

## FORUM

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

## Not Just Between Us: A Riposte to Mark Greene

### To the Editor:

In his article, “A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We’re Doing That’s All That Important?,” Mark Greene argues against an archival call for social justice. While I do not think Greene’s opinion piece merits a lengthy response, I am compelled to clarify just a few points regarding my own work and how he has characterized it.

First, Greene fails to define “social justice.” A more thorough investigation would have revealed that most conceptions of social justice entail the more equitable distribution of life chances, a thorough unveiling and analysis of power, and greater opportunities for self-representation.<sup>1</sup> The two articles of mine that Greene cites are not about social justice, but about good old-fashioned legal justice, that is, culpability and adjudication for crimes committed. Greene seems to have missed this fundamental difference. That said, I am also an advocate for social justice and have written on this issue elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> I believe that social justice is a human imperative and not just an archival one. In the face of overwhelming inequality, we have a primary ethical responsibility as humans to work toward a more just society. It is only logical that archivists should use archival skills to work toward social justice, just as physicians should use medical skills to work toward social justice and lawyers should use legal skills.

Second, Greene misses the basic observation that power is imbricated in the creation of records that reflect or document injustice. Contrary to positivist conceptions, records aren’t neutral by-products of activity; they are discursive agents through which power is made manifest. Records both produce and are produced by violent acts. To use a recent example, the photographs from Abu Ghraib were not neutral by-products of torture, but part and parcel of it. The torture was staged for the camera; the photographs are not only records of abuse, but vehicles through which that abuse was enacted. Lynndie England and Charles Graner were not neutral records creators documenting the torture so that their fellow soldiers could later be held accountable (as might logically be concluded from Greene’s argument); they were active participants in that torture. This is less an “ambiguity” in my work as Greene claims, but a nuanced illustration of the complex nature of power and how it can be both exercised

through and reflected by documentation. Records creators, records managers, and archivists all have ethical responsibilities; the obligation to engage these responsibilities is present at every stage in the social life of records, from their creation, to their appraisal, acquisition, representation, digitization, and use.

Finally, I would like to caution against the canonization of the work of a few scholars (Rand Jimerson, Verne Harris) in the field's discussion of social justice. There is a robust body of literature about social justice and archives that Greene ignores. Most egregiously, Greene fails to acknowledge both Anthony Dunbar's seminal article on critical race theory, social justice, and archives, and Anne Gilliland's work on social justice and archival education.<sup>3</sup> An article I coauthored with my students on using a social justice framework for introductory archival classes is also missing, as is an article on measuring the social justice impact of archives by Wendy Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David Wallace.<sup>4</sup> In limiting the discussion to the work of Jimerson and Harris, Greene unintentionally exposes how power animates the politics of whose voices get legitimated and whose get silenced. In categorizing my response as a letter to the editor to appear in the Forum section and Jimerson's as a formal article to appear alongside Greene's, the editor of this journal has further exacerbated this disparity. We must not be fooled into thinking that the conversation about social justice has been solely between the senior white men in our field, nor can we allow this conversation to continue as a dialogue that privileges their voices. Power, voice, silence; these are fundamentally archival issues, and yet they are exposed here as an egregious and persistent blind spot.

Much more can be said about Greene's article—its assumptions about the archivist's positionality, its failure to acknowledge community-based archival practice, its gross misreading of Verne Harris's work—but I leave that detailed critique to the readers. Rather than expend any more effort debating the merits of an obvious ethical imperative, I plan to continue to focus my energies on the difficult and messy task of enacting social justice through an archival lens, as I hope my colleagues will as well.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For a more detailed definition, see Anthony Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Stated," *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 117.
- <sup>2</sup> Michelle Caswell, Giso Broman, Jennifer Kirmer, Laura Martin, and Nathan Sowry, "Implementing a Social Justice Framework in an Introduction to Archives Course: Lessons from Both Sides of the Classroom," *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 8, no. 2 (2012), <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2jx083hr>.
- <sup>3</sup> See Anne Gilliland, "Neutrality, Social Justice, and the Obligations of Archival Education and Educators in the Twenty-First Century," *Archival Science* 11 (2011): 193–209; Anthony Dunbar,

"Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Stated," *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 109–129.

- <sup>4</sup> Caswell et al., "Implementing a Social Justice Framework in an Introduction to Archives Course." Wendy Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David Wallace, "Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation," *Archival Science* 2013, e-publication ahead of print.

## To the Editor

Let me see if I can effectively parry Michelle Caswell's riposte. She begins by objecting that I nowhere define "social justice." I contend she is simply incorrect, though I do not, to be sure, include any sentence beginning "I define social justice as . . ." I believe I make clear throughout the article that the definition I am using (and one I believe Harris and Jimerson are using) is the goal of effecting change in the legal, political, and cultural status of marginalized communities within a given society. This definition implicitly encompasses part of Caswell's definition, namely, "the more equitable distribution of life chances," and indeed also embraces the goals of activist archivy. But I am an activist archivist without accepting a social justice mandate—I have worked for decades to help ensure that marginalized communities are more equitably represented in repository collections and/or have assisted in maintaining community archives.

Caswell also criticizes me, in passing, for not recognizing the distinction between social justice and legal justice. I did not think it necessary to explicitly make such a distinction because I understand legal justice to be a component of social justice. I cannot, in fact, understand how the two concepts could be separate enough to require an acknowledgment of their distinction.

Next is Caswell's claim that "Greene misses the basic observation that. . . . Contrary to positivist conceptions, records aren't neutral by-products of activity; they are discursive agents through which power is made manifest." This is, in part, an astonishing accusation. I have published an entire (and, pardon me, widely and well-received) article explaining and praising much of the postmodern turn in archives, including the often intentional and always subjective and malleable nature of records.<sup>1</sup> However, I do *not* accept as a basic observation that all records are instruments of power, much less of oppression, any more than I accept the opinion of those who might insist that a given painting is beautiful; it is, as postmodernism itself ought to teach us, a subjective perception, not a Truth. And the fact that Caswell can identify one example of a situation where the record itself is implicated in the event does nothing to establish a broader argument.

Caswell goes on to criticize me *and* Rand Jimerson for being old white men, at least that's what her acerbic position seems to amount to. To say, "We must not be fooled into thinking that the conversation about social justice has been

solely between the senior white men in our field, nor can we allow this conversation to continue as a dialogue that privileges their voices,” simply because Rand chose to publish extensively on the topic and I happened to critique him is absurd. She herself suggests just how incongruous her claim is by noting the many individuals who are not senior white men already publishing on social justice. She is so anxious to make the point, however, that Rand and I are intentionally dominating the discourse about social justice, that some of the authors she claims I ignore I actually cite (Wallace, for one), and others actually published *after* I submitted my article to this journal (Caswell et al. and Duff et al.), making my failure to cite them rather understandable I would say.<sup>2</sup>

There is also this: “In categorizing my [Caswell’s] response as a letter to the editor to appear in the Forum section and Jimerson’s as a formal article to appear alongside Greene’s, the editor of this journal has further exacerbated this disparity” between senior white males and diverse voices. The facts: In accepting my article for publication, the journal editor and I agreed that Rand should have the opportunity to respond with an essay in the same issue, since my piece is so largely about his particular writings (as I say in my article, in the United States he has arguably published most extensively on this topic). That the editor accepted Caswell’s riposte for this issue at all is *extraordinary* and reflects a commitment to ensure that other voices are indeed heard—at no time in the past thirty years has *The American Archivist* printed a letter to the editor in the same issue as the article cited by the letter.

The only point in Caswell’s letter on which I agree is the need for a wide conversation about social justice and archival practice and theory. I hope to see many more letters to the editor in the next issue of the journal, both pro and con. Up to now, I would suggest, there was no real discussion about social justice, only voices arguing *for* its centrality to the archival enterprise. *Now* we have the basis for a true conversation, I think. Let the discussion begin!

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Greene, “The Power of Meaning: The Mission of Archives in the Postmodern World,” *The American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 42–55. Originally presented as a paper at the Spring 2001 Midwest Archives Conference. Available online at <http://archivists.metapress.com/content/1914668v881wv19n/fulltext.pdf>. Republished in Spain as “La Fuerza del Significado: la Mision de los Archivos en la Era Posmoderna,” in *Tabula: Estudios Archivísticos de Castilla y Leon*, ed. Luis Hernandez Olivera and Terry Cook, 10 (2007), 195–212. Republished as “O Poder do Significado: A Missao Arquivística na Era Pos-Moderna,” in *Documentos Eletronicos: Fundamentos Arquivísticos Para a Pesquisa em Gestao e Preservacao* (Brazil: Secretaria de Estado de Cultura, Arquivo Publico Mineiro, 2008), 14–32.

<sup>2</sup> Caswell also chastises me for not referencing the “seminal” works by Dunbar and Gilliland. Seminal, like beauty and power, is a highly subjective assessment.