



Archives in Context

Season 7 Episode 6: Lyric Evans-Hunter, Allegra Favila, and Lia Warner

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SPEAKERS

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Intro 00:10

From the Society of American Archivists, this is *Archives in Context*, a podcast highlighting archival literature and technologies and, most importantly, the people behind them.

Nicole Milano 00:28

Hi, everyone, my name is Nicole Milano, and today I am so excited to speak with three current or recent graduate students in New York University's Archives and Public History program. In addition to the theoretical and practical aspects of the two fields, the NYU program emphasizes a solid grounding in historical scholarship, intense engagement with new technologies, and close involvement with New York City's archival and public history institutions. Joining us today are Allegra Favila, Lia Warner, and Lyric Evans-Hunter. Allegra is the Exhibitions and Publications Manager at the Grey Art Gallery, NYU's fine arts museum. During her time at the museum, she has worked on exhibitions such as *Taking Shape: Abstraction from the Arab World, 1950s–1980s*, and publications such as a forthcoming volume celebrating the first twenty-five years of the Anonymous Was A Woman Award. As part of her graduate program, she is preparing to write a capstone paper discussing stewardship models for archival collections within academic institutions. Lia is a Reference and Instruction Associate at NYU's Bobst library. She is interested in archival labor practices, especially the way that archivists can work with community members to create meaning and foster historical memory. She works closely with undergraduate students and is passionate about critical information literacy, teaching with primary sources, and community engagement. Lyric is an archivist and writer living in Brooklyn. She is currently working on her capstone project as part of her graduate program, which is a history of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture's collection through its images. Welcome, all of you.

Allegra Favila, Lia Warner, and Lyric Evans-Hunter 02:06

Hi. Thank you.

Nicole Milano 02:10

So, Allegra, Lia, and Lyric, you are all in the process of either finishing up or having recently finished your archival studies. Could you tell us a bit more about how you each became interested in the archival profession?

Allegra Favila 02:22

Hi, this is Allegra Favila. I would say my first interest in archives was when I was a teenager, and I purchased a book by a scholar named Christopher Maurer. The book was *Sebastian's Arrows: Letters and Mementos of Salvador Dali and Federico Garcia Lorca*; Dali being a very well-known Spanish artist, surrealist, and Garcia Lorca being a Spanish poet who was killed in the Spanish Civil War. And this book, you know, digitized, translated, and published these materials that were previously only available to people who visited the archives of these two individuals. So, it really kind of showed me that archival material can- can illuminate these like creative partnerships, histories of these people that we really care about, in this case, two major artistic figures of the twentieth century. And this kind of showed me archival materials can expand your knowledge and create a sense of intimacy between yourself and historical figures. I did end up studying art history at Brown, and after I received my degree I worked for a short time as an archives assistant at the university's special collections, which are housed at John Hay Library. And that was my first taste of archival work, and I really loved it. And I encountered again that that sense of intimacy with someone you had never met. I will not forget; I was working on a collection of personal papers from a history professor that had worked at Brown for many decades. And in every ten sheets there was a perfectly folded Hershey's almond chocolate wrapper, perfectly preserved, and that was not saved in the archive, but even the process of going through that and seeing that this was part of someone's filekeeping process was- that kind of intimacy was really like engaging to me.

Lyric Evans-Hunter 04:25

Hi, this is Lyric Evans-Hunter. Before archives school, I was working in bookstores, and I was part of an experimental poetry community in Brooklyn, and a lot of people I knew were running small press poetry studios, publishing studios, writing or editing chatbooks, and doing their MFAs. And the notion of archives as a concept was becoming deeply embedded in the way that poets understood and wrote about ideas in the world. And we were all reading Fred Moten and Foucault and talking about the counter archive embodiment and affect resistance. And history, especially Black history, was very interesting to me. And at the same time, I was, you know, hanging out with my dad and spending a lot of time with him, talking about his life, and looking at all of the things that he's collected over his life, you know, his what you could call like a personal collection. And, you know, he's an artist, and a, and a musician. So, a lot of his material includes like a lot of audio visual formats and tons and tons of paper that, you know, told his story and, in extension, my story. So, all of these ideas were floating around in my head when the pandemic forced me to rethink my career trajectory, as it did for so many, which is how I ended up at archives school.

Lia Warner 05:57

Hi, this is Lia Warner. Finally, I guess I found my way to archives through my interest as an undergraduate in labor history. So, I went to NYU, both for undergrad and grad school, and as a labor history student, we visited the Tamiment Library and Archives at Bobst Library, and I immediately fell in love with the idea of archival work. And I have often sort of vacillated between thinking as a historian and as an archivist. And I've really had to think seriously about what sort of side I want to be on, because unfortunately, you do have to pick a side. And so, I got a job as a student at Tamiment Library. And as it was merged into the sort of unified special collections, I

continued working there until my graduate school experience, or I enrolled in graduate school and continued working there and then got my full-time job after that. So, yeah, NYU's Special Collections has been a really important part of my trajectory as sort of a scholar and an archivist professional. So, yeah, it's- it's been, it's been sort of working through the question of how I want to study materials that that I've been able to be in contact with.

Nicole Milano 07:29

It's always so fascinating to hear the many different reasons that people have coming into the archival community. I mean, ranging from your own historical research to personal family collections. It's really fascinating and kind of beautiful about the profession, the motives that people have to learn more and then want to kind of pass that on to others. So, thank you for your responses. What are some of the things about the profession today, or perhaps even what could come of the profession in the future, which are exciting to you?

Lia Warner 07:58

I might sound like I have sort of one track, but I, I'm excited about the labor element. I'm really excited about sort of this burgeoning labor movement, not only in higher ed, but also in knowledge, information, working sectors like museums and even private collections like film forum or other sort of film collections that serve the public in a bunch of different ways. I think that an issue that we'll probably talk about as it relates to, you know, historians and archivists and their historical divergence, and then coming back together, and that tension is the labor question because we're looking at the valuation of different types of labor and different ways that knowledge is created and disseminated. And we're also sort of internally within the profession talking about, you know, who gets to work with the public? What roles are siloed? What sort of structures are put in place that from the workforce sort of travel back down to the education level and model for those training to be librarians or archivists? So, I think people are really interested in talking about labor right now. I think, nationally, there have been a lot of really big victories across different sectors that are getting people interested in talking in their own workplaces about ways that they might organize and look at the power that they have as workers and starting to sort of think about themselves, not only as a professional, but as a worker. And I think it just relates back to how we do the work and how we teach people how to do the work. And, yeah, I'm really excited to see where those conversations go.

Nicole Milano 09:54

Those are all such important comments, and we think about the issue of contingent labor in our profession which has really been in discussion lately, and also the unseen labor behind a lot of the work that we do that often doesn't get recognized.

Lia Warner 10:06

Absolutely.

Lyric Evans-Hunter 10:07

Yeah, actually to lead off of that, off of what Lia is saying, because we did talk about this a lot in in class, which is to say that we had really great professors who, almost every semester, we were reading something from Michelle Caswell or Dorothy Berry. And we're often thinking about that the way that our invisible labor become

like sort of, you know, doesn't always get recognized on the other side of the reference desk, or even in, you know, the papers that are published by historians, so. But every time we did read, you know, these- these theorists and these thinkers, these intellectuals and scholars, who are- who are, you know, working in these big institutions or they're working in community archives; every time we had to read Michelle Caswell or Dorothy Berry, for me, it felt like archives was like opening up in a way that felt really specific for me being a Black woman archivist. Berry's like level-headed considerations of what it means to be a racialized, gendered person working in American institutions like really laid bare these like thorny issues that often get overlooked for these like easier workarounds that make for really good conference talks. And Caswell, you know, she's, you know, imagining what archival practice, what liberatory archival practice looks like. And I think that the more- I think that like this happening on the education level is really important for, like emerging, like, sort of, yeah, emerging archivists to like be entering the profession, like already imagining new ways for archives to be, and I think that that's super exciting. Not just critiquing the institutions, but like- but like already carving new ways for them to be.

Allegra Favila 12:19

It's interesting, because it, I'm only thinking of it in reaction to now, Lyric and Lia's comments, but I am really encouraged by the look towards radical empathy as part of archival practice, which I think, you know, is kind of in relationship to what we've already discussed. But I'm thinking about user-centered approach, subject-centered approach, thinking about who is harmed or helped by types of description, and just thinking about the holistic process of- of processing archives and everyone who's involved, even if they're not alive, or if they're not present. My initial thought was also, though, interest in how digital technologies are expanding archival efforts. I mean, archival description is going to be, I think, totally transformed by things like linked data, which are only just in their, you know, initial baby stages. I'm a huge, huge fan of the Internet Archive, and they've created a technology that's allowing institutions and individuals to archive the internet. And I think we're with- with the Internet Archive, we almost have like, almost a layperson, laypeople understanding the need to archive the internet and the fragility of- of digital information. So, I'm really always rooting for them and interested to see what they're doing.

Nicole Milano 13:52

So, now that we've discussed some of the many exciting things about the future of our profession, what are some things you find daunting?

Allegra Favila 14:01

I can jump in because it's along the same lines of my previous answer, which is the digital technologies, in the sense that something like digital asset management is a whole new sector of the archival profession that did not exist in previous decades, and it's requiring archivists to have a whole different set of skills, advanced technical skills. And part of what I really loved- have loved about the archives program at NYU is I do think they look that in the face, and they're preparing archives students for- for this change in the profession that's been brewing for, you know, since maybe 2000 or so. You know, I've taken a great number of digitally focused courses, but it's certainly changing, changing things in a way that maybe is causing a generational divide between emerging professionals and- and those that have been in the profession for some time, which can also cause maybe interpersonal struggle could be one, you know, result of the digital technology changes as well.

Lia Warner 15:08

I think like to your point about technology, it's also, like, discovery is happening in- in very new ways and is in some ways both obscuring and kind of putting the spotlight on archival institutions, institutions that, you know, create or preserve knowledge. And something that I, myself, I'm worried about is sort of attacks on intellectual freedom that not only target individual academics or groups that are supportive of different causes but also the institutions that collect and preserve knowledge. And the ways that, you know, our institutions are not necessarily prepared to take that, that heat in that spotlight. And I'm- I'm worried about both, you know, the safety of the materials but also of the people who work there. And I think it's going to be really important for our institutions to incorporate like a really holistic look at our, like, emergency plans and our long-term strategic plans and our presence to incorporate some of these new threats and- and think about how we can both protect the materials and the workers who work with that archival material.

Lyric Evans-Hunter 16:43

Yeah, for, for me, what sort of- what I find daunting, actually, I had- I had gone to a wedding last weekend, and everyone there, you know, I hadn't seen them, because I've been busy doing my schoolwork, so everyone wanted to know what I had been up to, and when I told them about archives, I had a lot of, you know, I had a lot of people really interested in- in understanding what I- what I've been doing. But, again and again, I came across this, these sorts of- the way that people understand, you know, sort of our older archival institutions as these like closed off places full of begrudging gatekeepers, which is- this is a- these are conversations we have a lot amongst us archivists. And but people who are not- people who maybe- it was a wedding full of artists and poets and people who would like to know how to use the archive, would like to feel welcome at the archive, and they don't. And, of course, this is part of the Western archival tradition, they were designed, a lot of these, especially older institutions, were designed as closed off places, as segregated places, as places that put barriers to access so that only a privileged few can enter, on purpose. And those collective memories of the archival institution are still circulating even as those very same institutions are opening up. Of course, community archives have been this great boon to both archivists and users to be these, like, places that are on the ground, working with people to serve the, you know, to serve communities, but our sort of larger, older institutions that, you know, hold a lot of our cultural memory are still thought of as these- these places that- that don't want anyone in there. And so for me, what I find daunting is going person to person one at a time kind of trying to communicate to them what we, all- all of us archivists, have been talking about for a long time, it's just, which is that we are opening up, we are sharing, we are doing our best to figure out how to be accessible, as accessible as possible. And so, it's the- it's like trying to have more and more open dialogues with not just historians but all kinds of users, all kinds of people who are just making things and thinking about things, trying to move beyond those days of privilege and exclusion. And just seeing that there's so much work to do, to continue to reach out and reach our users and make sure that those conversations that we're having are also becoming messages for the public.

Nicole Milano 19:54

All of your comments really reflect on the fact that there's so much room for growth in the archival profession, and it's refreshing for someone who's been in the profession for a while, like myself, to know that some of the new emerging archivists in the field, like yourself, are just so on point with some of the challenges that we need to tackle and- and some of these stereotypes that we need to overcome and practices we need to be better

about. And so Lyric, especially your comment about perception of archivists from those outside the profession and that user perspective really leads well into my next question. And I was really intrigued to hear about a forum you all had participated in during the fall of 2022, which was coordinated by Dr. Ellen Noonan and NYU and brought together archives and history students in conversation with each other about the two professions. Can one of you share how that forum came about? And we'd especially like to hear why each of you decided to participate in it.

Lyric Evans-Hunter 20:49

For me, I think- Lia you were with me when Ellen kind of cornered us at a, at some sort of school function. It was great, because I thought it was a fantastic idea, but I'm not really sure how she had sort of conceived of it. But I was glad that she asked us to participate.

Lia Warner 21:11

Yeah, I think it had to do with the way that some- some history MAs and PhDs at NYU are able to take our classes and really get this sort of insider perspective, but it wasn't true for the entire cohort. And the ones, the history PhDs and MAs, who were in some of our courses, I feel really benefited and- and had a lot of great insights, stimulated some great conversations. So, she was hoping to sort of bring us out of our- our silo within the department to answer questions about doing archival research, and also, maybe demystify some elements of going into other archives as- as history graduate students, and just create some sort of cross dialogue within this huge department that all have, you know, different priorities in their day to day. I'm not sure if Allegra remembers some other origins of the event.

Allegra Favila 22:24

No, I think I was gonna say something along the same lines, which is that Ellen has a great, you know, she's sitting in a position where she sees traditional history students, archives and public history students, all learning in the same space, and sometimes, you know, learning in the same classroom. And in that sense, she was able to- to assess that there is a gap between those accessing the archive and those that are maintaining the archive, you know, and as we've learned in our archival history courses, historically there was maybe more of a partnership between archivists and historians. And I think maybe this gap has really started to widen with the professionalization of the archivist in the last several decades, and maybe especially in more recent years as these access tools are created and user archivists have started to, like, change at a really rapid pace due to digital technologies. So, I think Ellen was perfectly positioned to kind of sense the landscape of history and of archives.

Nicole Milano 23:33

I was lucky enough to listen to the conversation, the recorded version after it happened, and I thought it was just great. The insights that were provided from sort of both sides of the spectrum about how the two professions could really understand each other a little bit better and maybe perhaps work together a little bit better in the future, as you said Allegra, as we have in the past. So, can you each share something that you learned as a result of the forum?

Allegra Favila 24:00

I can say, I too, I loved hearing from, you know, the history students. At that point I hadn't had any- done any classes where I was able to work with history students directly. I have now, which is great. But I would say, generally, it- it reinforced for me that access tools used in archives are unique to archives and not intuitive at all. Being in the silo as we are, we understand how they work and they feel intuitive to us, but finding aids are nonintuitive; they bear no relation to library catalogs, as we know. And in that sense, maybe it's easy to forget that part of an archivist's job could also be teaching about these access tools. So, I did, I think I came away thinking more about a user-oriented approach and taking that kind of approach in any work I do in the future.

Lyric Evans-Hunter 24:55

Yes, similar to- to Allegra I also sort of like took away from that conversation that- that users are- are continuously looking for ways to access the archives and not always, are not always finding their way, and that archivists have a lot to do to- to continue making records available and usable and accessible. For me, one great thing that came out of the forum was hearing from everyone about their various tips and strategies for using the archives, because users have had to find all these different ways to use them as well as the digital tools that were available. It might have been you, Allegra, who brought up Archive Grid, which was the first time I had ever heard of that. And I like I use it all the time. And I've taken a lot of, yeah, and I've taken a lot of those tips forward as I do my thesis which is in the realm of archival history. And I- and I think, actually, that everyone working on the technical services side of archives should- should do a little, a little history. Because being in the archives, as a user, has made me think even more carefully about how I arrange and describe records. So, that's what I took away.

Lia Warner 26:23

Yeah, I had all of those thoughts as well. It really struck me that I felt like some of the history students felt like this was the first time they had the space to talk to an archivist. And they really want to talk to us. So, I think something that's tied up in the professionalization issues that we've sort of alluded to, in terms of our separation from the archive, from the sort of realm of pure history, I guess, is that like, we- we wanted to make ourselves disappear, right? Like, we wanted to erase our interventions from the- from the documents, from the documentation, the records, and from the collection itself, in order to preserve this sort of perfect neutral trove of organic treasures for those historians to sort of go through and pull out the insights in the discoveries. And so, maybe, I think, a reaction to that in the field has been this attitude that they don't want to talk to us, they just want the stuff. And there's research that's been done that's shown that finding aids are just a means to an end, right, they're a means to facilitate discovery and access, but they don't actually give people what they really want in terms of the information they need to know about the collection. They need to know what interventions have occurred, what the positionality of the archivist who processed that collection was; everything that went into the decision making behind that- that processing endeavor. And so, I think, you know, we have this opportunity to engage in these conversations that both sides really want and would benefit from and sort of shedding that anxiety about, you know, not- not enforcing your sort of beliefs or attitudes or interpretation of the collection and leaving that sort of pure for the historian to take off is- is sort of an unhelpful one. And I think another thing, like with my sort of interest in primary source literacy, is that these conversations need to be happening more and more like before people even step into the archives, because it- it takes sort of the pressure off of that in-person interaction at the desk where you're trying to do a lot of remediation of- of these concepts and form a relationship on the fly when there's a lot of other things going on. And so, I think it was

great that this model sort of allowed for the space for both sides to come together and talk about the things that we are experiencing.

Nicole Milano 29:15

It sounds like this was just a really fruitful conversation. And, Lia, as you said, it would be great if there were space for these types of conversations to happen more in the future. So, a bit of a surprise follow-up question for all of you would be, how do you think those spaces can happen and where? So, for example, is this something you think the professions should engage in, in a formal capacity, at a conference, or is this something that should happen more in the internal workings of an archive? I would just love to get your perspectives on how that relationship can continue to improve moving forward.

Allegra Favila 29:50

I think I'm inclined to think that part of why the forum last fall was so successful was how casual it was. I almost think that if it were, say, part of an SAA annual conference or whatnot, there might not be the same kind of buy in, in the sense that, do you want to air your grievances in, you know, a professional- major professional event? So, I think, almost in a way, and it being virtual as well maybe, and more casual and conversational, contributed to being more like a safe space where tensions could be worked out.

Lia Warner 30:39

Something that I noticed at the forum was that we were hearing from researchers who did their primary archival research in other countries like in Europe. And so, we weren't really able to directly speak to those archivists, orientations, and training, because it's a completely sort of different model. So, I think it was helpful for us to be able to like talk to people who we might interact with at our university and sort of give them our perspective, but also recognize the sort of limitations of that conversation and just sort of plant the seeds. So, I think these conversations have to happen on a bunch of different levels. I think it would be great to sort of start these conversations even earlier like in an undergraduate setting. I know people like the TPS Collective do a lot of work to talk about primary source literacy and education with students of all different ages and sort of orientations. So, I think, sort of joining forces and maybe try and converse in a bunch of different ways would be really fruitful.

Lyric Evans-Hunter 31:54

Yeah, for me, that's actually, that was actually one of the interesting parts was to find out about what- what researchers and users were experiencing in both the US and elsewhere because of because- because there can be the kind of like cross dialogue of- of sort of like what's going on in US archives, as well as what's going on elsewhere in the world, and how a lot of us are kind of dealing with a lot of similar things. One thing that I did this week was sit in on a few talks at the sort of like through the Email Archiving Symposium, and it featured talks from-. There was someone who talked about archiving email at the 92NY as well as people working at the Archives Nationales in Paris and archiving email there. So, and talking about users, talking about metadata, talking about, you know, what's happening on the backend versus what's happening on the frontend. And how users are using- how archives can make using email archives work for users. And so, it's clear to me that archivists, both in the US and elsewhere, are- are having similar issues of how to best serve their users. And maybe coming across these- these issues where their users are not always aware of that work, so that work is-

still there's still a lot to be done to make it visible to them, as well as like- like continuing to have more and more conversations with users about how to use archives, as well as like having cross field conversations with scholars in other areas who are- who are using our materials and maybe not getting all of the messages that they need about- about how to use them and how to access them in person or digitally or otherwise. So, I found- I found that- that element of the conversation very interesting.

Allegra Favila 34:27

I do, thinking on it now and listening to Lyric in these comments, I'm wondering about the value of even like discipline-focused conversations. In my current position, I've spent a lot of time getting to know how artists' archives work at a very specific kind of archive, archives run by artists' estates or foundation, and I witnessed, you know, a lot of tension between these institutions and historians, art historians as well, and working- working at and accessing those types of archives is a totally different ballgame compared to like an academic or a government archive because the folks working there are really stewarding one group's or even one individual's legacy. So, you know, the priorities have really shifted. But also, these are these types of archives are really important resources for historians, especially if you're trying to create scholarship on individuals or groups that are historically marginalized, or you're not appearing in the canon, may not be documented in larger archives. So, I almost, you know, wonder about how replicating this type of conversation between archivists and historians in like a micro way like art history, or, you know, other disciplines like that.

Nicole Milano 35:45

So, now we have one final question for each of you to answer and it may be harder than your graduate capstone projects. But the question is, what superpower would you each like to have and why?

Allegra Favila 35:57

I will say, big X Men fan, probably like manipulating an element. Like, maybe not metal like Magneto, but maybe water, fire. I think clairvoyance, flying, that's a little too much power, but.

Lia Warner 36:18

I was going to say teleportation, because I thought like time travel would be too on the nose for an archivist. But I think teleportation is similarly useful and fun.

Lyric Evans-Hunter 36:34

I would love to time travel, actually, but that's, yeah.

Allegra Favila 36:39

But where would you go?

Lyric Evans-Hunter 36:41

Oh, my God, everywhere. The future, the past. I would just I would just go for it. Will it be dangerous? Yes. Am I going to run into a tough spot? Yeah, well, there's tough spots here too, so.

Nicole Milano 36:55

That is the truth. Although teleportation would help us all with the NYC Subway commute, so we might all want a little bit of that one.

Lyric Evans-Hunter 37:03

That would be nice. Yeah.

Nicole Milano 37:05

All right. Well, thank you all so much for this conversation today.

Allegra Favila, Lia Warner, and Lyric Evans-Hunter 37:09

Thank you. Thank you.

Camila Zorrilla Tessler 37:14

You've just listened to an episode of the Archives in Context podcast, the official podcast of the Society of American Archivists. Members of the podcast team include Rose Buchanan, Chris Burns, Mary Caldera, Abigail Christian, Stephanie Luke, Nicole Milano, Lolita Rowe, Camila Zorrilla Tessler, and Anna Trammell. All opinions expressed in this podcast are our own and are not reflective of a particular institution. Be sure to subscribe and listen wherever you get your podcasts or at archivesincontext.archivists.org. And join us again next time.