

Fleckner Revisited: Reflections on Being an Archivist, Then and Now

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“Deep in the archives parlayin new ways to get my bank bigger.”
—Ice-T

Who an archivist is as well as what an archivist does has long remained an enigma.¹ There’s always conversation, contestation, and complication regarding what it means to be an archivist, what constitutes an archive, and how archival work will continue to take shape in the future. John Fleckner delivered the presidential address titled “‘Dear Mary Jane’: Some Reflections on being an Archivist,” at the fifty-fourth Society of American Archivists (SAA) annual meeting in August of 1990. In his epistolary address, he centered the talk on correspondence between himself and Mary Jane Appel, a recent college graduate and interested potential recruit for library school. In the address, Fleckner ruminates on Mary Jane’s questions on how he became an archivist, what it meant to be an archivist, and his satisfaction with the profession.

Fleckner’s quest to find a *métier* that would be intellectually and spiritually fulfilling in addition to enabling him to provide for his family is not unfamiliar with what most young professionals hope to gain from a career. After all, being intellectually, spiritually, and financially grounded in one’s career creates space for other types of joys, interests, and endeavors. What was true then, and remains true today, is the need for America to rethink how we prepare young people to have meaningful careers that are both financially and intellectually rewarding.² Still, Fleckner’s decision to pursue a career in archives and his belief that it would be, at minimum, financially fulfilling immediately brought to mind the lyric from Ice-T’s “Return of the Real” that serves as this essay’s epigraph.

Previously, the domain of under-employed historians, what we now refer to as “archival studies,” began to more closely align with library science in the 1980s,

¹ Alex H. Poole and Ashley Todd- Diaz, “‘I’m not a very good visionary’: Challenge and Change in Twenty-First Century North American Archival Education,” *Archival Science* 22 (March 2022): 585–616. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s10502-022-09389-0.pdf?pdf=button>

² Gary J. Beach, *The US Technology Skills Gap: What Every Technology Executive Must Know to Save America’s Future* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 3.

such that most professional archival jobs now require a master of library and information science degree. By the 1990s, library and information studies departments (rather than history departments) began to confer doctoral degrees on scholars firmly rooted in the archival tradition.³ Before these disciplines began to align, Fleckner, then a historian who was impacted by the dismal job prospects of history faculty members in the 1970s, began to ponder career alternatives. Curiosities about alternative careers inspired him to seek out advice from a career counselor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison—whose office happened to be situated across the street from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The counselor affirmed Fleckner’s feelings and encouraged him to instead apply to the newly created graduate program in archives administration. Connecting with prominent faculty member F. Gerald Ham, archivist, educator, and former SAA president, Fleckner was further galvanized to explore the archives profession, and his hands-on experience in archival work sealed his fate.

While there are many pathways into the archives profession, not many current or would-be archivists share Fleckner’s experience of what he describes as “an accident of good guidance” (p. 9) from a college career counselor. However, like Fleckner, I too owe my pathway into information science, specifically archival studies, to good guidance. Before undergrad, I had not considered the archives profession, nor had I heard of the term *archivist*.⁴ It was not until my final year of college while conducting research for my senior thesis that I began to develop what would become an enriching mentoring relationship with university archivist, Michael Campbell, that the word, meaning, and practice of being an archivist would become familiar.

Admittedly, my career path was a bit myopic as I had a particular interest in the discipline of Black studies, the career path in academia it would afford, and how my expertise could be of service to the communities I belong to. Campbell helped to expand my thinking on how Black studies and archival studies—in addition to other disciplines—were intrinsically connected. Through better understanding the work and purpose of archives, I began to see how a myriad of works, interests, and passions centered on representational collecting, oral history, performance, art, education, and preservation could be possible.

Eager to learn and explore the career possibilities that pursuing a master of library and information science in archives could offer, my university archivist coordinated an internship with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee for me to try the profession on for size. Working with information professionals like Krystyna Matusiak, Ellen Engseth, and Amy Cooper Cary, I was immersed in the world of archives that summer. Splitting my time between working at the UW-Milwaukee Libraries in the digital collections on the award-winning civil rights project, *March*

³ Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (London: Routledge, 2021), 15.

⁴ SAA *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, “Archivist,” accessed December 20, 2022, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archivist.html>. SAA’s *Dictionary of Archives Terminology* defines *archivist* as an individual responsible for records of enduring value. I intentionally selected the second definition of archivist because it is more inclusive.

on *Milwaukee*, and working at the Milwaukee County Historical Society on 18th and 19th-century coroners reports, I began to make sense of, at least on its surface, the breadth and depth of archival work and what it meant to be an archivist.

Fleckner summarizes the responsibilities of an archivist as: “Part science, part art, and—when done properly—part showmanship, our ability to quickly understand and evaluate the record—especially when it is old, large, or complex—is a unique facet of our craft. So too is our ability to satisfy research inquiries by applying our complex understandings of how and why the historical record is created” (p. 11). Archival science is a systematic body of theory that supports the practice of identifying, acquiring, authenticating, preserving, and providing access to records of continuing value.⁵ While there is a science, method, and art to the production of archival work, it is through critically examining and challenging archival theory that we become best positioned to shift the archival paradigm as professionals and in practice.

Opportunities to create, tease out, and interrogate new frameworks—in and across industries—expands the possibility of records and how we work and collaborate as professionals to care for them. Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez et al. shares that “there are ‘better ways for humans to move’ and better ways for us to move as a profession.”⁶ In the spirit of collaboration and inclusivity, Fleckner’s address invites us to consider the “better” through imagination. How can archival theory be used to guide archival professionals from systems of oppression and exclusion to imagine more democratic and inclusive practices? Michelle Caswell writes that “by imagining what does not yet exist, but might if we collectively will it, I am trying to extricate archival theory and practice from the constraints of the oppressive systems in which it is rooted and for which it has been a tool.”⁷ This should be a shared ambition among all archivists.

Terry Eastwood asks, “what is the purpose of theory in the scheme of building knowledge about archives?”⁸ In the thirty-plus years since Fleckner’s address, the concept and ideas that grounded older paradigms of archival theory and work have been called into question, shifted, and expanded by current archival scholars and practitioners. Fleckner speaks to the imaginative work of the archivist, the practice of active listening and engaging with records, and the openness needed to be led by records’ possibilities to serve, document, and evidence the past. Fleckner also shares that even in this critical and imaginative work that lends itself to helping reconstruct the past and to imagine the future research records might support, there was, as he describes it, “a well-defined task to accomplish, a product to produce, techniques

⁵ SAA *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*, “Archival Science,” accessed December 11, 2022, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archival-science.html>.

⁶ Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith, “An Introduction to Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (March 2022): 7, <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.171>.

⁷ Caswell, *Urgent Archives*, 12.

⁸ Terry Eastwood, “What Is Archival Theory and Why Is It Important?,” *Archivaria* (1994): 122.

and methods for proceeding, and standards against which my work would be judged” (p. 10).

The task of production in archives paired with the measure of technical skill desired to accomplish archival projects often overshadows the purpose of the work and the labor performed by both MLIS and non-MLIS degree-holding practitioners, especially those outside of academia, government, or corporate institutions and organizations. Archival theorist Louise Craven reminds us that archival endeavors are often much too focused on the “how” rather than the “why” of what being an archivist and archival work entails.⁹ She further shares:

Critical analysis of what archives actually are and what an archivist actually does, in a philosophical sense, remains patchy: enthusiastically embraced by some courses, completely passed over by others. At the same time, there is little recognition within the wider profession that any post-diploma development would be beneficial—little opportunity then during an archivist’s career to develop any detailed understanding of the why, rather than the how, of being an archivist.¹⁰

Prioritizing the “how” of the work can perhaps, amongst many things, be attributed to how graduate programs, particularly at the master’s level, prepare archival professionals.

My first semester of library school and subsequently my decision to enter the archives profession revealed to me the scarcity of Black and Brown archivists, and how my experience as a Black queer woman would require me to show up as more than just an individual responsible for records of enduring value. I was committed to spending my career confronting, challenging, and subverting aspects of the archival mission and practice that have failed to leave space for meaningful critique of the exclusionary practices experienced by non-white students, professionals, and record creators. Very early in my career I decided my work would center and prioritize marginalized communities, strive for equity in who gets historicized, and expand the idea and concept of what it meant to be an archivist. Further, my positionality as a Black queer archivist took root in grad school and blossomed into the perspective that whether through theory or practice, archival work is most radical, impactful, and mission-filled when it is decolonial, collaborative, imaginative, and less concerned with output, product, and the “howness” of the work.

My summary experience as a graduate student, early careerist, and now mid-career professional remains aligned with how Jarrett Drake describes the purpose of the archival profession in “I’m Leaving the Archival Profession: It’s Better This Way.” Here, Drake shares that “the purpose of the archival profession is to curate the past,

⁹ Louise Craven, *What Are Archives?: Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

not confront it; to entrench inequality, not eradicate it; to erase black lives, not ennoble them.”¹¹ There are gaps in the curriculum, which, whether by design or general oversight, limit the ability to imagine new ways of doing archival work, who can be included in the work, and the spaces and places the work can be activated. Further, the lack of imaginative discourse in archival studies programs leaves gaps in our understanding of how record creation, record keeping, and archives document and serve a broader purpose to humanity. In my experience, library schools tended to place a more focused emphasis on traditional archival record-keeping practices and information management, while interests, initiatives, and discussions that center on community, cultural, and historical topics remained at the periphery. There are reasons to believe, though, that the perspectives of and experiences at library schools, and in the broader profession, are changing: in recent work, Craig Gauld offered that:

The area of archival studies today transcends the professional field of archival science. It encompasses an ever-broadening array of disciplinary discussions and methodological approaches that are identifying, critiquing and addressing the shifting social, cultural, philosophical, and political, as well as the technological imperatives of recordkeeping and remembering in the twenty-first century.¹²

Ernst Posner started the first formal archival education program in the US at American University in 1940.¹³ At the time of Fleckner’s address, the formal education programs for archivists in the US were only fifty years old, and in comparison to its partner field of library science, still in its infancy; they were also built upon a foundation of philosophies, research, and guidance of white men. In UW-Milwaukee’s Foundations of Library Science, two fast facts that were revealed early to me were how overwhelmingly white the library profession is and how archival decisions regarding appraisal and collecting had by and large been from the lens of white privilege, which in turn creates systemic silence and erasure of non-white, non-heterosexual, and perhaps even non-Christian record creators. Bergis Jules offers that to push back against the silence and erasure in the archival profession we need to talk about a few things, including the unbearable whiteness of our profession and why that’s dangerous for Black lives, Brown lives, Native lives, and Trans lives.¹⁴ When in conversation with persons of color, specifically Black

¹¹ Jarrett M. Drake, “I’m Leaving the Archival Profession: It’s Better This Way,” *Medium* (On Archivy, June 26, 2017), <https://medium.com/on-archivy/im-leaving-the-archival-profession-it-s-better-this-way-ed631c6d72fe>.

¹² Craig Gauld, “Interdisciplinarity and Archives—Editorial,” *Archives and Records* 42, no. 1 (May 2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2021.1901676>.

¹³ Jeannette Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel, “‘Are we there yet?’ Professionalism and the Development of an Archival Core Curriculum in the United States,” *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* (Spring 2005): 100, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40323864>.

¹⁴ Bergis Jules, “Confronting Our Failure of Care Around the Legacies of Marginalized People in the Archives,” *Medium* (blog), November 11, 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivy/confronting-our-failure-of-care-around-the-legacies-of-marginalized-people-in-the-archives-dc4180397280>.

people, who are curious about an archives career, the joy derived from said career, and financial prospects in the profession, it is always important to make this reality known.

However, despite this, there are members within the archives community who are invested in creating collaborative communities of support, who enact social justice in archival work, and who have common interests in serving and documenting marginalized communities. Groups, organizations, and collectives such as We Here, the Archivists of Color Roundtable, South Asian American Digital Archive, Black Memory Workers, Archivists Supporting Artists, The Blacktivists, The Gates Preserve, Archival Alchemy, Atlanta Black Archives Alliance, Build Your Archive, Shift Collective, and the Nomadic Archivists Project are but a sample of folks doing transformative work.

Revisiting the aforementioned Ice-T quote, unless an archival professional ventures into management and administration or lands an opportunity with a few select corporate or government entities, chances are slim that one will find themselves parlaying new ways to get their bank bigger by way of the archives. When making the decision to pursue a graduate or professional degree, regardless of discipline, oftentimes there are financially or mentally taxing burdens. Fleckner considered being a history faculty member as an economic liability, but in many ways, pursuing an MLIS can also be an economic liability. Today, job prospects are few, permanent positions are hard to procure, and the field is incredibly competitive. This is even more true for persons of color. According to data from SAA, the most recent of which was published in 2022, about 4.5% of professional archivists in the US identify as Black.¹⁵ Beyond the financial and mental aspects, persons of color—or in my experience, a queer Black person—often experience othering and discomfort and are made to expend too much emotional labor to successfully navigate library education programs or long-term archival careers.

Fleckner's professional contributions, scholarship, and oft-revisited presidential address continues to be essential, valued, and applauded in the archival profession. Guided by his unique experience, Fleckner's ability to speak to the beauty of archival work and the possibilities of records, while also calling to attention the overlooked narratives of marginalized communities and non-traditional practitioners who challenge dominant perspectives, demonstrates the importance of critique, and how it helps to analyze, evaluate, expand, and humanize our work.

However, if Fleckner's address was given today, it would need to call out by more critically and specifically naming the marginalized communities who suffer most from archival silences and erasures, and those of us who suffer as practitioners. This is especially important because whenever we name things, we structure

¹⁵ Makala Skinner and Ioana Hulbert, "A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey Report," Ithaka S+R, August 22, 2022, 67, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.317224>.

consciousness, and “language releases the unknown from limbo.”¹⁶ Gone are the days where we can willingly unknow or remain unattuned to the potential and very real tradition of violence and harm that engaging in archival work and the archival profession has on the psyche, spirit, and body.

Additionally, if the address was given today, other topics that would be relevant to include would be vocational awe, job scarcity, and the fact that most library and archives workers are not paid a livable wage. Fleckner’s address would also benefit from including a critique of performative gestures of DEI initiatives in libraries and archives in the aftermath of the 2020 murder of George Floyd. Perhaps most importantly, the address would discuss how archivists have a social and political responsibility to reject professionalism and neutrality, as reminded by Howard Zinn,¹⁷ and to know that neither professionalism nor the act of being neutral serves the profession. Zinn describes professionalism as being a form of social control and the act of total immersion in one’s craft and being so absorbed in the day-to-day routine that there is a failure to critically consider how skill, or perceived lack thereof, plays into the entire scheme.

So, we end as we began. Satisfaction with archival work is possible. However, we must be honest about how systemic barriers prevent us from seeing and confronting complexities within the archival profession. Looking forward, we must develop a collective understanding on the state of the profession, critically examine and dismantle power structures that disadvantage marginalized professionals and user groups, and allow truth and newness—new professionals, new knowledge, new collaboration across discipline and industry, and new theory—to shift and guide the future of archival work.

¹⁶ Larry Chang ed., *Wisdom for the Soul: Five Millennia of Prescriptions for Spiritual Healing* (Washington, D.C.: Gnosophilia Publishers, 2006), 477. Quote by Marilyn Ferguson from her book *The Aquarian Conspiracy*.

¹⁷ Howard Zinn, “Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest,” *The Midwestern Archivist* 2, no. 2 (1977): 16, https://minds.wisconsin.edu/bitstream/handle/1793/44118/MA02_2_3.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y.