

# The Hubris of Neutrality in Archives

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Good afternoon, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to share some of my thoughts on this emerging topic. I want to take a moment to acknowledge the scholars, practitioners, and friends who have really transformed my understanding of archival description. I am indebted to their scholarship as well as their willingness to grapple with this question on a relatively public stage.

## Can description be “honest”? Can archivists?

First and foremost, I want to challenge the premise that any archival description can capture the truth. And I would argue that framing the work we do as either “honest” or “dishonest” obscures the reality that well-intentioned people can still write patronising and erroneous descriptions. The historic record has been repeatedly muddled and punctuated by perfectly “honest” scholars who thought they were telling the truth. Archivists are not exempt from this defect — in fact, our hubristic trust in our own capacity for objectivity makes us rather dangerous custodians. We have inherited this flaw from our philosophical and historiographic forbears, but we have yet to inherit their critical response.

This is not to suggest that objectivity in description is an unworthy goal. We should be clear, however, that true neutrality is an impossible aspiration, because we as archivists are individual practitioners called upon to distill the historic record through the inescapable lens of our personal worldviews. These unexamined paradigms shape our values, which determine what we collect, present, study, and name. Any ambitions we have of handling the historic record with fairness or equity must be shored up by continual self-examination, humility, and scholarly engagement. It is not a matter of *intention*. Unless we recognize the boundaries of our own intellectual territories — the cultural assumptions, spoken and unspoken, that shape the way we understand the world — how can we be trusted to describe anything “honestly”?

## Facing the harmful legacy of “archival neutrality”

In his [2016 keynote speech](#) to the National Digital Stewardship Alliance, Bergis Jules asked whether archivists are ready to confront the fact that our professional practices have upheld, and even facilitated, the institutionalized dehumanization of Black people, indigenous peoples, immigrants, trans and gender-nonconforming people, and other marginalized communities. Michelle Caswell [draws our](#)

[attention](#) to the phenomenon of “symbolic annihilation” in archives, the process by which archivists contribute to the omission or erasure of historically marginalized groups in the archives.

Assuming rather charitably that our profession is *willing* to confront this failing, how can we do better? This is the question I want to frame. In other words, how do we equip individual archivists to recognize and reprogram their internal cultural biases? How do we decolonize professional practices and standards to correct for centuries of rote exclusion?

What Jarrett Drake [calls](#) a “radically inclusive historical record” will not happen by accident. We must address the ideological foundations of description. As Mark Matienzo emphasized in [his address](#) to the 2015 Library Information Technology Association forum, archival descriptions and metadata are yet “another space in which ideology and systematic oppression are likely to be reproduced.” Or, as Howard Zinn [told us](#) in 1970:

*“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.”*

## **The hegemony of the status quo**

In contrast to the rallying cry of “it depends,” archival programs tend to assume that description is a one-size-fits-all venture. We establish and teach a “neutral” vocabulary and narrative style that conforms to the expectations of the hegemonic default — white, male, heterosexual, gender-normative, upper-middle class, Global North — an allegedly blank canvas against which any deviation will contrast. So a man practicing architecture will be described simply as “an architect,” because our unspoken assumption of “architect” is male. Meanwhile, a woman practicing architecture will be described as “a woman architect” or a “female architect”, or most cringe-inducingly, a “gendered architect.”

The default is rarely described. In fact, archivists who go out of their way to name the unnamed are seen as activists. Those who defy Western linguistic norms and information protocols are seen as radical, even partisan. But no matter how comfortable it feels to uphold the status quo (palatable, euphemistic, even vague descriptions of Great Men and Important Events), this is a political act. Returning to Howard Zinn’s [1970 SAA address](#), we see that *“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.”*

## Towards a “humanized” craft

If we are not making conscious and collective efforts to rectify these exclusionary tendencies, we will continue to perpetuate them in our descriptions (and consequently, in the historic record that we manage). When custodial institutions do concern themselves with the ethics of representation in archival description, they often place the onus on individual archivists (or paraprofessionals and student workers) to “get” the community in question.

In this respect, it is well worth our time to consider who is doing the describing. I invite you to look at the representation here on the stage. We appear to embody the demographic norms of our profession: younger, white-presenting, gender-normative, academic archivists of middle or upper-middle class. And yet we are collectively expected (and expecting) to interpret and aggregate the cultural experiences of all these different communities who make up the fabric of the United States.

*What qualifies us to do this work?* I would argue that, by and large, archivists are not professionally or pedagogically equipped to move beyond the unspoken status quo. This skill is simply not taught — inclusive description continues to be framed as radical or niche work. This is a critical failure of our graduate education, our standards, and our systems. A radically inclusive historic record requires us to make progress on all three fronts.

## Interrogating the Unnamed Norm

In a [2016 presentation](#) at the Museum of Modern Art on the topic of *Invisible Defaults and Perceived Limitations*, Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez argued that:

*“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, which, in turn, influences the outcomes of our processes, and the way we provide access to, and (mis)represent, information.”*

How does an aspiring archivist develop such critical awareness? As Fobazi Ettarh [pointed out](#) in a 2013 post on intersectional librarianship, few library schools offer (much less require) coursework in cultural competency or diversity. Even fewer programs challenge their students to study comparative knowledge systems and values. This curriculum is also missing from our continuing education workshops, although new programs are under development.

## Models for Consideration

With that deficiency in mind, I do want to highlight programs and professionals who are (in my mind) moving the field forward. The Knowledge River Institute at the University of Arizona's School of Information has profoundly influenced the way cultural heritage and sensitivity is taught at the graduate level. The program itself focuses on Latinx and Native American cultural issues in information studies, but all students in the broader school of information learn about a spectrum of ethnic perspectives throughout their classes. We have seen the success of the Mukurtu content management system, which was built to prioritize indigenous knowledge protocols and support parallel descriptions by community members and external scholars.

The South Asian American Digital Archive and the People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland demonstrate the value of community driven description. T-Kay Sangwand, Isto Huvila, and Kate Theimer, among others, have advanced our understanding of participatory archives. We can also learn from librarian colleagues like Emily Drabinski and Netanel Ganin, who interrogate cataloging standards and challenge us to consider what and who remains unnamed. I have been particularly inspired by the work of the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections and the Black Metropolis Research Consortium to surface hidden collections through survey instruments. At Virginia Tech, we are preparing to launch a similar project this summer.

## Steps toward inclusive description

In a [2016 presentation](#) to the Radcliffe Workshop on Technology & Archival Processing, Jarrett Drake explored the colonial origins and shortcomings of *provenance* as a core principle of archival description. He challenged us to think beyond the narrow confines of our current practice and imagine new strategies for giving voice to traditionally marginalized groups in the records they helped create. As I wrap up my presentation, I want to share a key quote from his presentation:

*“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.”*

So, with Jarrett's prescription as a framework, here's where I get a bit "radical." If archivists have any hope of contributing to a radically inclusive historical record, we must make a fundamental change. I want to see the day where inclusive and community-driven description is no longer radical, but mainstream. I want to see new professionals enter the field with basic cultural competency about the knowledge protocols, definitions, and information needs of the diverse communities they serve.

This kind of change will take more than a few archivists on the fringes. We need to train up a generation of archivists to overcome the descriptive status quo and engage in meaningful debate with colleagues outside of our disciplinary and geographic silos. And that will require a meaningful shift of graduate school curriculum. I suspect that innovation will follow education and standards will be adapted to reflect these innovations. That's one way we *could* get there. But are we willing to take those steps? Thank you.

## **Selected Resources and Additional Readings**

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