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Defining Archival Debt: Building New Futures for Archives

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Defining Archival Debt: Building New Futures for Archives

Cover Page Footnote

This is the edited transcript of a discussion panel that was delivered to the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists on August 26, 2022. Four academic archivists connected through their professional and personal networks agreed to respond to prompts about the emergent concept of “archival debt,” coined by Jillian Cuellar. While this session will be informed primarily by the panelists’ experiences as academic archivists, their discussion aimed to address the broader implications of archival debt for the profession as a whole. The panelists represent varying levels of experience and institutional authority. They also bring a wide range of personal and professional experiences and identities to this discussion, including diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, differing US geographical regions, and employment statuses which range from contingent to permanent. After introducing the concept of archival debt, the speakers responded to these prompts, considering archival debt from their individual experiences as archivists whose education and careers developed along different trajectories over the last two decades. The authors have revised the text for readability, and to adhere to JCAS’s Style Guidelines.

DEFINING ARCHIVAL DEBT: BUILDING NEW FUTURES FOR ARCHIVES

What is Archival Debt?

Jillian Cuellar (JC): I'm Jillian Cuellar, Director of Special Collections at Tulane University, and I'm honored to be joined by my three friends and colleagues, Audra Eagle Yun, Head of Special Collections & Archives at University of California, Irvine; Jennifer Meehan, Director of the Special Collections Directorate at the Library of Congress; and Jessica Tai, Processing Archivist for Institutional Records and Faculty Papers at University of California, Berkeley.

This panel introduces and reflects on the concept of “archival debt,” a term I coined last year through a series of conversations with Audra. Archival debt is a play on the concept of technical debt, a term born out of the technology field.¹ Technical debt is commonly understood to refer to the resources owed to address compromises made in the short term that impact the long term. In other words, the shortcuts, workarounds, or choices we make that are based on urgency and that may be out of alignment with programmatic goals. Like monetary debt, this debt accrues interest until it is repaid. I want to acknowledge the article “Toward a Conceptual Framework for Technical Debt in Archives,” authored by Déirdre Joyce, Laurel McPhee, Rita Johnston, Julia Corrin, and Rebecca Hirsch, which was published in the Spring 2022 issue of *American Archivist*. Their article similarly considers how long-term goals are adversely affected by short-term solutions in archival repositories.²

However, while their article homes in on how technical debt is accrued in digital collections work, and more broadly, in collection management work, our conception and consideration of archival debt speaks to a profession-wide liability, one that all archivists are accountable for regardless of our functional role. Archival debt signifies resources owed to address problematic legacy issues in an archival repository resulting from past practices, policies, and strategies that prioritized the protection and validation of institutions over democratic access and responsible stewardship.³ As a concept, archival debt amalgamates the myriad issues we now grapple with as a profession, including harmful or inadequate description, performative or competitive collecting, languishing backlogs, failure to recognize staff potential, shortsighted fund management, neglected constituencies, a lack of documentation, and poor project management. It is a debt we acquired by promoting or acquiescing to the hallmarks of patriarchal white supremacist culture, like power

¹ *Technopedia Technology Dictionary*, s.v. “technical debt,” accessed January 24, 2023, <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/27913/technical-debt>.

² Déirdre Joyce, Laurel McPhee, Rita Johnston, Julia Corrin, and Rebecca Hirsch, “Toward a Conceptual Framework for Technical Debt in Archives,” *American Archivist* 85, no. 1 (2022): 104–25. <https://doi.org/10.17723/2327-9702-85.1.104>.

³ For an in-depth examination of the concept of responsible stewardship, see Michelle Light, “From Responsible Custody to Responsible Stewardship,” in *Archival Values: Essays in Honor of Mark A. Greene*, ed. Christine Weideman and Mary Caldera (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019), https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/lib_articles/590.

hoarding, objectivity, individualism, and defensiveness.⁴ Each new generation of archivists has inherited the debt of their predecessors, thus burying our profession in the accumulation of a legacy that we must address. Yet, despite the intelligence, training, and care that we may bring to our work, the cards are stacked against us. Rectifying these issues and eliminating our debt is not possible without significant professional change that must be embraced at a wide, collective scale. Further, this change can only be realized by leaving behind or repudiating many of our past practices and tenets, and instead promoting values and actions that combat patriarchal white supremacy, such as sharing or ceding power, earning and maintaining trust, and celebrating the complexities that arise from diverse ways of knowing and living.⁵

Archival debt is a burden that we all carry together, but that we often contend with in individualized and deeply personal ways. Confronting archival debt may have special resonance with those of us who are impacted by other kinds of debt in our professional and personal lives—for example, archivists who have sizeable student debt, those who are contingently employed, who are paid below market level or cost of living benchmarks, or those who simply lack the resources to build the career they desire.⁶ For those who inhabit marginalized identities, the repercussions of this debt accrual can be felt even more acutely.⁷

Archivists who don't find the above issues relevant to their personal experience, yet relate to feeling frustrated with the restrictions and barriers of inflexible institutions that are designed to preserve tradition and prevent change, are also feeling the weight of archival debt.

Through this discussion, we seek to examine the implications of archival debt on the profession and to consider ways that we may relieve ourselves from this debt, in order to instill intentionality into archival practice, awaken community-centered care, and generate new visions for archives.

⁴ This is a reference to the list of characteristics of white supremacy culture evident in organizations, developed by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun. For the complete list and further insight, see Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups* (Durham: ChangeWork, 2001).

⁵ Ibid, see “antidotes.”

⁶ For data on student loan debt incurred by MLS/MLIS degree holders particularly, see Figures 38 and 39 in Makala Skinner and Ioana Hulbert, “A*CENSUS II All Archivists Survey Report,” Ithaka S+R, last modified August 22, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.317224>; Katharine Chandler, Courtney Dean, Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty, Allison Jai O'Dell, Lori Birrell, and Beth Farwell, “On the Preservation of Ephemeral Staff: Impacts of the Gig Economy in Special Collections” (panel presentation, 61st Annual RBMS Conference, virtual, June 8–10, 2021); for data on salary and career satisfaction, see Figures 56, 156, and 157 in Skinner and Hulbert, “A*CENSUS II.”

⁷ For a discussion of barriers to entering the LIS field that disproportionately impact BIPOC workers, see Angela Galvan, “Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness and Librarianship,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, June 3, 2015, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/soliciting-performance-hiding-bias-whiteness-and-librarianship/>. For a perspective on the lack of support faced by BIPOC students in MLS/MLIS programs, see Jennifer A. Ferretti, Cristina Fontáñez Rodríguez, Yvette Ramírez, Amanda Toledo, and Gabby Womack, “‘Latinidad’ as Erasure: Words from a Critical Discussion on the Single Narrative of Latinidad,” *up//root: a We Here publication*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.uproot.space/features/latinidad-as-erasure>.

Perspectives on Archival Debt

How did you acquire your training as an archivist and how did that inform your perspective of your work?

Jessica Tai (JT): I graduated from my MLIS program at UCLA in 2018. During my time at UCLA, I had the opportunity to work in the UCLA Library Special Collections, doing processing work in the Center for Primary Research and Training, as well as working as a researcher for UCLA’s Community Archives Lab. These opportunities afforded me a multifaceted introduction to archives—gaining both technical skills and processing experience within a special collections library, while also learning about community archives theory and practice. It was an interesting dichotomy, because on one hand, I was being trained in MPLP⁸ and efficient processing from within a traditional academic special collections, while also being immersed in research and writing on dismantling traditional archival practice and being introduced to models that community archives offer for confronting racist and colonial legacies within archival practice.

I was also at UCLA at the time of the temporary archivists’ open letter to UCLA Library administrators,⁹ the subsequent grievance process, and the SAA Council Resolution Honoring The UCLA Six.¹⁰ I stood in solidarity with my colleagues and friends, participating in UC-AFT demonstrations on campus and just learning so much from my colleagues’ courageous and important advocacy work. This was a deeply impactful and grounding introduction to the importance of labor advocacy and the need for ethical, sustainable alternatives to contingent, temporary archivist positions.

For some further context, my Introduction to Archives class with Michelle Caswell took place in the fall of 2016, during the time in which Trump was elected. If you are familiar with her article “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives,” she outlines an exercise she developed to enable students to identify the ways in which white privilege is embedded in archival institutions and to help collectively strategize concrete steps to dismantle white supremacy in students’ own archival practice.¹¹ I was in the class where this inaugural exercise took place, and it was a hugely impactful experience for me—not only in my development as an archivist but also in the way it shaped my understanding of archival debt and subsequently what my generation of archivists was

⁸ Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *American Archivist* 68, no. 2 (2005): 208–63, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.68.2.c741823776k65863>.

⁹ Courtney Dean, Lori Dedeyan, M. Angel Diaz, Melissa Haley, Margaret Hughes, and Lauren McDaniel, “UCLA Temporary Librarians Open Letter,” Zenodo, June 11, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5159944>.

¹⁰ “SAA Council Resolution Honoring the UCLA Six,” Society of American Archivists, updated July 26, 2019, <https://www2.archivists.org/council/awards/2019/UCLA-six>.

¹¹ Michelle Caswell, “Teaching to Dismantle White Supremacy in Archives,” *Library Quarterly* 87, no. 3 (2017): 222–35, <https://doi.org/10.1086/692299>.

inheriting. It also imbued me with a sense of responsibility, defining my obligation to confront and liberate this accumulated debt.

This imperative was made clear by Dr. Caswell who in reflecting on the experience of facilitating my class's exercise wrote, "As intellectual leaders in the field, faculty must model behaviors of critique and resistance if we aim to train students who will disrupt the status quo of oppression in their information institutions as LIS professionals."¹² My imperative as an incoming professional to the field was clear—I was to tear down systems of oppression and create a new, liberatory archival future free from the harmful ideologies and practices that the profession was built on. I was energized by this charge—but yet, reflecting back, not wholly prepared for the challenges and limitations of translating this vision into the actual workplace. And particularly in my experience, doing so as a diversity resident within a predominantly white institution.

Audra Eagle Yun (AEY): I graduated from UCLA's MLIS program in 2008, during the wave of debate about MPLP and coinciding with the emergence of "community archives" as a field of practice and study. Anne Gilliland's work was hugely influential, as well as a one-time visit from self-proclaimed "rogue" archivist Yolanda Retter-Vargas, who collected orphaned photographs of Chicano/Latino communities and incorporated them into the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center. She was proactively and decidedly prioritizing preservation of the histories of communities that had been marginalized and made invisible in large institutional archives. Her willingness to prioritize these voices above all else stayed with me.

I read MPLP in grad school. At the time, there was this sense that archival work was not being valued, reduced to a job where all you do is remove rusty staples and paperclips. But I also found myself compelled by the idea of a "golden minimum," a baseline from which to describe every collection. The concept of efficiency, though—treating things alike at a large scale—translated well into the essentialization of labor. There was even an article calling for application of MPLP principles on all functions within archival institutions. It felt very focused on streamlining, cutting the fat, borrowing from corporate lingo. It served the imperatives of austerity. But it did not serve the communities who are not represented in the archives.

My first job was as a local history librarian in a large public library. Eventually I got a job as a project archivist at a private university, where I found myself tasked with the job of processing "the backlog" of collections. However, first I had to create locations for every container. Oh, and then I realized there weren't deeds of gift for most of the collections. And the collections in no way reflected the diversity of the campus or the community around it. Just many thousands of boxes with the names of founders on them.

¹² Ibid., 223.

A few years later, I moved to UC Irvine, which has a solid track record of engaging with the communities of the Orange County area as well as the Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao diasporic communities through the Southeast Asian Archive.¹³ I was fortunate to be part of the group that produced the Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries, or the UC Guidelines.¹⁴ In the guidelines was the intention to *justify* effort through a value score rubric. My colleagues have helped UC Irvine move toward community-centered archives partnerships as a core component of our work, including non-custodial/post-custodial work, reparative description and processing, and reciprocity.

I would say these early experiences of thinking about and working on community and local history, combined with holistic baseline collection management, are the two core areas that motivate me. The emergence of concepts like ethics of care, reparative archival work, and representational belonging have given me language for the work I strive to do and advocate for every day.

JC: I started the MLIS program at Pratt Institute in 2004 with a vague goal of becoming a rare books librarian. Before my second year, I secured a job as an assistant project archivist. Anne Kumer, who is still my dear friend, was the project archivist, and together, we processed the records of Parsons School of Design. We spent just under two years in the basement of a former department store in Manhattan, reading the witty memos dashed off by former fashion department dean Tim Gunn and laboriously over-describing and over-arranging the collections. It was fun sometimes, but it was also boring sometimes. Anne and I were mostly alone, left to forge relationships with the carousel of circulating DVDs outside our office, and with each other as we talked about books over lunch at the macrobiotic restaurant around the corner. Did anyone really care if each piece of paper in each folder was arranged in chronological order? Our boss did. Who would ever use these materials? We never met any researchers. And if someone did, would they appreciate the scope and content notes that I painstakingly wrote with the authority of someone who has touched every item in a collection? I viewed this as a momentary resting place along the hopscotch path of what I assumed would eventually work out into a career.

At Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library the men wore suits and my heels clicked loudly on the polished wood floors. Now I was the project archivist, working with my own assistant, Katie Henningsen, who is also still a dear friend, to process the New York Chamber of Commerce and Industry records. My boss, Susan Hamson, who has sadly passed on, asked during my interview what I thought about MPLP. "It's . . . good?" I said tentatively, intuiting that her enthusiasm meant that it must be so. It was 2007 and I had never heard of MPLP, which, according

¹³ Orange County & Southeast Asian Archive Center, UCI Libraries, <https://ocseaa.lib.uci.edu/>.

¹⁴ Kate Dundon, Laurel McPhee, Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jolene Beiser, Courtney Dean, Audra Eagle Yun, et al., "Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in the University of California Libraries," version 4, University of California Libraries, May 2020, retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4b81g01z>.

to Susan, everyone had been talking about at SAA¹⁵ that year. I had never been to SAA or any conference. I was unaware that backlogs were a problem, but after my experience at Parsons, it was not a surprise that they must be so. Susan kept a Xeroxed map of Manhattan on her wall on which she had drawn a north/south line that illustrated what eight miles of city streets looked like. That was the size of RBML's backlog, and with Susan at the helm of RBML's archivists ("the A-team," she called us), it seemed entirely possible that we would eliminate it in no time. Katie and I sped through processing the NYCC records—we had no choice really; our grant only funded us for a year. In a year, we processed 350 linear feet, presented at a conference, created one of the first processing blogs, took on reference shifts, and made friends with everyone from the mail room staff to the editor of the John Jay papers. We found ourselves among a wonderful community of archivists and librarians to learn with and to learn from.

Those early years helped me figure out what was important to me as an archivist. I knew I needed an environment that encouraged my creativity, and that recognized the talents I brought to the table. I knew I needed a community in which I felt safe to ask questions, to experiment, and which felt connected to a larger professional consciousness. I knew I wanted to be part of a profession that was vibrant and held possibility. In my later roles at UCLA Library Special Collections and now in my current role at Tulane, I have worked to create that kind of atmosphere—environments of possibility—for myself and my colleagues, with a goal of tempering practicality and ambition with levity and grace.

Jennifer Meehan (JM): I acquired my formal training almost 20 years ago now, receiving a master's in archival studies from the University of British Columbia in 2003. The focus of study at that time was very much on traditional archival theory and methodology with coursework on diplomatics, record trustworthiness, and history of recordkeeping in addition to core classes on appraisal, archival arrangement and description, and the like. This formal learning provided me with a strong grounding in the foundational concepts and principles informing archival praxis, albeit without much of an emphasis on practical experience apart from some class assignments. Overall, I would characterize the focus of my formal and early training as being *centered on records*, understanding their nature, context, and structure, and safeguarding for future use.

My practical, real-world training as an archivist really happened "on the job." I learned by doing the work, specifically the work of archival processing, arrangement, and description in early project- and fixed-term positions. As I stepped into management roles, first as accessioning archivist and then as head of processing at Yale's Beinecke Library, I joined collective efforts to eliminate the backlog, as part of which I was charged to "revamp" the existing program for manuscript accessioning and then expand this work to lead a comprehensive manuscript backlog

¹⁵ *Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists Preliminary Program*, August 28–September 1, 2007, Society of American Archivists, accessed January 24, 2023, http://files.archivists.org/conference/Chicago2007_PrelimProg.pdf.

project. (These efforts were spearheaded by my former supervisor, and now close friend, Tom Hyry and involved a team of stellar colleagues in the Manuscript Unit.) This work involved applying the principles of MPLP and implementing a more *user-centered and production-oriented approach* to archival accessioning and processing. Again, for me, this was a process of learning by doing *and* leading—MPLP was new to me when I took on these roles and eventually I went on to teach the SAA workshop on MPLP (first developed by Dan Santamaria) for a time based on my work at Yale.

Stepping into more administrative roles, first as associate director at Emory’s Rose Library, then as head of special collections at Penn State, and now as a senior level director at the Library of Congress, has provided opportunities to work more holistically across archival functions and programs, marking a further shift in my perspective from depth in one area to breadth across interconnected areas and a major shift in mindset and role from doer to facilitator. This work has taken the form of: implementing procedures for considering operational costs for new acquisitions at Emory;¹⁶ collaboratively developing and implementing a new Collection Development Plan at Penn State that incorporates principles for responsible stewardship and criteria for collecting/documenting that prioritize historically marginalized communities;¹⁷ and, also at Penn State, conducting audits of archival finding aids to identify inaccurate and offensive terminology in conjunction with developing and implementing Inclusive Guidelines for Archival Description.¹⁸

Each step of my journey, including my most recent and still very new step at LC, has expanded and challenged my view and understanding of archival work and my place in this work. It has also marked continual shifts in perspective, for instance: from records-centered to people-centered; from depth to breadth; from operational to structural and cultural; and from doing to facilitating.

What does archival debt look like as you’ve encountered it in your career? How does the term resonate with you?

JT: In my archival education and early career, archival debt has been framed in different ways. As I alluded to previously, it has been presented as the legacies and continuation of oppressive archival practices and structures.

¹⁶ This early work was done in collaboration with Carrie Hintz, a colleague at Emory, who went on to take part in the OCLC working group that produced the fantastic resources on total cost of stewardship. Chela Scott Weber, Martha O’Hara Conway, Nicholas Martin, Gioia Stevens, and Brigette Kamsler, *Total Cost of Stewardship: Responsible Collection Building in Archives and Special Collections*, Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.25333/zbh0-a044>.

¹⁷ Ben Goldman and Clara Drummond, colleagues at Penn State, were key partners and leaders in the ongoing and iterative effort to develop and implement the Collection Development Plan. “Collection Development Plan,” Eberly Family Special Collections Library, <https://libraries.psu.edu/about/libraries/special-collections-library/eberly-family-special-collections-collection-development>.

¹⁸ This was a team effort in which Caitlin Rizzo and Lexy deGraffenreid, colleagues at Penn State, played key roles.

Archival debt has also been defined by the acknowledgement of the overwhelming whiteness of our profession. This was largely reflected in my graduate degree curriculum, and in the professional organizations I first engaged with, particularly SAA. There was a sense of urgency—and rightfully so—to address what I’m now able to understand as an archival debt—a debt owed to the lack of representation within archives.

Since entering the profession, I have witnessed and have been directly impacted by the attempts to pay these debts off, one of which has been the proliferation of diversity residency positions, which are time-limited, professional positions for early career librarians from underrepresented groups. Half a year after graduating from my MLIS program, I began in an inaugural diversity resident archivist position at Yale.

Like many newly graduated archivists, I was eager to take on “diversity” related work, to begin to address the collective archival debt I was inheriting. For instance, I welcomed the opportunity to chair a new reparative archival description task force in my library. My next remarks aren’t offered as a specific criticism of my experience, but I think it’s important to examine how often the onus to enact equity and racial justice focused change is placed on new professionals, particularly new professionals of color within term-limited positions.

The stated goal of diversity residencies is clear—to increase the number of people from underrepresented communities into the archives profession. But as April Hathcock points out in her article “White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS,” the focus on an additive model to address the lack of diversity in the profession does not acknowledge the deeper issues of structural discrimination nor does it overtly name and address the permeating issues of whiteness.¹⁹

How can we expect actual, meaningful change to be enacted from those who are not empowered with the agency to do so? And just as critically: within organizations who have not developed strategies or committed to the actual work needed to dismantle systems of oppression from within their own libraries?

Being put in the position of leading organizational change will inevitably lead to situations in which you have to navigate resistance and the subsequent hostility, microaggressions, and demoralization that come with that. Yet, this is one of the primary ways that our profession is focused on addressing our archival debt. There are no finite or easy answers for how we as a profession can change course, but there has to be a better way.

AEY: I want to comment on the layering of debt, the insistence of our field that we must do *all the things*, adhere to the expectations of our predecessors, navigate the expectations of wealthy

¹⁹ April Hathcock, “White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 15, 2015, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity/>.

and powerful donors, pursue the expectations of reparative work, manage born-digital collections, minimize our personal backgrounds and the affective impact of memory work.

What archival debt looks like to me are those “structural NO’s” as Bethany Nowviskie calls it. Primarily white institutions (PWIs), academic and institutional archives are, by design, structured to prohibit action in the service of social justice, divestment, and repatriation. Precedent policy creates the structure where “no” is the status quo. Lack of succession planning, doing “more with less.” The expectation of deference to the decisions of the past without the appreciation for new knowledge and new ways of doing the work.

At each of the places I have worked, I’ve been fascinated by the complexities of custody and accessioning, and how archival collecting decisions of the past can perplex, burden, and even traumatize. I’ve had to follow through on other people’s promises. I’ve been compelled to prioritize the demands of the privileged, the wealthy donor, the powerful elected official, the campus administrator—skirting the realities of imbalance, misrepresentation, and the avoidance of “controversy.”

What archival debt has looked like for me is the continuous influence of the elite on the core of archival work. How many of us have been contacted by a donor who knows exactly what a deed of gift is, what the tax benefits are, what a financial valuation is worth, which curator to appeal to, and the names of the faculty or board members or directors they know?

There are, of course, large academic archives collecting or beginning to collect the histories of marginalized people, their community leaders, organizations, etc.—but typically have not been able to care for these collections in an intentional, iterative, consultative way. And for many institutions, that’s considered a capacity issue.

The work of community-centered archives practice at UC Irvine is about struggling against archival debt for what it is: a burden too large to carry, and one that takes away from new forms of knowledge, distracts us from reparative and community-driven work, that relegates diversity and inclusion to a special side project. We want to compensate nonprofit organizations for their partnership, and there have been a lot of fights and proposals and tears and hard-fought wins.

When we see stories like Tamara Lanier’s fight for the daguerreotypes depicting her enslaved ancestors,²⁰ or the community-led fight to rebury stolen skulls of Black Philadelphians,²¹ we must recognize that the failures of these predecessors in the PWI setting...indeed, the primary reason

²⁰ Jarrett Martin Drake (@jmddrake), “A Vision of (In)Justice: Harvard Archives Bear a Strange Fruit,” Medium, May 24, 2019, <https://medium.com/@jmddrake/a-vision-of-in-justice-harvard-archives-bear-a-strange-fruit-30e645643df>.

²¹ Ed Pilkington, “Ivy League university set to rebury skulls of Black people kept for centuries,” *Guardian*, August 7, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/aug/07/us-university-plans-repatriation-black-american-remains>.

for *being* for academic and research archives has been in the desire to possess. Jarrett Drake outlines the need to study not only the material of archives but the boundaries of who belongs in them.²² The desire to possess, to own, and to preserve archives can too often be held above the voices, the stories, and the memory of those being represented.

This, to me, is the ultimate burden of archival debt: the impossible weight of possession, and the concentration of power in the institutional context, an inherited legacy that codifies white supremacy—which becomes the archivist’s problem, a problem so large that it takes up nearly all our breathing room.

JC: As a director now, what I see as the most visible impact of archival debt is the time that my colleagues and I spend on corrective measures, like tracking down missing boxes, trying to build relationships with communities who may have good reasons to not trust us, or trying to understand decisions that were made when there are no paper trails that document procedures, policies, or workflows. These issues, pervasive in archives, are not attributable to individuals necessarily; rather they are often outcomes of an accumulation of choices that are improvisations or made under duress. While paying down this debt can be demoralizing, I also recognize that it can be rewarding and spur innovation. Like many who began their career around the time MPLP was published, I embraced “good enough” processing, iterative description, and extensible solutions. I believed in the goal of total intellectual and physical control, no matter how far off into the distance it seemed. I appreciated the camaraderie that resulted from collaborations designed to address longstanding problems. I found that my grant-funded positions gave me firsthand evidence that most academic institutions were dealing with the same problems, as well as a fresh perspective that allowed me to see what long-term employees could no longer see as easily. I valued institutional memory but did not feel beholden to it.

It’s also clear, however, that it is perilous to ignore the significant impact archival debt can have on less tangible things in our organizations and in our profession, like morale, on our ability to be future-oriented, and on our ability to sustainably build trust within and across communities. Accomplishments, camaraderie, and innovation don’t negate the anxiety that arises and the compromises that must be made due to a lack of job security. Accomplishments can’t fully counter the despair of assuming responsibility for half-finished projects that have no documentation and that you lack the resources to complete. Camaraderie doesn’t make up for feeling tokenized when your ethnicity becomes a prize for an organization to win or to be discarded when you are not ethnic enough. It’s difficult to champion strategic plans when administrators dismiss the argument that temporary positions are a pennywise and pound-foolish way to move mission-critical work forward. And it’s especially challenging to generate innovation, ambition, and creativity across

²² Jarrett Martin Drake, “Blood at the Root,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 8 (2021), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol8/iss1/6>.

teams while also asking them to pander to constituencies whose values and interests are out of alignment with your professional and personal values.

What I've realized, what I think we have all realized in these last few years, is that our archival debt is insurmountable. It can't be paid off because it will continue to accumulate interest unless we agitate for significant change. I fully believe that data-driven decision making, extensible solutions, documentation, standards-based description, and accountability measures have substantially improved our professional practice and made us more trustworthy stewards. So much so, that when I first heard colleagues calling on our profession to slow down, to take time to learn and listen, criticizing MPLP and mass digitization and baseline description, I bristled a bit.²³ And then, when I let go of my ego, when I tried harder to see what I could no longer see so easily, I understood that of course these criticisms are justified. Attempting to pay off our debt with assessment data, with efficient technologies, or with modern standards has not and will not fix structural issues that are bigger than the departments we work in, the repositories we work in, and quite obviously bigger than our profession.

JM: In my career, I've encountered archival debt in many shapes and forms, but a foundational and longstanding form that I've grappled with has been that of *hidden collections and silenced voices*—specific instances include backlogs of unprocessed collections, inaccurate or insufficient description, harmful legacy practices of collecting and stewarding materials, and a growing awareness of the unintended consequences and potentially harmful impact of the action-oriented and data-driven solutions that I was part of implementing to eliminate the backlog.

Reflecting on my own experiences through the lens of archival debt, I can see that it has resonated with me in different ways at different points in my career.

Earlier in my career as a processing archivist and manager of accessioning and processing programs, I viewed archival debt as: a breach of trust (not honoring the commitments made to creators, donors, and users and not respecting the individuals and communities represented); a sign of failure (not fulfilling our professional, institutional, individual obligation); a source of blame and shame (directed outward and inward); and ultimately a problem to be solved.

This view led to targeted, problem-specific solutions that focused more on symptoms (“the backlog”) rather than the roots of the problem (the causes and conditions that resulted in “the

²³ For just a few of these critiques, see Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, “Toward Slow Archives,” *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09307-x>; Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, “Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.10>; and Tonia Sutherland and Alyssa Purcell, “A Weapon and a Tool: Decolonizing Description and Embracing Redescription as Liberatory Archival Praxis,” *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion (IJIDI)* 5, no. 1 (2021): 60–78, <https://doi.org/10.33137/ijidi.v5i1.34669>.

backlog”). This view also led to approaches that focused largely on taking action (changing technical processes and practices, shifting specific operations) in order to achieve desired results and outcomes. While these actions did lead to some significant results in terms of improved access to collections and increased use, they did not necessarily lead to the structural and cultural shifts necessary to sustain change over time. And they did not really attend to the consequences of such actions on those involved or impacted, directly and indirectly, especially those from historically marginalized communities.

As I’ve progressed in my career as a leader and administrator, I now view archival debt as: an indicator of misalignment (between commitments made and honored, between intention and action); a symptom of imbalance (between resources and demands, between decisions and actions at different points of archival lifecycle); as a structural and cultural issue rather than merely a technical one; as a collective responsibility in which we all have a role to play; and ultimately as a polarity (one of many “wicked issues,” paradoxes, conundrums) to be managed and navigated with intention and care, rather than a problem to be solved.

For me, this view has led to more critical reflection before taking action, a focus on inner work as individuals and teams to inform the outer work of mission-driven actions, more process-oriented approaches that center people and relationships, and different forms of stakeholder and community engagement.

What does it look like for you, your team, your institution, or our profession to forgive archival debt?

JT: I’ve spoken about a couple ways the term archival debt has resonated with me based on my experience and introduction to the profession.

Firstly, I understood archival debt as the systems of oppression and harmful ideologies and practices that have been embedded into and are perpetuated by normative archival practice. My archival education posed this as a debt that incoming archivists held a responsibility to absolve. I took this as a direct call to action and have spent my entire career thus far focused on developing practices to address harmful language within archives through leading reparative archival description efforts at my institution and in the wider profession. Much of these efforts took place during my time in a diversity residency position. Through these experiences, it has become abundantly clear: while the momentum for change must be carried forward from the incoming generations of archivists, we must ensure they do not shoulder it alone. We need a profession-wide, cross-generation adoption of responsibility, and most critically, a shift in how we approach

making progress. I propose that we adopt cultural humility as an overarching guiding principle.²⁴ In doing so, we can operate from a shared understanding of how power imbalances act as barriers in implementing organizational change. A framework of cultural humility encourages viewing progress as an honest, transparent, and iterative process in which we honor and acknowledge the need for a lifelong commitment to critical self-reflection at both the individual and institutional level.

Secondly, framing diversity residencies as a way to forgive the archival debt caused by the prevailing whiteness of our profession is not possible. But—we can put concerted effort towards improving the experience of diversity residencies and other initiatives focused on recruiting and retaining people from underrepresented groups to the profession. Guides such as the Residency Interest Group’s Diversity Residency Toolkit emphasize the need for continuous support systems, assessment on institutional readiness, and best practices for onboarding residents.²⁵ They advocate for the implementation of a resident-centered framework, which upholds the resident as the primary beneficiary of the experience over the institution. Frameworks such as these subvert traditional “additive” models of diversity initiatives and are essential if we want to meaningfully include, recruit, and retain BIPOC archivists and, subsequently, lessen our archival debt.

AEY: Our profession is conditioned on the premise that for all recordkeeping, there is always some acceptable loss. We know that not everything will be kept, that archival values change, that practices change. We find ourselves at a moment where we can look holistically at archival practices and ask: what, today, would be acceptable loss in our professional practice? What can we leave behind?

The reckoning in other professions is not unlike what we archivists are facing. For instance, the recent controversy from the American Historical Association, whose president lamented “unrelenting presentism” as a critique of historiography that concerns itself with how the structural and systemic realities of today relate to the past. It denigrates Black historical scholarship and defends so-called “traditional” historical work. Historian T.J. Tallie’s response succinctly describes what is at stake: “And history that isn’t ‘presentist’? Concerned with the abstract study for intellectual gratification? That’s just glorified antiquarianism, and I’m glad that the original Victorian hobbyists who made the ‘rules’ of studying us are dead.”²⁶

²⁴ Jessica Tai, “Cultural Humility as a Framework for Anti-Oppressive Archival Description,” in “Radical Empathy in Archival Practice,” ed. Elvia Arroyo-Ramírez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O’Neill, and Holly Smith, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v3i2.120>.

²⁵ Kalani Adolpho, Maya Bergamasco, Ana Corral, Michelle Peralta, Mallary Rawls, Laura Tadena, and Willa Tavernier, “Diversity Residency Toolkit,” Residency Interest Group, September 1, 2021, <https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/26808>.

²⁶ T.J. Tallie, “On Black Autonomy and Responding to Abstract, Genteel Contempt,” *Ridiculousness. Critical Theory. Poor Life Choices* (blog), August 17, 2022, <https://theteej.tumblr.com/post/692882482112151552/on-black-autonomy-and-responding-to-abstract>.

We must use the present—emerging practices, stronger ethics, reparative and continuous intellectual endeavors (to quote DACS)—in service of a richer, more nuanced history through the archives we curate, steward, and co-create.²⁷ We must be willing to release originalism, redesign the rules we are given, and be critical of things as we go. We can become a learning profession.

And we must do this without asking for permission or forgiveness. We can take a lot of inspiration from the student debt movement. To adapt the words of the president of the NAACP, Derrick Johnson, Stop calling it debt “forgiveness.” “No one is asking for forgiveness for getting an education, seeking a better future for their family, their community, and their country. No one is sorry here. We’re asking for cancellation. We’re asking for justice.”²⁸

The archival debt upon us is systemic, cyclical, and oppressive. We cannot bear responsibility for all that we have inherited, but we can leave it. We must make room for ethical, justice-oriented work as a core function – listening to new professionals, listening to our communities. So we accept that some practices, some debt, some “traditions” must be left behind.

JC: My liberation from archival debt depends on actively choosing a change in mindset. There are certainly situations where this is not an appropriate or humane approach, such as in instances of discrimination or harassment. But I do continually remind myself that our profession is a long game by nature, and that our current strategies may be informed by the past but must prioritize the future. All of us can leverage the influence we hold within our particular spheres, asking ourselves and our organizations what portion of our debt is most critical to pay off while also proposing new structures and standards that will prevent further accumulation. This means we need to instill strong accountability measures into our policies, principles, and practices that make us responsible to each other, our successors, and our constituencies. Documenting knowledge and sharing it in transparent, accessible ways should be a required part of our jobs. This includes everything from hiring practices to collection development policies to access guidelines. If we want to accomplish transformative work to support and partner with external communities, we need to first prioritize building trust among our organizations and across our profession. And if we want to build creative, enthusiastic teams, to grow purposeful and enduring programs, and to advance our personal, professional, and organizational missions, we need to understand that transparent and inclusive strategy development is an essential element.

Finally, I don’t think it’s possible to forgive, pay off, or leave behind archival debt without engaging senior leaders and administrators. We need them to leverage their power to support and

²⁷ “Statement of Principles,” in *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, Version 2022, Society of American Archivists, https://saa-ts-dacs.github.io/dacs/04_statement_of_principles.html.

²⁸ Derrick Johnson (@DerrickNAACP), “Stop calling it student debt ‘forgiveness’. No one is asking for forgiveness for getting an education, seeking a better future for their family, their community, and their country. No one is sorry here. We’re asking for cancellation. We’re asking for justice. Words matter,” Twitter, August 2, 2022, 12:34 p.m., <https://twitter.com/derricknaacp/status/1554505816270462976>.

foster change for our organizations and our profession to succeed. Those with institutional power can remove barriers, influence strategy and policy at high levels, and invite dissent, provocations, and novelty into discussions with greater ease and impact. We spend a fair amount of resources as a profession on preparing archivists and librarians to become leaders; we should also focus on preparing current leaders, especially senior administrators, to consider and advocate for new visions that may emerge from criticisms of past strategies or through experimental, or even radical, propositions.²⁹ This means that library deans, directors, university librarians, and division heads must recognize that merely recruiting change agents without also ceding or sharing institutional power and influence will do nothing to relieve us of our debt, nor will it bring about lasting change. And as archivists and library workers, we must resist participating in or contributing to work that only serves to build an illusion of change without fostering real transformation.³⁰ Leaders who share their power generously, who ask for feedback and receive it with humility, who yield the floor to those with less political capital—they will not only cultivate a more impactful profession but they can also alleviate the pressures of our archival debt.

Just as canceling student debt won't fix higher education's broken cost model, forgiving, paying off, or leaving behind our archival debt will not solve our professional challenges or absolve us of the culpability that we all own. But it will bring some temporary relief. It will give us room to take a breath, so that we can focus more fully on the much more critical issue of structural changes that are needed in archives. And maybe it will give us more opportunities to find the joy in our work, despite the challenges we've all experienced in the last few years. Archives *can* be joyful. We all have the power to create, recognize, share, and sustain joy as archivists. Let's use that power, if only because the vibrancy of our profession, and the possibilities that we all hold in ourselves, depend on it.

JM: Forgiveness speaks to me of *acknowledging harm, making amends, and committed action to do better*. So I think forgiving archival debt might include practices for:

Acknowledging and interrogating the roots of archival debt and the continuing impact: Such practices would shift from focusing solely on the “symptoms” (legacy issues) to also examining the system giving rise to the problem, the interrelatedness of the various legacy issues we are facing, and the consequences of our actions and inactions in order to recognize the harmful impacts and critically reflect on our role and responsibility. In this regard, I have found helpful insights in the Theory U Methodology developed by Otto Scharmer for systems and social transformation,

²⁹ Among several programs, see the Association of Research Libraries' Learning Network, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://www.arl.org/category/our-priorities/learning-at-arl/>, and the Archives Leadership Institute, accessed January 24, 2023, <https://www.archivesleadershipinstitute.org/>.

³⁰ Much has been written about the overlooked maintainers in libraries and archives, but I want to especially refer readers to Jane Schmidt's discussion of how the fetishization of leaders in our profession contributes to this invisibility, as well as her assertion that many of the change initiatives that library leaders endorse are examples of “box-ticking.” See Jane Schmidt, “Innovate This! Bullshit in Academic Libraries and What We Can Do About It,” presentation, Toronto Metropolitan University, May 22, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.32920/ryerson.14639826.v1>.

which offers a framework for developing “eco-system awareness” and shifting the whole starting with a focus on intentions to guide and inform actions.³¹

Telling a new story about archival debt: Such practices would shift the narrative from solving problems to managing polarities, and would frame the stories we tell ourselves and others in terms of assets (aspirations, contributions, what we offer) and not solely in terms of deficits (failures, shortcomings, what we lack) in order to clarify and connect with our intentions as a starting point for imagining new possibilities and new ways of being and doing. Asset-Based and Asset Framing approaches being adopted in community-centered archival initiatives are tremendously useful tools to be leveraged in this regard.

Cultivating alignment and balance in responding to archival debt: Such practices would embrace both/and thinking to navigate polarities between redressing “legacy issues” and stepping into new initiatives; they would create space and conditions for new ideas and approaches; they would engage the creativity of the people most directly involved and impacted; and they would ensure the necessary resources and support from leaders in order to shape actions aligned with our intentions—actions that focus on small steps that build toward larger shifts over time. adrienne maree brown’s work on Emergent Strategy is especially insightful and practical in offering principles and tools for, as she describes it, “humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions.”³²

Prototyping and iterating such practices with intention and care: By clarifying our intentions and aligning actions, both individually and collectively, we enable ourselves and others to co-create results that shift the system in small and large ways, and hopefully help us move through and forward from archival debt in ways that are scalable, sustainable, and liberating.

Afterword/Reflection

December 2022

In this exploratory conversation, we named and defined the concept of archival debt, examined factors that contribute to its accumulation, and considered its impact on our careers as archivists, as well as on the archival profession. We identified a variety of approaches to addressing archival debt collectively in the archival profession, accented by our multifaceted, multigenerational perspectives. Should, or could, archival debt be forgiven? Should it be canceled? Paid off? Who has the prerogative—or the power—to decide? We agree that archivists have some level of authority to leave behind the harmful practices of the past. In order to build new visions beyond the debt we shoulder, however, we cannot merely ignore or discharge this debt without reckoning

³¹C. Otto Sharrow, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2016.

³² adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Chico, Calif.: AK Press, 2017.

with the harm inflicted by these legacies. We hope this conversation generates further reflection and discussion and sets the stage for further research and application of the concept of archival debt. We encourage all of us as archivists to interrogate harmful legacies, release archival debt, and participate in the disciplined act of creating new futures for archival work.