

Radical Honesty in Archival Description

Sam Winn, Virginia Tech
@sam_winn

Framing question

“If the *métier* of archivists is to create order out of chaos, exerting control over a material and digital world that constantly attempts to exceed its own bounds, what happens when unpredictable social, political, and racial factors challenge standards and practices founded on a normative whiteness?”

Mario H. Ramirez

Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative

Acknowledgments

Cecily Walker, Jennifer Vinopal, Jarrett Drake, Bergis Jules, Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Dominique Luster, Michelle Caswell, Kimberly Christen, Mario H. Ramirez, T. Kay Sangwand, Natalie Baur, April Hathcock, Emily Drabinski, Netanel Ganin, Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty, Shanee' Yvette Murrain, Ricardo Punzalan, Fobazi Ettarh, nina de jesus, Kate Theimer

Building on the work of Jennifer Vinopal and Cecily Walker, here is a brief list of folks who have inspired and shaped my thinking on this topic.

Can description be “honest”?

Can archivists be “honest”?

Facing our legacy of harm

“Our traditional practices in the archives are dangerously close to this legacy of institutionalized dehumanization. The silences, erasures, and distortions, and the lack of care, around the histories of the most marginalized people in our society are essential characteristics of it... Are we ready to confront this reality?”

- **Bergis Jules, NDSA 2016 keynote**

Reproducing oppressions

“My hope is that we can start to examine linked data, particularly within the context of cultural heritage, and how it is decidedly not neutral, nor an intrinsic good, but instead as another space in which ideology and systematic oppression are likely to be reproduced.”

- **Mark Matienzo, LITA 2015 keynote**

The hubris of archival neutrality

“...the scholar may swear to his neutrality on the job, but whether he be physicist, historian, or archivist, his work will tend... to maintain the existing social order by perpetuating its values, by legitimizing its priorities, by justifying its wars, perpetuating its prejudices, contributing to its xenophobia, and apologizing for its class order”

- Howard Zinn, 1970 SAA keynote

Hegemony of the status quo

Towards a “humanized” craft

“... the rebellion of the archivist against [their] normal role is not... the politicizing of a neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitably political craft.”

- Howard Zinn, 1970 SAA Keynote

What is the unnamed norm?

Revealing “(in)visible defaults”

“it takes critical awareness, consciousness, and ethical responsibility to uphold the cultural and political integrity of archival collections that are located outside of the (in)visible default of ‘western, white, straight, and male’ [and English language]... Without this critical awareness archivists run the risk of projecting the (in)visible default onto these collections...”

- Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez,

Invisible Defaults and Perceived Limitations (2016)

Where can archivists cultivate critical awareness?

Some of the folks doing this work...

Challenging core principles

“The truly transformative principle that is needed for archival practice and archival description cannot come from one person or from one invite-only forum, but such a principle necessarily must develop organically, slowly, and anti-oppressively with a radical cross-section of academic, disciplinary, racial, ethnic, gender, cultural and class backgrounds represented. In this sense, a new foundational archival principle, should it be worth anything, must be developed beyond the bounds of the archival profession.”

- Jarrett M. Drake

RadTech Meets RadArch: Towards A New Principle for Archives and Archival Description
(2016)

Towards a “humanized” descriptive practice

- ★ Cultivate cultural competency
- ★ Diversify describers
- ★ Elevate community expertise & participation
- ★ Challenge traditional principles of ownership, origin, and “honesty”