

Archives for All: The Importance of Archives in Society

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paper given at the 15th Congresso Brasileiro de Arquivologia, June 2008
(<http://www.aag.org.br/anaisxvcba/conteudo/resumos/plenaria1/randalljimerson.pdf>)

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Abstract

Archivists should use their power—in determining what records will be preserved for future generations and in interpreting this documentation for researchers—for the benefit of all members of society. By adopting a social conscience for the profession, they can commit themselves to active engagement in the public arena. Archivists can use the power of archives to promote accountability, open government, diversity, and social justice. In doing so it is essential to distinguish objectivity from neutrality. Advocacy and activism can address social issues without abandoning professional standards of fairness, honesty, detachment, and transparency.

Key words: archival theory, archival ethics, accountability, social justice

In my dream I am entering a temple. Its ornate façade and tall spires give me hope. I will find enlightenment here. I push open the massive door and enter. The door clangs shut behind me. I am in a dimly lit room with high windows that prevent the sunlight from reaching me. Despite the heat outside it is cool here. A security guard approaches. The temple has become a prison.

The guard tells me to surrender my pens and put my briefcase in a locker. I sit at a table, filling out forms to prove my identity. Guards and security cameras watch me constantly to prevent escape or theft. I realize that I am hungry. A young woman hands me a menu. The prison is now a restaurant.

“What do you want?” the waitress asks. The menu she hands me does not list food items, only the names of companies that sell packaged foods. “May I suggest something local?” She pulls down a menu of Brazilian specialties.

Soon a cart arrives laden with several boxes. My food must be inside. I open one box at a time – correspondence, reports, and financial ledgers. In the last box are recipes. Pastéis fritos. Sopa de palmito. Feijoada. These recipes are not food, only the promise of food.

The waitress recommends feijoada. She brings me a box filled with black beans, carne seca, pork, sweet sausage, onions, garlic, and other primary sources of nutrition. After all this time, I still have to cook my own meal.

Images of Archives

These are changing images of the archives, as sites of power. The temple reflects the power of authority and veneration. The prison wields the power of control. The restaurant holds the power of interpretation and mediation. These represent the trinity of archival functions: selection, preservation, and access. Archives are places of knowledge, memory, nourishment, and power. Archives at once protect and preserve records; legitimize and sanctify certain documents while negating and destroying others; and provide access to selected sources while controlling the researchers and conditions under which they may examine the archival record.

George Orwell recognized that archives represent power. In his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Orwell declared:

Who controls the past, controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past. ... The mutability of the past is the central tenet of Ingsoc. Past events, it is argued, have no objective existence, but survive only in written records and in human memories. The past is whatever the records and the memories agree upon. And since the Party is in full control

of all records, and in equally full control of the minds of its members, it follows that the past is whatever the Party chooses to make it.¹

Orwell repeatedly lamented the fragmentary record of the past and the resulting gaps in our knowledge of historical events. In a 1943 essay he wrote, “When I think of antiquity, the detail that frightens me is that those hundreds of millions of slaves on whose backs civilization rested generation after generation have left behind them no record whatever.”² These gaps in historical knowledge—the silences of the archives—most troubled Orwell.

Historians and others who depend on archives for information and knowledge increasingly recognize the important role of archivists. No matter how complete or reliable the records are, the role of the archivist is crucial in releasing their power. Antoinette Burton writes, “all archival sources are at once primary and secondary sources: neither raw nor fully cooked,” but both archival records and history-in-the-making.³

In his book *Archive Fever*, French philosopher Jacques Derrida finds these images of authority, power, and control inherent in the original Greek concepts of the *arkheion*, or archives. Derrida declares, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by ... access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation.”⁴ Derrida thereby unites the prevalent images of archives with the political power they convey and embody, and their importance for society.

The Illusion of Neutrality

However much they protest their impartiality and neutrality, archivists cannot avoid leaving their own imprint on these powerful sources of knowledge and identity. Since the emergence of “scientific history” in the 19th century, historians have relied on archives and other primary sources to create and buttress their interpretations of the past.

¹ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, quoted in Helen Willa Samuels, “Who Controls the Past,” *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 109. Samuels first alerted archivists to Orwell’s concern for records and memory, which I examine more fully in Chapter 3.

² Orwell, *A Collection of Essays* (Garden City, NY, 1954), 206.

³ Burton, in *Archive Stories*: 12.

⁴ Derrida, *Archive Fever*: 4n.

Through the seminar, invented in the 1830s by a German professor of history, Leopold von Ranke, professors taught the techniques of reading and dissecting historical documents.⁵ The archives provided a scientific laboratory for historical investigation. Sir Hilary Jenkinson of England stated the archivist's ideal of impartiality, neutrality, and passivity in 1922:

The Archivist's career is one of service. He exists in order to make other people's work possible. ... The good Archivist is perhaps the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces.⁶

As Elisabeth Kaplan points out, Jenkinson's appeal to 19th century ideas of positivism—even after exposure to the 20th century thinking of Einstein and Freud—seems in retrospect “stunningly reactionary.”⁷ Yet nearly a century later this is still the ideal held up to archivists by many of our colleagues. Indeed, until very recently, archivists often described themselves—proudly—as ‘the handmaidens of historians,’ Terry Cook observes. “In retrospect, that phrase is astonishing for its servility and its gender connotations.”⁸ Even if archivists were to accept the possibility of such neutrality and passivity, do we really want to be merely handmaidens to history? I hope we have higher aspirations. We certainly should have more self-respect than this.

The postmodernist perspective only recently seeped into the American archival discourse, but it has already influenced archivists' perspective on the traditional core values of archives. Postmodernism calls into question Enlightenment values such as rationality, truth, and progress, which conceal or exclude any forces that might challenge the cultural dominance of modern society's institutions.⁹ Archivists cannot be mere custodians, South African archivist Verne Harris argues, since “any attempt to be impartial, to stand above the power-plays, constitutes a choice, whether conscious or not, to replicate if not to reinforce prevailing relations of power.”¹⁰ The archivist's role unavoidably engages in politics.

⁵ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York, 1994): 73.

⁶ Hilary Jenkinson, quoted in Elisabeth Kaplan, “‘Many Paths to Partial Truths’: Archives, Anthropology, and the Power of Representation,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 215.

⁷ Kaplan, “Many paths”: 215-16.

⁸ Cook, “Remembering the Future,” in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*: 173.

⁹ Michael Fegan, quoted in Mark Greene, “The Messy Business of Remembering: History, Memory, and Archives,” *Archival Issues* 28:2 (2003-04), pp. 95-96.

¹⁰ Harris, *Archives and Justice*: 248.

Postmodern archivists have challenged five central principles of the traditional archival profession, according to Terry Cook:

1. Archivists are neutral, impartial custodians of 'Truth,' managing records according to universal, value-free theories.
2. Archives as documents and as institutions are disinterested by-products of actions and administrations.
3. The origin or provenance of records must be assigned to a single office rather than in the complex processes and multiple forms of creation.
4. The order and language imposed on records through archival arrangement and description are value-free re-creations of some prior reality.
5. Archives are (or should be) the passively inherited, natural or organic metanarrative of the state.¹¹

Postmodern archivists reject these traditional assumptions as outmoded and dangerous in modern society. They argue that archives cannot remain neutral or passive. As early as 1970 Howard Zinn, the radical historian, told an audience of American archivists that their "supposed neutrality" was "a fake." Archivists, even more than historians and political scientists, tend to see their work as a technical job, free from the nasty world of political interest; but archival collections are almost always biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, ignoring the impotent and obscure.¹²

As archivists consider their role in society, it is important to recognize that objectivity is not the same as neutrality. Commitment to honesty, fairness, and truth provide the necessary grounding in "objectivity." If we remain true to these professional and ethical values, we can responsibly engage in public policy debates and we can seek to ensure that archives document the perspectives of all segments of society. This is not "neutral" because archivists will be taking sides and bringing their professional expertise to address social problems and concerns. But it can be done objectively, by following acceptable standards of archival practice. This may require a broader definition of

¹¹ Cook, "Remembering the Future," in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*: 174.

¹² Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *Midwestern Archivist* 2:2 (1977): 20-21.

archival ethics. Such a definition should include active participation in ensuring the rights of all citizens in society.

Since the era of ancient Sumeria, archives have consolidated economic and political power. Writing emerged in hierarchical societies, which needed to control and account for property and laws. The modern European public archive came into being to solidify and memorialize first monarchical rule, and then the power of the nation-state.¹³ Archives have thus never been neutral. They have throughout Western history served the interests of the state and its rulers. This archival partisanship occurs in both monarchical and democratic societies, including the United States, Brazil, and other countries.

Power Struggles in the Archives

In its most useful application to archival theory, postmodernism extends our understanding of the power relationships that exist in archives. Elisabeth Kaplan found that although both anthropologists and archivists claim to be “disinterested selectors” both serve as “intermediaries between a subject and its later interpreters, a function/role that is one of interpretation itself.” Echoing George Orwell, Kaplan concluded that, “This power over the evidence of representation, and the power over access to it, endows us with some measure of power over history, memory, and the past.”¹⁴ This power of archives carries with it a significant measure of responsibility.

Recognizing this power that archivists wield in the universe of knowledge, some will be tempted to seek pseudo-scientific methods of distancing themselves from their decisions. They want to believe in their neutrality.

Rather than hide from our power in the realm of history, memory, and the past, I hope that archivists will embrace the power of archives and use it for the good of mankind. Before looking at the responses to this challenge of using archival power, we need to understand some of its manifestations. There are three essential aspects of the power of archives, reflected in these metaphors:

- the temple: authority and control over social (collective) memory;
- the prison: control over preservation and security of records;

¹³ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 69.

¹⁴ Kaplan, “Many Paths”: 211.

- the restaurant: the archivist's role as interpreter and mediator between records and users.

The Temple

In the archival temple, records of human activity achieve authority and immortality (or at least its semblance). In the ancient world and in medieval times, temples and churches contained both the treasure of “crown jewels” and the records of state, safely stored and hidden from the gaze of strangers.¹⁵ Even today the architecture of many archives buildings deliberately embodies imagery of temples and shrines.

Documents, photographs, electronic records, and other materials placed in such temples acquire special significance. The very acts of selection and preservation set some records apart from others and give them heightened validity. They represent evidence, information, truth, and social memory. As a Canadian archivist proclaimed in 1924, “Of all national assets, archives are the most precious. They are the gift of one generation to another and the extent of our care of them marks the extent of our civilization.”¹⁶ The archivist's decisions about such things convey power over knowledge. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot states in *Silencing the Past*, the “making of archives involves ... the exclusion of some producers, some evidence, some themes, some procedures.”¹⁷

In the archival temples, archivists make value-laden decisions with momentous implications for the knowledge that the future will have of the past. A few precious relics gain recognition as rare or sacred like Dead Sea Scrolls or Shakespeare first folios, treasured for “their talismanic worth as tangible witnesses to some personal event or personality.”¹⁸ In such temples, archivists make vital decisions about which documents will be saved for future generations and which will be excluded or destroyed. People's concern for the past—often a burning, feverish passion—produces the human desire for

¹⁵ Eric Ketelaar, “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 234.

¹⁶ Ian E. Wilson, “‘The Gift of One Generation to Another’: The Real Thing for the Pepsi Generation,” in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*: 335.

¹⁷ Richard J. Cox, *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal* (Lanham, Maryland, 2004): 40-41. Trouillot quoted p. 41.

¹⁸ David Lowenthal, “Archives, Heritage, and History,” in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*: 199-200.

archives, for a recording that enables us to know our own origins. In its essence this resembles a religious quest for meaning, for the secrets of life.

Archivists have long recognized that they are somehow in the “memory business,” but they have not always understood their role or the extent of their job description. What we preserve in archives represents a complex array of social values. As Elisabeth Kaplan argues in an essay on archives and the construction of identity, “We are what we collect, we collect what we are.”¹⁹ By preserving some records and not others, archivists affect society’s collective understanding of its past, including what will be forgotten.

Archives, however, do not constitute the past itself, nor our collective memory of the past. After researching his mother’s stories of growing up in Ireland, historian Richard White cautioned, “History is the enemy of memory. ... When left alone with memories, historians treat them as detectives treat their sources: they compare them, interrogate them, and match them one against the other.”²⁰ Archival sources proved many of White’s mother’s memories to be false.

Archives provide the record of an agreement made at a certain time, by one or more persons, about individual actions, events, and stories. Archives do not testify to the accuracy or truth of these accounts, but rather to the accuracy of how and when the account was created.²¹ Collectively, these records of the past provide a corrective for human memory, a surrogate that remains unchanged while memory constantly shifts and refocuses its vision of the past. Although the documents and images in archival records do not visibly change, however, the postmodernists remind us that our understanding and interpretation of them do constantly shift and refocus.

The Prison

The second site of archival power is the archival prison. From security doors to lockers for researchers’ belongings, from closed stacks to reading room surveillance cameras, archives often resemble prisons or fortresses. If the most common architectural

¹⁹ Elisabeth Kaplan, “We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity,” *American Archivist* 63 (Spring/Summer 2000): 126-151.

²⁰ Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagan: A History of Stories* (New York, 1998): 4.

²¹ Luciana Duranti, “Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science,” *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989): 7-27.

metaphor and model of archival facilities is the temple or shrine, a secondary metaphor emphasizes security and protection. The building constructed in the 1980s for the Departmental Archives of Guadeloupe offers one example. According to Laurent Dubois, “In a curious architectural gesture, the new building was built partly surrounded by a moat and a wall, so that it looks not a little like a fortress.”²² The records are imprisoned (for their own security, of course), but so are the researchers, who must consult records in closely guarded chambers under vigilant surveillance.

Eric Ketelaar compares the archival reading room to Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, a prison where the inmates were kept under constant surveillance by guards in a central control tower.²³ This concept became the iconic central image of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. “Big Brother is watching you, not by keeping his eyes continually fixed on you necessarily but primarily by making and ever checking your file,” Ketelaar observes.²⁴ Both in their design and operation, archival reference rooms echo Bentham’s goal of panopticism, ensuring security and control.²⁵

This idea extends even to the physical ordering of records and “the knowledge-power of the finding aids,” which represent what the public can only find behind the closed doors of the prison-like repository.²⁶ In entering the archives, researchers undergo a variety of “policing measures,” such as signing a register, displaying identification documents, reading research rules, leaving their bags and personal belongings outside the reading room, maintaining silence, and undergoing constant surveillance. The user of archives becomes an ‘inmate’ of the search room.²⁷ These rituals and discipline help to maintain the power of the archives and the archivist.²⁸ Preservation, security, and administration of access all represent aspects of the archivist’s control.

²² Laurent Dubois, “Maroons in the Archives: The Uses of the Past in the French Caribbean,” in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*: 293.

²³ Ketelaar, “Archival Temples”: 227.

²⁴ Eric Ketelaar, “The Panoptical Archive,” in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*: 145.

²⁵ A leading manual on archival security recommends that “every effort should be made to let the researchers know that they are being supervised,” and “the layout of tables and chairs should provide the archivist with a clear view of all areas and researchers in the room.” It also recommends installing security cameras and circular detection mirrors. Gregor Trinkaus-Randall, *Protecting Your Collections: A Manual of Archival Security* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1995): 26-27.

²⁶ Ketelaar, “Archival Temples”: 234, 236.

²⁷ Ketelaar, “The Panoptical Archive,” in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*: 147.

²⁸ Ketelaar, “Archival Temples”: 236-37.

Archival control also extends to the processes of arrangement and description. “In naming, we bring order to chaos. We tame the wilderness, place everything in boxes, whether standard physical containers or standardized intellectual ones,” Wendy Duff and Verne Harris observe. “In the realm of descriptive standardization, using big boxes such as fonds or series, or small boxes such as dates of creation or acquisition, we bring order to wild realities.”²⁹ Archivists thus imprison not only their boxes of records and their researchers, but also the meanings of the archival records and identities of their creators. The archivist wields a power of interpretation over the records in her custody and thus controls and shapes the meaning of these imprisoned sources.

The Restaurant

The archivist’s power of interpretation appears most strongly in the image of archives as a restaurant, where those hungry for truth or knowledge seek nourishment. Archival power governs the research process, from the finding aids that may at first appear to be strange and exotic menus of choices difficult for the first-time customer to interpret, to the one-on-one consultation by which archivists mediate between user and document. Just look at archival menus! They reduce the complex life story of a person to a brief biographical note, and the complexities of thousands of documents to a short summary. As interpreters of the menu, archivists mediate between customers and records. This mediation separates the reader from direct access to the record, which archivists argue must be placed in context, arranged, and explained before it can be used. The archivist may not claim omniscience, but this role of mediation approaches an unstated, implicit claim to omnipotence over the archive.

There are no innocent encounters with archives; all who touch them leave fingerprints, altering and shaping the meaning of the documents. As many archivists now recognize, we are currently moving into a *very* active age of archival intervention, in which archivists recognize that the processes of selection, access, and even description result from particular cultural values, social perspectives, and political inclinations.³⁰

²⁹ Wendy M. Duff and Verne Harris, “Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 282.

³⁰ Blouin and Rosenberg, “Part II: Archives in the Production of Knowledge,” in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory*: 86.

As Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz point out, the archivist plays a carefully scripted role in this research drama—in a performance through which the researcher and the reference archivist interact. “The archivist is an actor, not a guardian; a performer, not a custodian.”³¹ It is this theatrical role that endows the archivist with authority and power.

Archivists think of themselves as neutral and passive, lacking power. Negative stereotypes of archivists in fiction, films, and news media convey an image of knowledgeable but ineffective toilers in dark, mysterious basements.³² But in an information-based society, knowledge provides a means to power. “Knowledge does not equal power, as the cliché would have it, but power cannot be exercised without it,” Verne Harris asserts. “Information is essential to efficient and thereby effective democracy.”³³

In modern society, archivists have more than their share of this knowledge-power. What archivists need to do is transfer some of the power contained in the records to the records professionals and their repositories.³⁴ The archivist’s role of interpretation, both in creating finding aids to guide users of records and in providing reference services, conveys stories of the human condition. “Telling stories of our pasts is a quintessentially human activity,” Verne Harris declares. “Story is crucial to our construction of meaning and is carried by our dream of the impossible. Without story we are without soul.”³⁵ These stories are primal and hence powerful, both for individuals and within society.

In the archival restaurant, the waitress welcomes the customer, interprets the menu, suggests an entrée or dessert, and collects the money before the customer exits. She offers a menu of choices that permit the customer to select the appropriate or desired foods. She explains (interprets) both the menu and the types of food offered. She keeps and preserves, she ensures safety, she provides a comfortable dining experience. She offers advice (narrates the record), but often only when requested. It is a service role, but it comes with a measure of power and requires a reassuring smile if one wants a generous tip.

³¹ Cook and Schwartz, 183.

³² For an intriguing analysis of these images see Arlene Schmuland, “The Archival Image in Fiction: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography,” *American Archivist* 62 (Spring 1999): 24-73.

³³ Harris, *Archives and Justice*: 270.

³⁴ Cox, *No Innocent Deposits*: 35.

³⁵ Harris, *Archives and Justice*: 102.

Embracing Power

Archivists' challenge is to embrace the power of archives and to use it well. The first step is to abandon the pretense of neutrality. The concepts of neutrality and impartiality are impossible to achieve. Often they are simply masks to hide what are really political decisions in support of the status quo.³⁶ The performance of archivists, their use of power, needs to be opened to debate and to accountability. Once archivists acknowledge their power, it that can be questioned, made accountable, and opened to dialogue and understanding.³⁷ This will allow us to avoid using this power indiscriminately or, even worse, accidentally.

Archivists have already made many thought-provoking suggestions on how to acknowledge and use the power of archives. Erik Ketelaar urges archivists to open their decision-making to public scrutiny: "In a democracy, the debate about selection and access should be a public debate, subject to verification and control by the public."³⁸ Abraham Lincoln declared that the United States believed in government of the people, by the people, and for the people. It is now time for archivists in all countries to ensure *archives* of the people, by the people, and for the people.³⁹

Archivists' focus on the technical side of their duties sometimes obscures their social and cultural responsibilities. Too much emphasis on record-keeping systems, accountability, and evidence—all critical for institutional archives—could lead to neglect and devaluation of our role in preserving heritage, culture, and social memory. In addition to holding accountable those leaders in politics, business, academics, and other fields whose records they manage, archivists themselves will be held accountable by tomorrow's users, who depend on our making well formulated, professional decisions that can stand the test of time. Archivists are vital players, not passive observers, of the relationship between history, memory, and accountability.⁴⁰ Power carries responsibility. It also raises the stakes of what archivists do and how we perform our roles.

³⁶ Allan Spear, "Politics and the Professions," *Midwestern Archivist* 9:2 (1984): 81.

³⁷ Cook and Schwartz, 181.

³⁸ Ketelaar, *Archival Image*: 19.

³⁹ Ketelaar, *Archival Image*: 15.

⁴⁰ John M. Dirks, "Accountability, History, and Archives: Conflicting Priorities or Synthesized Strands?" *Archivaria* 57 (Spring 2004), 35, 49. Spragge quoted p. 35.

Hilary Jenkinson set an unattainable ideal of the archivist as one who served researchers but never engaged in interpretation of the records. However, interpretation is always at the heart of the management and use of documents. The archivist's role in society includes protecting the integrity of records as evidence. To do this the archivist must be able to interpret or contextualize records, rather than simply observing and guarding records.⁴¹ These professional responsibilities are vital and profound.

In their role as creators of the documentary record, archivists help to ensure accountability and documentation, and to provide a means to verify or correct personal and collective memory through documentation. Accountability lies at the heart of Orwell's fear for Big Brother's control over public memory. In the face of Soviet attempts to obliterate memories and compel the silence of the Czechoslovakian people, Milan Kundera declared "that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."⁴²

For archivists, the idea of archives as memory is more than a simple metaphor. The documents and artifacts they collect are important resources for extending the range of human communication over time and over distance.⁴³ Archives provide essential benefits for society. "The care which the nation devotes to the preservation of the monuments of its past may serve as a true measure of the degree of civilization it has achieved," historian Waldo G. Leland declared in 1912. "The chief monument of the history of a nation is its archives, the preservation of which is recognized in all civilized countries as a natural and proper function of government."⁴⁴ Archives not only hold public leaders accountable, they also enable all citizens to know the past.

⁴¹ Tom Nesmith, "What's History Got to Do With It?: Reconsidering the Place of Historical Knowledge in Archival Work," *Archivaria* 57 (Spring 2004): 25-26.

⁴² Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980): 3. This passage also quoted in David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *Journal of American History* 75 (March 1989): 1126.

⁴³ Kenneth E. Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 393.

⁴⁴ "Address by Waldo G. Leland, 1956," in Waldo G. Leland Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Social Responsibility

Archives express and hold numerous oppositions: memory and forgetting, suffering and hope, power and accountability, confinement and liberation, oppression and justice, conformity and diversity, silence and speaking. Archives often serve the interests of entrenched power, but they can also empower the marginalized groups in society. Archivists should use their power—in determining what records will be preserved for future generations and in interpreting this documentation for researchers—for the benefit of all members of society. By adopting a social conscience for the profession, they can commit themselves to active engagement in the public arena. Archivists can use the power of archives to promote accountability, open government, diversity, and social justice. In doing so it is essential to distinguish objectivity from neutrality. Advocacy and activism can address social issues without abandoning professional standards of fairness, honesty, detachment, and transparency.

Archivists therefore become responsible to all citizens in a democratic society. They play an important function that often goes unnoticed. Archives document society and protect the rights of citizens. Archivists, both individually and collectively, must commit themselves to ensuring that their records document the lives and experiences of all groups in society, not just the political, economic, social, and intellectual elite. In 1971 Howard Zinn urged archivists to “take the trouble to compile a whole new world of documentary material, about the lives, desires, needs, of ordinary people.” This would help ensure “that the condition, the grievances, the will of the underclasses become a force in the nation.”⁴⁵

In responding to this challenge, archivists have made great strides. There are more archives devoted to -- or at least concerned with -- documenting women, racial and ethnic groups, laborers, the poor, gays and lesbians, and other marginalized peoples. Archivists can still do more. I hope we will aspire to improve on our past successes.

⁴⁵ Zinn, 25.

Paying attention to the need for accountability and documentation serves the cause of human rights and social justice. Archives not only aid in holding today's organizations legally and fiscally accountable to society, they also hold yesterday's leaders and institutions accountable, both in terms of morality and effectiveness. The availability of archives is essential to serve "a society's need for the prevalence of justice, and the preservation of rights, and values."⁴⁶ Archival records have been used to rehabilitate people wrongly convicted of crimes under a totalitarian regime, and to obtain restitution from their former oppressor.⁴⁷

There is an inherent tension in documenting groups that have traditionally been neglected or marginalized. Who owns their history? In the United States, the controversy over Native American graves and artifacts illustrates a problem of ownership that affects other groups in society. One reason that African-Americans, ethnic groups, gays and lesbians, and others have created their own repositories is to retain control over their own documentation, over its presentation and interpretation, and over the very terms of access.

Among Native Americans, for example, there are some rituals and traditions that only specified families within a tribe are entitled to know. The archival concept of open and equal access must be modified to respect such cultural traditions.⁴⁸ In April 2006 a group of archivists, librarians, museum curators, historians, and anthropologists prepared a document entitled *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*. Based on the concept that "Native American communities have primary rights for all culturally sensitive materials that are culturally affiliated with them,"⁴⁹ the *Protocols* request: repatriation of some Native materials acquired by non-Native repositories, obtaining clearance from Native American communities before permitting access to sensitive materials, adding explanations or removing "offensive terms" from original titles and

⁴⁶ Dirks, 38.

⁴⁷ Ketelaar, "Archival Temples": 230-31; John Fleckner, "'Dear Mary Jane': Some Reflections on Being an Archivist," *American Archivist* 54 (Winter 1991): 8-13; see also the extensive writings by Verne Harris on the archives of South Africa, particularly in *Archives and Justice*.

⁴⁸ Conversation with Juanita Jefferson, archivist and records manager for Lummi Nation, August 5, 2005. See also Michael F. Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

⁴⁹ "Building Relationships of Mutual Respect," in *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials*.

archival descriptions, and providing culturally-sensitive reference service for Native American users of archives.⁵⁰

As archivists and the many constituencies that use archives, either directly or indirectly, confront the power relationships at work within archives, we must consider the context in which such powerful social forces operate. The historical origins and development of archives provide a starting point for our consideration of the role of archives and archivists in the construction of memory, in accountability and public interest concerns, and in using this power of archives to achieve socially-responsible goals while ensuring professional integrity. Archives must serve all sectors of society. By embracing the power of archives, archivists can fulfill their proper role in society, to ensure archives of the people, by the people, and for the people.

The Need to Remember

I want to conclude with a poem that examines the importance of the simple act of remembrance. In some societies people who document historical events can be jailed, or even made to “disappear.” Remembering unpleasant truths is illegal. Thus, memory becomes a political act, charged with social meaning. In his poem “Against Amnesia,” John Ross writes of the dangers of political suppression of memory in Latin American countries as well as in the United States. This is an excerpt:

... In Uruguay now, in Chile,
it is official,
there is no memory,
you are not allowed to remember
the bad times, they are over,
and the rememberers
have been ordered
by the Commission of Oblivion
to forget. ...

⁵⁰ Society of American Archivists, “Report: Task Force to Review *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* (February 2008), available 12 May 2008 through the SAA website, www.archivists.org.

Here too in these green hills
in the free territories of Ovantic and Polho,
they will try and make us forget
the mass graves,
the babies ripped from the wombs,
the wounded families and towns,
the languages they speak,
they will shrug and say it never happened,
it is written nowhere,

no pasa nada aqui, señor, ...
but ...
the Indians will never let go,
never abandon the memory of their dead,
never leave the past behind
because the past will never go away,
it is like a boomerang,
it will always return,
it is always present,
it is always future,
it is the most fundamental human right,
memory,
what belongs to us.⁵¹

Historians – and archivists – work in a public arena, which is unavoidably political. Every choice we make about what documents and evidence to save, what to include in our research, and how to frame the questions for our interpretations of the past reflects our own personal and collective perspectives on the world. This is as true of the historical past as it is of the political present. As Ross warns in his poem, those who dispute the past “will shrug and say it never happened, it is written nowhere.”

⁵¹ John Ross, “Against Amnesia”; available 18 January 2007 at: <http://www.media-alliance.org/article.php?story=2004051402014153>.

This is why it is essential for societies to preserve documentation of the past – to prevent amnesia, to ensure an accurate record of events that will serve as a corrective to false memories or oblivion. This is why archives are so important – not only to historians, but to all citizens concerned about truth, accountability, and social justice.

Responding effectively to the challenges of using the power of archives for the public good will require a broad commitment by the archival profession to reflect on our underlying assumptions and biases, and to overcome these through a renewed commitment to democratic values. There are risks involved in such changes. It will be difficult to commit archivists and their profession to a more inclusive view of social responsibilities. But the stakes are too high not to accept these challenges. Historical examples of abuses of power, control through manipulation of the archival record, and efforts to limit access to vital information show the dangers of misusing the power of archives and records. Archivists should commit ourselves to preventing the archival profession's explicit or implicit support of privileged elites and powerful rulers at the expense of the people's rights and interests. We should commit ourselves to the values of public accountability, open government, cultural diversity, and social justice. Then archivists can truly say that we are ensuring archives for all, and employing our professional skills to promote a better society.