

FORUM

With the exception of editing for conformity to capitalization, punctuation, and citation style, letters to the Forum are published verbatim.

To the Editor:

For the most part I found the article “Pluralizing the Archival Paradigm: Can Archival Education in Pacific Rim Communities Address the Challenge?” in the Spring/Summer 2008 issue of *American Archivist* to be fascinating, thought-provoking, and well written. I’m delighted to see this outstanding by-product of the collaborative efforts between UCLA and Monash University on a topic that is cutting edge for many archivists.

That said, I am troubled by one passage in the article: “Manuscript, museum, and other collecting repositories, while they may collect historical and cultural materials that fall outside the narrow traditional definition of records, have been criticized for their tendency to be elitist and for their selectivity, decontextualization, and reinterpretation of the materials they acquire—or misappropriate. These repositories are often located in private, philanthropic, or academic institutions remote from marginalized communities, and they have had little interest in working with those communities to empower them through their own records.”

I find these statements to be sweeping, accusatory, and apparently based on personal opinion rather than facts, since there were no footnotes in support of the conclusions. In an attempt to raise awareness of the issues involved in managing the records of indigenous communities, the authors appear to be completely dismissive of manuscript and museum curators, many of whom may be sympathetic to the issues being raised in the article.

The authors have shed light on an important topic—one that is especially relevant to SAA in light of our diversity initiatives and in light of the current debate over the Native American protocols. I just wish they had displayed as much sensitivity toward manuscript curators and museum professionals as they have for the native communities who are at the heart of their research and advocacy.

Sincerely,

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To the Editor:

We want to thank Elizabeth Adkins for her thoughtful comments about our recently published article, “Pluralizing the Archival Paradigm: Can Archival Education in Pacific Rim Communities Address the Challenge?” However, we would like to clarify that the article, and indeed our research findings as a whole, take issue not with special collections and museum professionals, but with the professional paradigms and institutional missions and goals that frame and circumscribe work in archives, libraries, and museums and that frequently fail to address viewpoints other than those of the dominant groups in society. We base our statements not only on analysis of the genesis and development of archival ideas and current scholarship in fields such as anthropology and cultural and legal studies, which we discuss further below, but also on the data we collected in our surveys and workshop discussions from professionals and others who are members of communities that are traditionally underrepresented in our repositories. These data are discussed considerably more extensively in a recent article in the Australian journal *Archives and Manuscripts*¹, and we encourage those who are interested to read that piece as a companion to the *American Archivist* article. In the workshops, several participants cited firsthand examples of cases where they had sought to develop innovative strategies and services for addressing the worldviews and needs of various Indigenous, ethnic, and racial communities but had been frustrated by conflicts that arose with the perspectives and priorities of their own institutions, as well as the limitations of current archival theory and practice.

The passage in question, therefore, is not merely an assertion, but rather seeks to encourage reflexivity about whose interests cultural institutions and archival ideas about records serve. It also focuses on the importance of respecting the contexts of creation of cultural materials and the consequences of removing them from their contexts. Anthropologist Chris Paci warned of the dangers posed by separating cultural artifact from cultural process.² His work applies in this case in that cultural materials that are often collected, especially from Indigenous communities for research or exhibition purposes, are not only sources for research or works of art. The value of these materials also lies in their functionality within their community. The critique offered by our article sought to shed light on the importance of the proximity of cultural materials to their respective communities. Without this proximity, cultural materials that have been created with the intention of functioning within a particular community are unable to play that role. The point here (according to Paci) is that there may

¹ A. Gilliland, A. Lau, Y. Lu, S. McKemmish, S. Rele, K. White, “Pluralizing the Archival Paradigm through Education: Critical Discussions around the Pacific Rim,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 35, no. 2 (November 2007).

² Chris Paci, “Institutional Representations of Aboriginal People,” *Reviews in Anthropology* 31, no. 2 (2002): 165–83.

be materials within various repositories that become decontextualized and held in cultural stasis by virtue of their severance from their communities.

Anthropologist James Clifford also challenges museums and their relationships to other cultures.³ According to him, those relationships are often perceived as one-sided, imperialist appropriations of the subordinate culture(s). To counter this, he proposed that museums become a space where both community members and museums could mutually benefit by including community input about specific exhibits or collections, a strategy that is also recommended in our two articles. This point leads to the question of why these materials are being collected in the first place, and for whose benefit? Will the artifacts be returned to their communities after exhibition? Will they remain in special collections indefinitely? Ultimately, cultural materials are unfairly charged with being representations of the communities that created them; what happens when visitors to the museum, or researchers at special collections, are presented only with a partial view of cultural materials and their particular function in a culture? Similarly, we need to be aware of the long history of misrepresentation and appropriation that has occurred in archival repositories resulting in the disenfranchisement of certain communities, and the inescapable politics and ideological struggles that ensue.⁴ In the legal profession, scholars such as Patricia Williams, Mari Matsuda, Derrick Bell, and Richard Delgado have for a long time advocated using “counternarratives”⁵ to construct alternative and/or broader realities of disenfranchised and underrepresented communities, such as Native Americans, Chicana/os, Asian Americans, and African Americans, to those constructed through social institutions of dominant culture.⁶

We understand very well that archival professionals who pursue some of these strategies are faced with the difficult challenge of reconciling their institutional missions and priorities and professional best practices with the beliefs, perspectives, and needs of the communities who create and wish to have control over and access to the materials these institutions seek to collect, describe, and exhibit. Until our professional paradigms and institutional frameworks

³ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁴ See also Canadian Museum of Civilization with the Commonwealth Association of Museums and the University of Victoria, *Curatorship: Indigenous Perspectives in Post-Colonial Societies* (1996); Timothy W. Luke, *Museum Politics: Power Plays at the Exhibition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002); and Richard Sandell, ed., *Museums, Society, Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁵ Richard Delgado, “The Storytelling for Oppositionist and Others—a Plea for Narrative,” *Michigan Law Review* 87, no. 8 (1989): 2411–41.

⁶ See also *Michigan Law Review* 87, no. 8 (1989).

recognize and respect multiple ways of knowing and the interests and rights of communities in their records, however, these institutions will continue to marginalize those communities.

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