

Presidential Address

"Dear Mary Jane": Some Reflections on Being an Archivist

JOHN A. FLECKNER



John A. Fleckner gave this presidential address at the fifty-fourth annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists in Seattle on 30 August 1990.

F. Gerald Ham, retired state archivist at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, introduced him on that occasion with these words:

In early 1971 a gangly graduate student-wearing a locomotive engineer's cap-came into my office. He inquired if there was a future in archives for a budding historian with a growing family to feed. He soon took over directing the thirteen-member archival network affiliated with the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and, with the help of others, made the Area Research Center system a national model. After twelve years at Wisconsin, in 1983 John became the first director of the newly formed archival program at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. He has held that position to the present.

*Among John's most significant contributions to our profession are his role in fostering cooperation, in helping other archives help themselves, and in promoting the notion that wider use of archives by a broader clientele is good for the health of a democratic society. His 1976 article on "Cooperation as an Archival Strategy" helped define and broaden the concept of interinstitutional collaboration. A few years later he organized a conference on archival networks and edited the resulting 1982 special "archival networks" issue of the *Midwestern Archivist*, which has become a standard reference.*

*While in Wisconsin, John had worked with several groups of Native Americans to develop their own archives. This work was the seedbed for the SAA manual, *Tribal Archives: An Introduction*, for which he received the Waldo G. Leland Prize in 1985. Earlier he had published another manual, *Archives and Manuscripts: Surveys*.*

*His role in promoting wider use is best evidenced by his work as one of the original members of the Task Force on Goals and Priorities. In the report, *Planning for the Profession*, his guiding hand is seen throughout the chapter on promoting wider use. John went on to chair the *Committee on Goals and Priorities*.*

The real roots to John's contributions to our profession lie in his deep and abiding interest and concern for others-extending to his colleagues in the workplace, to the broader profession, and to all others because of their human dignity and equality.

THIS ADDRESS IS WRITTEN in the form of three letters to a recent college graduate who spent nearly a year as a volunteer and intern in the Archives Center of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. For Mary Jane Appel the year was an opportunity to experience archival work firsthand and to consider her future before entering graduate school. For me, our conversations were an occasion to recollect and reflect on my own career choices and on the archival mission.

Dear Mary Jane:

You asked me how I became an archivist. Really, it was elegantly uncomplicated. After too many years in graduate school, pursuing a vague notion of teaching college-level history, I recognized that university jobs weren't to be found, even if I somehow managed to complete a dissertation. I recognized too that moving office furniture—my latest in a string of minimum-wage jobs—helped to feed my small family and to nurture my identification with the proletariat, but starved my mind and spirit.

Still, I was so naive that it took a University career counselor to recognize that my history background might be anything other than an economic liability. Leaning back in her chair, she pointed out her office window to the State Historical Society of Wisconsin just across the street, and she directed me to a recently established graduate program in archives administration. The instructor—yes, it was Gerry Ham—would make no promises about the prospects for a job, but with a sly smile he offered that all his previous students were working. I didn't need a weatherman—as they said in those days, the early 1970s—to tell me which way the wind was blowing.

So, it was an accident in good guidance that got me in the door. But it was the experience of doing archival work—beginning with simplest class exercises and then a formal internship—that sealed it for me.

I loved the combination of handicraft and analytical work and I loved the intense, intimate contact with the "stuff" of history. Before I completed my internship, I knew I wanted to be an archivist. I never considered the long-term prospects, the career ladders, or the alternatives. No, I didn't visualize my future at all.

As a graduate student, of course I had done some research in archives—at the Library of Congress, the College of William and Mary, and especially the State Historical Society. But the archivists had taken all the fun out of it—the materials were antiseptically foldered, boxed, and listed. Wheeled out on carts, they were like cadavers to be dissected by first-year medical students. On occasion, perhaps, I even donned white gloves. The documents always seemed lifeless.

Now, as a would-be archivist, they thrilled me. Of course, now I was in charge of these would-be archives. I would evaluate their significance, determine their order, describe their contents, and physically prepare them for their permanent resting places. Still, it was not so much this heady feeling of control that awed me but more the mystery, the possibilities of the records themselves. Unlike the research forays of my graduate student days, I now came to the records without preconceived questions and I didn't judge them solely by their contributions to my puny research interests. Now I didn't have to ignore those portions that fell outside my research design. No, the records could speak to me in whatever voices my curious ears could hear, with whatever messages I could understand.

I recall my first collection as an intern, the first I would take charge of from beginning to end—is it possible I still remember this more than twenty years later, like a first date? It was the records of a local settlement house. The building itself had been razed, a casualty of 1960s urban renewal. I knew nothing of the settlement

house, although I lived nearby and could still see remnants of the Italian-American neighborhood it once served. Of the collection I especially remember the photographs, some of them taken for a neighborhood garden contest. Old men in undershirts and women in house dresses, amidst great clusters of tomato vines, stared out at me from four decades before. And the minutes and reports, dutifully prepared by the students and imitators of Jane Addams, with their predictable WASP views, recorded a world they had come to make over and which now, only a few decades later, had vanished.

It was my job, I knew, to be imaginative in listening to these records. My judgments would be critical to building paths to them for generations of researchers, across the entire spectrum of topics, and into unknown future time. Pretty heady stuff for someone who had devoted much of his-admittedly quite brief-adult life to writing term papers for required courses. (Years later I still was crushed to learn that despite my best efforts and great enthusiasm the collection had to be entirely reprocessed-a learning experience for both intern and supervisor.)

The archival enterprise held another attractive feature for me. For all the opportunity to reconstruct the past captured in these documents and to imagine the future research they might support, I had a well-defined task to accomplish, a product to produce, techniques and methods for proceeding, and standards against which my work would be judged. There was rigor and discipline; this was real work. And, as good fortune would have it, I soon was getting paid to do it.

Well, Mary Jane, this has gone on perhaps too long but your questions brought back a rush of recollections.

Sincerely,
John

Dear Mary Jane:

Your question about the satisfactions of being an archivist gives me some pause.

Like most folks, I suppose, I go off to my job each morning with little thought to what it is that sustains my enthusiasm, in this case for some twenty years. Perhaps these reflections will convey to you, and even reveal to me, something of what being an archivist means.

Some background. My father and my grandfather were, among other things, craftsmen, skilled machinists. Whether for lack of aptitude or—I suspect—in quiet rebellion, I turned away from industry to more academic interests. But who knows better than archivists that our pasts-personal and communal-are never left entirely behind. And how fitting, then, that today my mastery of the craft of "doing archives" should be so important to my sense of personal and professional identity.

I didn't become a skilled archivist overnight, of course. After an introductory class and an internship, I served, in effect, an extended apprenticeship (although we never called it that and only now do I recognize what it really was). Senior colleagues, whose critical attention to my work was never clouded by our warm personal relationships, honed my skills. In those ancient days, before word processing, I rewrote and retyped finding aids, memoranda, and reports until I met their high standards. I accompanied my colleagues to courthouses, university campuses, attics, and basements. And they stood over my shoulder as I analyzed records, proposed processing plans, and replied to reference inquiries. In a spirit of personal generosity and professional pride, they passed on to me their craft and their wisdom. I wish I had been as grateful then as I am now.

I began to understand the payoff for all this attention when I ventured out on my own. The Crawford County courthouse in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, stands out in memory. My task was to survey a great jumble of nineteenth-century court records-some of them among the oldest in the state. Stored in a damp basement, the

records were adjacent to the prison cell in which the Winnebago Indian leader Red Bird had died in 1828. A single naked light bulb revealed the iron manacles still hanging from the walls of the tiny rooms. It was an eerie place and a true archival challenge. But I mustered my archival knowledge and trusted my budding archival instincts, and I succeeded in making sense of the records, producing an intelligible survey report, and thereby initiating a long process that eventually saved some of these treasures.

Since then I have exercised, and expanded, my archival skills in many locations—although very few have been as exotic and unpleasant as the Crawford County courthouse basement. And, on many of these occasions, I have been taken aback by the awe that the ordinary practice of archival techniques can inspire in nonarchivists. 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. Perhaps in modesty, or perhaps because we devalue the everyday and familiar, we fail too often to appreciate our unique archival skills and capabilities.

Most often, of course, my exercise of archival mastery has no audience. I smile only to myself at how quickly I recognize a pattern of arrangement in a complex body of papers and how I determine the correct provenance of a misplaced file. No one else will fully appreciate the concise accuracy of my well-constructed scope note. And, like a surgeon, I do bury my mistakes: the unidentified negatives, left behind for disposal and only later fully appreciated; the series misinterpreted and scheduled for destruction. Successful archivists relish their unseen accomplishments and learn from

them; they don't brood over their mistakes, seen or unseen.

Mary Jane, you've noticed that these days precious little of my time is spent appraising, arranging, or describing archives. Is it nostalgia for "real" archival work that sustains me now, you might ask (if you were less discreet)? Well, as manager and administrator, much of the satisfaction is secondhand. The funding proposal I help to write and to massage through the bureaucracy enables David—with temporary staff—to turn an embarrassing backlog problem into an important research resource. With my advice and assistance Barbara scrounges time from our in-house editor and designer, coordinates staff review of her narrative text, selects illustrations, and the Archives Center finally has a brochure announcing its program and services. Fath and I pore over a potential donation, as she reflects on its appropriateness to our collection. A consensus emerges and she carries through with the acquisition.

Often, my role in all this is only to facilitate the work of others: clearing road-blocks in "the system," recognizing and encouraging good work, coordinating efforts. At other times I represent the Archives Center and its fifteen staff members in the complex and unending rituals of budget and policy planning that are the soul of the modern bureaucracy. And, at appropriate moments, I lead—most often, I hope, by example; least often by direct command. My leadership—once again, I hope—sets larger goals and standards and motivates and facilitates my colleagues' efforts. Some days it doesn't work so well. We have our crises of confidence and our failings out. Yet, in the long run I know it does work. We have created a viable archival program. Historical records are preserved and used. We have the support of our colleagues (and the respect of our competitors). The individual efforts of dozens of people combine to achieve our goals. It is a different satisfaction from the exercise

of my individual professional skills to achieve mastery. I like them both.

Sincerely,
John

Dear Mary Jane,

As I reread my letter to you about the pleasures of mastering archival practice, I realize it neglects a critical source of the satisfactions I find in my archival career. As a professional archivist, I have joined a community of colleagues who share not just a common occupation but a common set of values and commitments. We join in this profession in mutual self-interest and in the pursuit of the larger public interests that we espouse.

This notion of "profession" is much debated these days and much abused in the public parlance. After all, what do we make of "professional" wrestling except that it is done in public for large amounts of money? Well, we archivists rarely qualify on either score, but we do have many of the other manifestations: a journal long on footnotes and short on photographs; annual conventions where we stay up too late (or at least we did when we were younger), and an esoteric jargon requiring a regularly revised glossary. More seriously, we do share a body of common knowledge, practices, and standards for our work. Indeed, much of our expanding professional literature, our educational endeavor, our certification program, and our committee work is devoted to these matters.

But the notion of a "profession" also harkens back to a more old-fashioned idea: the idea that as "professionals" we have something to "profess," something more than devotion to the latest techniques. And further, that in this act of "professing" we tie our own self-interest to the well-being of the larger society so that our "profession" is not merely that of a self-interested clique, but, instead, a legitimate claim on behalf of the greater public interest.

Well, Mary Jane, you might ask what, then, do I profess as an archivist? Most simply put: that what we archivists do is essential to the well-being of an enlightened and democratic society. No, not every step or each day is so vital, but the sum of all our efforts makes a critical difference. Of course, like all grand and abstract claims, this one is at once self-evident and layered with complex meanings. In my two decades in the profession, I have begun to discover something of its essential truth for me.

The archival record—and here I mean the total of what we look after as well as the underlying principles of records keeping—is a bastion of a just society. In a just society, individual rights are not time-bound and past injustices are reversible. Thus the archival record has sustained the claims of Native American peoples to lands and liberties once unjustly denied them. And the archival record will help to secure justice for the victims of government actions forty years ago downwind from the Hanford, Washington, nuclear installation.

On a larger scale—beyond the rights of individuals—the archival record serves all citizens as a check against a tyrannical government. We need look no further than the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals to see that without the documentary record there could have been no calling to account, no investigation, no prosecution. And that record—the tapes, the documents, and all the rest—stands as witness in the future to those who would forget or rewrite that past.

The absence of outright scandal and of irreversible injustice is no guarantee of an enlightened and democratic society. The archival record assures our rights—as individuals and collectively—to our ownership of our history. As archivists who maintain the integrity of the historical record, we guard our collective past from becoming the mere creation of "official" history. Fortunately, today there is little threat to us from a centralized Orwellian

tyranny. Yet the continuing struggles of individuals and groups neglected or maligned by the dominant culture remind us that central governments are not the only oppressors. African Americans, Native Americans, and others are now recreating from the surviving historical record a sense of their historical peoplehood too frequently denied to them in the past. And they are struggling also to assure that the historical record in the future does greater justice to the richness and truths of their pasts.

The history of the United States is uniquely one in which we—as individuals, as ethnic groups, as localities, as generations—continually reinvent ourselves and then, like Huck Finn, light out for new territory. All this places a special burden on the American archivist. Our society values the present and the future above all. And yet, from time to time, we turn back, almost in panic or desperation, to rediscover and rethink where we have come from. Today, for example, we ask how the nation fared in a previous era of massive immigration and how we brought the natural environment to its current precarious state. If we are successful as archivists, the historical record will speak for this past in a full and truthful voice. And, as a society, we will be wiser for understanding who and where we have been.

As I write these words, I am struck—as always—by the magnitude of our profession's ambitions and responsibilities in contrast to our miniscule numbers. And then I recall—as I usually do—that it is precisely the breadth of our professional values that ties us to a wider community of professions, institutions, and individuals. Our allies are all those who struggle to understand and protect the past for the benefit of the future. We are, from this enlarged perspective, truly the partners of librarians, museum professionals, folklorists, archae-

ologists, and all the others who preserve the cultural record in its material form. We are the colleagues of political leaders and scholars, of jurists and journalists, of architects and artists who would be faithful to the integrity of the past in their interpretation of it.

Well then, this is my joy in doing archives. To be, at once, a master practitioner—with esoteric knowledge and uncommon skills—and a participant in the most profoundly and universally human of all undertakings: to understand and preserve the past on behalf of the future.

Mary Jane, I would like to tell you much more about my profession: about the sense of shared commitment to the archival mission; about the spirit of generosity and collegiality; about the lifelong friendships. I would tell you, too, about the Society of American Archivists which embodies so much of the profession and through which we have accomplished so much on its behalf. And, lastly, I would tell you of my hopes for the profession: that we will overcome centrifugal forces and embrace all who care for the historical record in all its forms; that we will articulate the public interest in preservation of the record; and that we will increase public understanding and support for our essential mission.

I would like to tell you all this, but perhaps better, I invite you to join me in this profession, to share in our commitments, and to discover for yourself the larger (and smaller) meanings in what we do. If this is your calling, I assure you lifelong challenges, a sense of community through participation, good friends, and more than a few good times. Let me know; I expect to follow this path for a good while longer. I hope you will come and walk with us.

Sincerely,
John

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

By Jessica C. Neal, Records Management Project Manager, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

“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.

