

To the Editor:

Frank J. Boles' upcoming ecclesiastical addition to *American Archivist*, as I suspect many other letter-writers will point out, merits a range of criticisms. Boles conflates chattel slavery with prohibition with abortion, somehow evading the historical specificity and political nuance of each (pp. 7–10). In one shocking passage, he describes the temperance movement as a “social justice cause,” and thereby misuses the term “social justice” to lump feminist politics of 2019 with 1930s Christian conservatism (p. 9). His response to Mario H. Ramirez’s analysis of whiteness in the archives takes a shortsighted, and quite traditionally white, “shoe-on-the-other-foot” approach common to claims of “reverse racism” (pp. 12–13). To everything its season indeed, and the publication of Boles’s article in *American Archivist* is a sharp, frozen wind in the faces of many readers—reminding us of the harsh climate of archival practice and theory.

But even in winter you can harvest plants resting below the snow, and so I write with the hope of extracting some useful questions from an arrestingly uncared-for article. First, Boles laments that archivists cannot adequately describe the archives of justice they might create even if they had “all the resources they might want” (p. 4). A pertinent question brought to mind by his assertion: What, if anything, is the “end game” of archives? In a repaired, just world, would archives exist? If access to memory were universal, the right to exist were unchallenged for all, and the political tensions of nation-states were no more (or nation-states themselves were no more), what role would archives have? Are archives *only* an artifact of injustice?

Second, Boles tells us that declaring our want for a mirror of society is not the same as having the power to create such a mirror, a reminder of what J. L. Austin called “felicity” (p. 5). Yet Boles fails to identify what—other than lack of resources—might impose limits on the power of archivists and archives. A question we might take up is: What are the real limits of the archives’ power to enact justice? Does a social justice approach to archives presume the possibility of final justice in the universe? If so, we should seek to elucidate the kinds of metaphysics which archival theory espouses and perhaps therein more fully understand our desires to remember and document.

I am startled that Boles’s essay was not only taken on-board by *American Archivist*’s editors, but also passed peer review and subsequent copyediting. I hope *American Archivist* will use this opportunity to revisit its standards for intellectual rigor, and I hope my fellow readers will give thought to the questions I’ve tried to pull out from under the snow.

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