

# Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative

Mario H. Ramirez

## ABSTRACT

Taking Mark Greene's Fall/Winter 2013 *American Archivist* article, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We're Doing That's All That Important?," as its point of departure, this article poses a critique of normative assumptions of race prevalent in the archival profession and analyzes the concomitant resistance to the integration of social justice and the political. In the recent past, an increasing emphasis has been placed on rethinking the role of archives and archivists, and the ways in which each reinforces unequal power structures and the manufacturing of distorted histories. This notwithstanding, Greene's article points toward a strain of resistance to self-reflexivity within the archives community, and, moreover, is emblematic of an inability to think critically about race, whiteness, and sociocultural positionality that is supported by the escalating homogeneity of the profession. Using perspectives derived from archival theory, philosophy, and political science, this article teases out some of the reasons for this resistance to the "political" and critical within archives, and the problematic implications of efforts to continuously assert the neutrality, if not objectivity, of archival space. It reflects on the ramifications of this latter phenomenon for the archival profession and how it helps reinforce social and political inequalities that curb nascent organizational efforts at diversity and inclusivity.

© Mario H. Ramirez. 

## KEY WORDS

Advocacy, Archival theory and principles, Writings about archives

In the 1993 film *Falling Down*,<sup>1</sup> Michael Douglas's character, William "D-Fens" Foster, is a man brought to the brink of madness and violent vigilantism by the forces of urbanity, difference, and corporate deviance. An unemployed defense worker, a white man increasingly displaced by the shifting multiracial and multicultural landscape of Los Angeles, he lashes out at the entities he perceives as impinging on his privileged white manhood by fomenting a series of confrontations with Latino gang members, enraged motorists, and impudent fast-food workers. Suffering from deep anxiety due to the sociocultural, racial, and economic shifts of late twentieth-century America, he fights an uphill battle against the forces of difference that challenge the stability of his worldview and promise the inevitability of change.

I was reminded of this film when reading Mark A. Greene's article "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We're Doing That's All That Important?" in the Fall/Winter 2013 issue of *The American Archivist*.<sup>2</sup> A critique of what he perceives as the overarching emphasis on social justice concerns in archival processes, Greene's article hints at a compulsion to maintain an order of things in the archival world that I contend contributes to the privileging of whiteness in the profession. Like Michael Douglas's character, Greene appears to steel himself against the unwarranted demands of social justice by taking a stance that, in contrast to his previous work, communicates an unease with the expanding influence of politics and so-called postmodernism<sup>3</sup> on archival praxis and betrays a discomfort with the implications for the profession these factors portend.

But rather than dismiss Greene's article as misguided, I ask to what extent his apparent resistance to the critiques posed by social justice, and subsequent privileging of whiteness, indicate a larger trend in the archival field toward intellectual, methodological, and racial homogeneity? A 2013 survey of the archival profession conducted by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) demonstrated that the realm of archives continues to be predominantly white, if increasingly female, and that African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and other groups remain only marginally represented.<sup>4</sup> Despite efforts to create a more racially diverse cohort (*vis-à-vis* scholarships, policy changes, surveys, and committees dedicated to the theme), whiteness persists as the *terra firma* of the archives profession in the United States and, in turn, informs the very formation of its praxis.

In this article, I use Greene's work as the impetus for a broader look at the predominance of whiteness in the archival profession and the resultant, if unrecognized, desire to maintain a professional landscape free of difference and contestation. I maintain that continued assertions of neutrality and objectivity, and a rejection of the "political," take for granted an archival subject that is not only homogenous (free of racial stereotypes, societal influence, prejudice,

and political opinions), but that also supports whiteness and white privilege in the profession. Thus, I open this essay with an analysis of whiteness and white privilege as a means of getting at the heart of their continued meaning and influence in North American society and within the archival field. I then focus on Greene's article and explore the ways in which it is emblematic of the pervasive, yet unconscious, privileging of whiteness in the profession. Finally, I look at the efforts of the Society of American Archivists to contend with the profession's lack of racial diversity<sup>5</sup> and speculate on why the various initiatives supported by the organization continue to fall short despite the leadership's best intentions.

### One of These Things Is Not Like the "Other": Whiteness, Difference, and the Archival Profession

In his elucidating article "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started,"<sup>6</sup> Anthony W. Dunbar stated ". . . the importance of raising the collective social consciousness of the archival field about racial issues as these apply to establishing alternative discussions or counter-narratives within the archival discourse."<sup>7</sup> Primarily focused on exploring the contributions of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to this process, Dunbar also addressed the intersecting contributions of social justice to this expanding dialogue and its role in bridging ". . . CRT, notions of archives as place, and archival practice."<sup>8</sup> In an effort to increase the perspectives of people of color in legal discourse, CRT also engenders a discussion of manifestations of privilege in "dominant" culture and, specifically, how whiteness functions as a "generic or colorblind norm" whose status as a norm indicates privilege itself.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, "[w]hiteness provides advantages of both social capital and institutionally structured control"<sup>10</sup> that are not often acknowledged, particularly by those who directly benefit from them, and supports notions of *neutrality*, *meritocracy*, *objectivity*, and *color-blindness* that serve to further undermine the subjectivity of people of color.<sup>11</sup>

As George Lipsitz also pointed out, whiteness is an "unmarked category" that manifests a ". . . structured advantage that channels unearned gains and unjust enrichments to some people [whites] while imposing unfair impediments against the accumulation of assets . . ."<sup>12</sup> by people of color. Arguing that ". . . white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to the identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity," he maintained that a "possessive investment in whiteness" indicates the concrete economic, social, cultural, and political ways that white privilege is engendered and racial hierarchies are created and perpetuated. Rather than demonstrating a "snarling contempt" toward racial difference, white supremacy instead

guarantees the ongoing reification of whiteness through the amassing of valuable socio-economic resources at the expense of nonwhites.<sup>13</sup>

This “invisible knapsack of unearned assets,”<sup>14</sup> while unacknowledged by whites, enables them to move freely through the world and to reap the numerous benefits conferred upon them by systems engineered to grant them agency and power. As Peggy McIntosh astutely recognized,<sup>15</sup> white privilege is a pervasive presence in daily life that is made manifest in activities and interactions both mundane and socioculturally charged. When enumerating the ways in which she benefits from being white, she concluded that the American myth of meritocracy is ultimately a failed ideal that has been hidden under the guise of the universal availability of resources, as well as the equal standing of all American citizens.

In her seminal article, “Whiteness as Property,”<sup>16</sup> Cheryl I. Harris noted that historically, “White identity conferred tangible and economically valuable benefits and was jealously guarded as a valued possession. . . .”<sup>17</sup> Depending on the systemic domination and exclusion of blacks and Native Americans for their unifying characteristics and sociolegal rationale, whiteness and white identity developed as the direct products of American expansionism and capitalist ambition, and as a means of justifying the moral and cultural exceptionalism of whites. Indeed, the subjugation of blacks and Native Americans, and their dispossession from both territorial and corporeal forms of value in property, conferred import and exclusivity to the possession of whiteness and assumption of white identity, and allowed for the ongoing reification of a racial hierarchy wherein they were not only “. . . ratified and legitimated in law as a type of property status. . . .”<sup>18</sup> but ultimately established as the “. . . legitimate and natural baseline . . .”<sup>19</sup> for consideration as a full human and citizen. Therefore, to be in possession of whiteness was to be in possession of the right to own and not be owned, to assert a level of agency that provided access to a bevy of rights and privileges purposively withheld from nonwhites as a means of appropriating their territories and physical labor. Constructed as vehicles for domination, whiteness and white identity in turn created value for those allowed to align themselves with them and established a social, historical, and political precedent whose system of white privilege continues to have ramifications for North American society.

Todd Honma, in his article “Trippin’ over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies,”<sup>20</sup> drew on the field of critical white studies<sup>21</sup> to articulate a parallel analysis for library and information studies (LIS) that further maintains the status of whiteness as “an invisible and elusive structure of privilege, one that allows for constant reinvention and re-articulation to protect the interests of a white ruling class.”<sup>22</sup> A constructed category, whiteness asserts a racial and sociocultural valence that determines what is normative

in library and information studies. Whiteness subsequently has deep ramifications for the plurality of the field insofar as it elides a critical discussion of racial inequalities in the information professions and, instead, invokes a benign discourse of “diversity” and/or “multiculturalism” that does not contend with the continuing predominance of whiteness as *the* marker of subjective privilege.

A state of being generally invisible to those who inhabit it, whiteness as the “neutral” ground upon which racial difference and exclusion are determined benefits from this unquestioned status as the ultimate point of reference for normativity. Ubiquitous in its inconspicuousness, whiteness, as Lipsitz affirmed, is nevertheless omnipresent to nonwhites who are subject to its standards.<sup>23</sup> As Sara Ahmed noted, “. . . the power of whiteness is maintained by *being seen*; we [nonwhites] see it everywhere, in the casualness of white bodies in space, crowded in parks, meetings, in white bodies that are displayed in films and advertisements, in white laws that talk about white experiences. . . .”<sup>24</sup> As the “master signifier of racial difference,” the promise of ontological wholeness, whiteness is the comparative point of reference for all other subjects and is the foundational cornerstone of a racial economy that determines subjective inclusion and exclusion.<sup>25</sup>

The racialized body as constituted *a priori* by the signifier “whiteness” can never be other than a failure in self, an ontological dead end unable to measure up to the potential of its primary referent (i.e., whiteness). If, as Dunbar advocated, we must seek to integrate concerns about race in archival discourse as a means of engendering “alternative discussions,” what can be done when the very terms of those discussions are engineered to foreclose the possibility of this necessary paradigmatic shift in discursive practices? Or, as Honma pointed out, if the epistemological tradition evident in LIS only allows for “. . . the formation of white Eurocentric knowledge to emerge as *the* legitimate form of knowledge that shapes and informs the discipline,”<sup>26</sup> then can we really get at the heart of the reproduction of whiteness and the power of white privilege in the discipline?

If the *métier* of archivists is to create order out of chaos, exerting control over a material and digital world that constantly attempts to exceed its own bounds, what happens when unpredictable social, political, and racial factors challenge standards and practices founded on a normative whiteness? As artist and philosopher Adrian Piper observed, fear is exhibited “. . . when the Other is an anomalous object, circumstance, or practice that intrudes into the safe and comfortable surroundings you have fashioned so carefully.”<sup>27</sup> Resistance to critical inquiry and the demands of social justice demonstrates this fear of that which disrupts established perceptions and actions, and compels archivists to rethink the assumptions that inform their work and fuel their ideological engines.

## Social Justice, Power, and the Troubling of Mark A. Greene<sup>28</sup>

In an endnote to his article, Greene is quick to point out that although he is critical of compelling archivists to adhere to a social justice imperative, his credentials as an “activist archivist”<sup>29</sup> are nonetheless irrefutable. Noting that he was at the forefront of creating and supporting initiatives to increase the representation of diverse histories at his various institutions, he asserts his support for multiculturalism<sup>30</sup> as a means of legitimizing his contentions with a “social justice agenda” and to differentiate multiculturalism’s professional propriety from social justice’s politicized interventions. Framed as a mandate to integrate social responsibility and the support of a just and equitable society into the archivist’s professional practice, Greene nonetheless posits social justice as a dangerous enterprise that “risks overly politicizing and ultimately damaging the archival profession.”<sup>31</sup> Registering a *profound* disagreement with the “social justice thesis,” Greene maintains that the power of archivists rests not with a foray into the political, but in adhering to professional codes of conduct and the parameters set by workplace ethics.

Moreover, he is keen on making a distinction between a commitment to “diversity” and the diversification of archival holdings, and what he posits as the social justice demand that archivists engage in attempting to change structural inequalities typically negotiated in the realm of politics. Although he adheres to an idea of “archival power” and the need to strengthen the “profession’s advocacy agenda,” he nonetheless remains critical of moving beyond these boundaries of engagement insofar as they compromise the *ethical* standing of archivists and the nature of the power they assert. Focused primarily on Randall Jimerson’s book *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice*,<sup>32</sup> Greene’s answer to the “challenge” posed by the argument for the integration of social justice concerns in archival praxis surprisingly does not avail itself of the existing body of work surrounding this issue. Granted, he does address the work of Verne Harris, Michelle Caswell, and David Wallace, but it is Jimerson, whom he designates as “one of the most thoughtful, rigorous, compassionate, articulate, and diplomatic figures in the profession” whose arguments for social justice are “the most forceful, reasoned, and comprehensive,” to which he addresses his retort.<sup>33</sup> Notwithstanding the lack of rigor presented in this gesture, Greene’s choice of Jimerson also belies a troubling move toward maintaining the conversation about power and diversity within the realms of North American whiteness and masculinity.<sup>34</sup> To be fair, Greene and Jimerson have a long-standing personal and professional relationship that one assumes has influenced a safe choice of theoretical adversary, but nevertheless, it is telling that in his reach to support diversity and make a case for archival power and advocacy, Greene

addresses himself to someone whose racial and gender position parallels his own, effectively excluding the very diversity he claims to so fervently support.<sup>35</sup>

With this in mind, we must ask ourselves what Greene means when he speaks of diversity? As noted earlier, he continuously maintains that archivists' only responsibility to this concept is in gathering collections that reflect individuals and organizations of varied backgrounds. As honorable and welcome a goal as this may be, I would contend that by restricting diversity solely to this gesture, and shunning its more challenging permutations (i.e., critiques of racism, sexism, homophobia, etc.), Greene inadvertently contributes to policing the boundaries of difference and the corralling of its ramifications for personal and institutional change. In other words, diversity is allowed to thrive *only if* it refrains from challenging the ability of whiteness to control it. Once it rebels and dares to open the Pandora's box of structural inequalities and problematic power dynamics, it is wholly unwelcome. Throughout his discussion, Greene masks this resistance to a critique of the limited parameters for inclusion and acceptance of diversity in the profession by claiming that purveyors of social justice posit an "either/or" scenario for archivists wherein they are either supporters of political engagement and/or change, or enthusiastic perpetrators of injustice. When he considers the work of Harris and Caswell, Greene is quick to posit their efforts at pointing toward the active role of archives and archivists in knowledge production as contrary to what archivists are accountable for.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Caswell's and Harris's emphases on the extent to which archivists are potentially complicit with systemic malfeasance and inability to avoid political entanglements chafes Greene and leads him to call for what appears to be a more uncomplicated truth wherein archivists are not called upon to confront the impact of their own actions and positionalities.

Indeed, he resists Harris's assertion that archivists recognize their inability to separate their professional lives and practices from the context they inhabit when Harris stated, "for archivists and other recordmakers, 'the political' is unavoidable. Those who believe that they can remain professionally impartial, fool themselves and condemn themselves to being pawns of those who hold power."<sup>37</sup> Arguing that Harris posited a "black-and-white, cut-and-dried understanding of archival roles,"<sup>38</sup> Greene curiously enough supplies his own reductive reading of this statement by gleaning that, rather than advocating for a consideration of complicated and multilayered subjectivities, Harris asserted that archivists are either slated to violently sabotage recordkeeping systems, or are agents of complicity who fail to measure up to the demands of social justice or its advocates. Beyond a lack of desire for accountability, Greene also reveals a profound uneasiness with the ambiguity at the heart of archives and record-making. Moreover, by dismissing Harris's recognition of his inability to resolve how archivists go about "avoiding the dangers" of an exclusionary political



agenda, Greene presses for a clear-cut prescriptive answer that allows no room for speculation or the admittance of the limits of personal knowledge.

Thus, Greene turned to Jimerson as the progenitor of a clearer and more civil articulation of the social justice perspective. He states, “. . . Jimerson presents his conception of social justice goal *less normatively, less stridently*, and, to my mind, *less insultingly*,”<sup>39</sup> though Jimerson remained as frustratingly insistent on introducing political concerns and personal and public accountability within a sacrosanct archival realm. Temporarily setting aside Greene’s loaded and highly problematic framing of the reasons for his choice of Jimerson, let us look more closely at his points of contention with Jimerson’s arguments and what those bring to light about Greene’s unexamined set of assumptions.

According to the article, besides being the most prolific advocate for a social justice perspective in the archives world stateside, Greene credits Jimerson with sharing his own conviction that what archivists do “matters profoundly,” but, nevertheless, Jimerson insists on pushing the boundaries of their level of political engagement too far. Greene notes that for himself “[e]ngaging broadly in politics as professionals makes no more sense . . . when applied to archivists than it would if applied to accountants, computer programmers, or engineers,”<sup>40</sup> while Jimerson maintained that archivists “actively engage the political issues of our times” and reject complacency in the face of repression, inequality, and other similar issues.<sup>41</sup>

Besides positing counterposing perspectives, Greene’s stance glosses over the very profundity of archival work he asserts throughout his article by equating it with the quotidian and denying the impact that archives and archivists have on history, meaning, and identity. In asking, “What is it we’re doing that’s all that important?,” Greene exhibits a curious desire to vacate archival work of its “power” and to relegate it to a state of banality where archivists function solely as “servants”<sup>42</sup> to their public and profession, and stop aspiring to ask more of themselves and their work. Indeed, his issues with Jimerson circulate around his insistence on archivists examining their professional assumptions, methods, and practices in light of concerns regarding social injustice, discrimination, and unchecked social power. Although Greene supports public advocacy insofar as it engages donors, record makers, and other stakeholders, he resists self-reflection and the internalization of critique as a means of interrogating the role and complicity of archivists in structural inequalities. This is the line not to be crossed, the space where we risk “exchanging professional purpose for ‘propaganda.’”<sup>43</sup>

In tandem, Greene takes issue with Jimerson’s rejection of neutrality and greater emphasis on the valence of objectivity as a problematic, yet aspirational, goal in archives. According to Greene, Jimerson was critical of neutrality’s compromising stance and ready accommodation of the status quo, and, instead,



insisted that objectivity offers the possibility of maintaining professional standards while advocating for a moral or ideological perspective. In a gesture that engenders confusion, Greene takes Jimerson to task for not fully admitting to objectivity's elusive nature and the sheer inability for archival work and history to exist in an objective space. He even puts forth his own formulation that transparency should, instead, be our goal, so that "historians and archivists are responsible for understanding and making clear their agency in formulating content and meaning in archives."<sup>44</sup> But then he turns around and vehemently defends the right to neutrality, stating his fear that otherwise "archivists and their institutions will become overly politicized, the stalking horses or pawns of every stripe of partisan effort."<sup>45</sup>

What proceeds is a disturbing appeal to the virtues of neutrality that promotes archives as spaces free of the undue influence of the "contest of ideologies"<sup>46</sup> and that circulates around unrecognized assumptions of whiteness and privilege. Greene indicates that "one of his proudest moments" was when a prospective donor assumed that he was politically conservative given what he articulated as his "polite distance" from conversations involving such topics and his "respectfulness" toward the differing opinions of others.<sup>47</sup> If we begin to unpack this scenario, we are confronted with Greene's striking lack of (self-) awareness regarding the ability of individuals to grant him such leeway given his whiteness, heterosexuality, and gender. Perceived as "normative" (white), researchers and donors are more willing to give Greene the benefit of the doubt and to project their own opinions onto him because his phenotype and heteronormativity do nothing to dissuade them from presuming that he has a prescribed political agenda. Moreover, the use of code words such as "polite" and "respectful" demonstrates an alliance with rhetoric of civility and classism that shuns associations with the impolite, vulgar, uneducated, and disruptive.<sup>48</sup> This rejection of aural, visual, and ideological difference belies an unrecognized uneasiness with a boundary-pushing social justice platform that openly invites otherness and critique into archival spaces and acknowledges and questions the ethics and ideological biases of archivists.

Not surprisingly, Greene disagrees with the possibility of an "accepted power structure that archivists must work against," deeming it a relic of the very positivism of which individuals like Harris and Jimerson are critical. In addition, he contends that even "many white, Christian, heterosexual males feel keenly that they have been radically *disempowered*,"<sup>49</sup> undermining the possibility that power structures in the United States in 2013 continue to benefit them. Although he claims not to ascribe to this belief, one needs to ask oneself why Greene felt compelled to pose this example in particular and to think that he could so readily divorce himself from its implications in a discussion of diversity and inclusivity. Indeed, in an endnote commenting on this passage

on white males, he states “[p]ersonally, I do not happen to find the evidence or argument persuasive, but surely that is beside the point.”<sup>50</sup> But is it “beside the point”? Furthermore, what does this say about Greene’s disagreements with social justice and his framing of it as problematic? Or of social justice as being in violation of the tenets of neutrality and normativity?

In fact, Greene’s conceptualization of *diversity* appears to be more invested in the comfortable belief that it constitutes “subsets of employees within a private organization” as well as some vague notion of “groups who comprise a nation.”<sup>51</sup> Critical of the progenitors of a “social justice agenda” for foregrounding the explicitly *ethical* and *political* complexities at the heart of advocating for diversity, Greene opts for a benign form of inclusion vacated of its potentially radical implications. By promoting a more diffuse and seemingly expansive notion of diversity, he neutralizes its pointed critiques of whiteness, the marginalization of minorities, and so on, and the extent to which these phenomena continue to affect access to power, knowledge, and historical representation. Put off by the purported exclusion of corporate archivists from the social justice equation, Greene loses sight of the specificity of the demand for diversity, which, at its best, speaks to the structural exclusion of women and minorities and, instead, makes a case for the inclusion of the privacy concerns of corporations as a representation of difference. Despite his protests to the contrary, Greene seems wholly unaware of how problematic this proposition is and the extent to which it reifies unequal power structures and recenters historically dominant forces.

### Whither Diversity?: The Society of American Archivists and the Racial Divide

Notwithstanding efforts to the contrary, the archival profession in turn continues to suffer from the ongoing marginalization of change and difference due to its inability to recognize the normative whiteness that continues to lie at the heart of its motivations. Despite rolling out the proverbial welcome mat for “diversity” through some of its programs and policies, and exhibiting an enthusiastic tolerance for difference, representative organizations in the United States, such as the Society of American Archivists, continue to fail to experience structural changes that would shift nearly exclusive directional and policy-making power away from the hands of whites. Anecdotal evidence of the lack of nonwhite bodies within the profession and at organizational events was corroborated by a Membership Needs and Satisfaction Survey published by SAA in the spring of 2012, which revealed that among individual respondents, only 3 percent were Latino, 3 percent were Asian, 2 percent were African American, and 1 percent were Native American, with zero representation from Pacific

Islanders or Alaskan natives, and an overwhelming 89 percent self-identified as white/Caucasian.<sup>52</sup> Not only was this not addressed as a point of concern in the “Conclusions and Recommendations” section of this report, but the only comment associated with these racial disparities is located in the section detailing loyalty to the organization, which was difficult to measure given the low numbers of minorities represented.

The failed interest in the ramifications of this finding drew parallels in the debate over the lack of consideration for the inclusion of diversity as a primary goal for SAA in a draft of its 2013–2018 strategic plan.<sup>53</sup> After several years of emphasizing it as a stated priority, the authors of the revised plan now argued that diversity was implied in its other goals and designs for the profession and did not need to be explicitly stated. Under pressure from members,<sup>54</sup> SAA had to reconsider its oversight and included diversity as a core goal in a revised version of the plan.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, given the stated figures depicting a profession dominated by whiteness, it is not surprising that diversity, and particularly racial diversity, should be overlooked. In a sociocultural and political environment purportedly experiencing a “postracial” renaissance in which it is hardly necessary to give much consideration to racism and its concomitant structural disparities, SAA’s move to remove diversity as a stated goal and agenda item was unfortunately not surprising. Equally, organizational leadership’s belief in the ability to address diversity, in all of its manifestations, from within other points in its agenda was further evidence of this investment in the idea of a society not in need of policies and practices that attempt to directly address its inequalities. Although SAA subsequently conducted an online survey soliciting membership opinion on “diversifying the archival record,”<sup>56</sup> the endemic whiteness of the profession will only continue to condemn it to committing the same mistakes if the organization’s, and, in turn, the profession’s, own racial disparities are not addressed. Yes, SAA supports efforts such as the Mosaic Scholarship, the Diversity Committee, and the Harold T. Pinkett Minority Student Award,<sup>57</sup> all of which seek to redress this imbalance by funding students of color and fostering diversity initiatives. But, as Piper again reminds us, these liberal gestures of nobility do little to address the primary reasons why few people of color are represented in the ranks of American archivists.<sup>58</sup>

But what are the factors that contribute to this disparity and that continue to support whiteness as an archival norm? Of the sparse online comments to the aforementioned survey on “diversifying the archival record,” several indicated the need for the archival profession to critically interrogate itself and its praxis, and to do the hard work of looking at its own sociocultural and racial homogeneity.<sup>59</sup> In addition, in what could have been a comment on participation in the survey itself, one individual discussed attending a session on diversity in the profession at an SAA annual conference, only to find the room less than half full.<sup>60</sup>

This lack of engagement with issues of diversity, and specifically racial diversity, demonstrates an inability to envision what is problematic about 89 percent of archivists being white. If whiteness is normative, if its privileged beneficiaries are unaware of the ways in which they are complicit and in positions of great advantage (which more than likely increase their prospects in the profession), then how is it possible to contend honestly with the issue of increasing diversity and changing the very system that suppresses it? Indeed, if one is vested with unquestioned power, why disrupt the structures that hand you that power and ultimately benefit you throughout your career? Are most archivists even aware of how whiteness ferries their lives and enables their success?

Well intended as most archivists are, the very fact that the profession is predominantly white limits the possibility of having a dialogue about racial diversity, for example, due to the fact that the engine of homogeneity driving the profession is not perceived as a problem. As V. Chapman-Smith has pointed out, although population trends indicate that by 2050 the United States will be a majority minority nation, the pipeline currently feeding the archival profession, and its future leadership, stems from fields among “the whitest in the United States.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the profession will remain immune to change, and increased racial difference, as long as this remains the case. Moreover, Chapman-Smith astutely noted that rampant dropout rates among minorities, lack of early engagement with archives or other historical sources, and an educational system that places the bulk of minorities at a disadvantage, all contribute to keeping access to the archival profession limited.<sup>62</sup> Unless the profession and its leading organizations are willing to confront this fact, and develop and/or participate in policy initiatives and progressive political movements that address these structural problems as roots of its lack of racial diversity, then the field will continue to be woefully absent of nonwhite bodies. Laudable as initiatives such as the Harold T. Pinkett Minority Student Award and the Mosaic Scholarship are, they regrettably only attend to the small fraction of people of color who have been able to overcome the structural obstacles that may have stood between them and higher education.<sup>63</sup>

Recognizing the link between educational and economic disparities, and the whiteness of the profession, is to also acknowledge how committing to diversity as a core organizational goal necessitates the examination of structural inequalities and one’s role in perpetuating them. As long as this is not done, the profession will continue to remain as homogenous in 2050 as it currently is. Of course, this is assuming that white archivists are willing to make the necessary changes and reflect upon their own privileged status. As pointed out beforehand, given the systemic advantages of whiteness, it is an open question as to whether much impetus exists for further change and/or self-interrogation within the profession. Are archivists and organizations such as SAA willing to

push past a benign interpretation of diversity and prioritize a disruptive engagement with difference that undergirds their own position in the archival hierarchy? Will the profession ever recognize that a patchwork of collections is not the equivalent of parity in representation? Rather than curtail them, how do we as a profession instead promote the growth of alternative perspectives, such as social justice and Critical Race Theory, which seek to question the method and madness, the whiteness, of the profession?

The ongoing and increasing homogeneity of archivists is certainly a factor, but, moreover, the ideological fallout of this homogeneity, and blind spots engendered by its representative whiteness, act as barriers to the profession moving beyond its current approach to diversification. Rather than supplying facile solutions to what is a product of systemic racism and classism, can the profession commit itself to addressing its role in perpetuating these “isms” and in pondering how and where it could intervene to diminish their impact on the makeup of its membership? Moreover, instead of framing this as an enforced agenda outside the central concerns of archivists, can we begin to reify the notion that archivists are of the world and not somehow removed from it? How do we remind archivists that *being* an archivist does not somehow absolve them of also being a product of society and therefore subject to its prejudices and assumptions? All of these questions and issues have ramifications for archivists’ interactions with donors, colleagues, and researchers, and deeply inform their perspectives on the needs and direction of the profession.

## Conclusion

Trihn T. Minh-ha stated, “. . . Tradition remains the sacred weapon oppressors repeatedly hold up whenever the need to maintain their privileges, hence to impose the form of the old on the content of the new, arises.”<sup>64</sup> If social justice feels like an imposition, it is the threat of structural change and the displacement of power dynamics that privilege select individuals that are more at issue. Whiteness and masculinity in this instance serve to maintain a small and heavily privileged group at the top of the archival heap and to continue to dictate the terms of propriety and belonging. This scenario is made all the more problematic by the lack of apparent awareness of or desire to recognize the manner in which prejudice and power are continuously exerted. Professed sympathies for the plight of diversity go further to muddy the situation insofar as they mask the ubiquitous benefits of whiteness and masculinity, and their ability to transcend the political divide. Indeed, leftist affinities alone do not render one immune from critique or incapable of being oppressive.

As Ann Russo asserted, “. . . keeping whiteness an invisible and unscrutinized presence reproduces unequal power lines rather than disrupting them.”<sup>65</sup>

An unexamined whiteness, no matter its political leanings, continues to support and replicate structural inequalities that inevitably marginalize people of color and maintain the status quo. By deflecting more in-depth critiques, such as that posed by social justice, CRT, and so on and, indeed, by claiming that they are far outside the concerns of archival praxis, archivists do their profession a profound disservice and contribute not only to circumscribing the historical record, but toward delimiting the impact of their work for future generations. Given the aforementioned demographic shifts, archivists will be hard pressed to claim relevance for the majority of people living in the United States and will be woefully out of step with the historical future. It is not enough to collect with an eye toward diversity without expanding the ranks of those who do the collecting. This will necessitate a paradigmatic shift in power wherein whiteness no longer claims unquestioned and protected status and where the roots of our professional imbalances are addressed. Rather than trying to supply solutions that contend with this issue at the tail end of the process, therefore limiting our reach, archivists, much like V. Chapman-Smith, need to further develop programs and policies that intervene early in the life cycle of engagement with historical sources and advocate for dramatic changes in the educational system. As the Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group (PACG) suggested, it is important to recognize the systemic nature of the problems involved in attempting to diversify the profession, “. . . diversifying the student population without expanding pedagogy and practice perpetuates a lack of awareness and consideration of the perspectives, behaviors, and needs of many different communities.”<sup>66</sup> If we are truly committed to diversity as a core goal, then we need to remove intraprofessional obstacles, such as racism and white privilege, which impinge upon our ability to fulfill it. By questioning whiteness and its semantic markers (such as *tradition*, *neutrality*, and *objectivity*) and having honest dialogues about how we as a profession and individuals perpetuate inequality, we can liberate ourselves to do the real work of documenting history to our fullest capacity—in turn, inaugurating a praxis that listens “. . . for the voices of those who are marginalised or excluded by prevailing relations of power.”<sup>67</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joel Schumacher, *Falling Down*, directed by Joel Schumacher (Los Angeles: Warner Brothers, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Mark Greene, “A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What Is It We’re Doing That’s All That Important?,” *The American Archivist* 76 (Fall/Winter 2013): 302–34.

<sup>3</sup> This marks a dramatic shift in Greene’s stance on the generative potential of the relationship between postmodernism and archives. In previous articles such as “The Power of Archives: Archivists’ Values and Value in the Postmodern Age (with an Introduction by Dennis Meissner),” *The American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (2009): 13–41; “The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age,” *The American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (2002): 42–55; and “The Messy Business of Remembering: History, Memory, and Archives,” *Archival Issues: Journal of the Midwest Archives*

Conference 28 (2003), we get the sense that postmodernism is a positive force in archival praxis, bringing into healthy speculation archival intentionality and subjectivity. But, moreover, Greene argued against claims of archival neutrality or objectivity, which stands in stark contrast to his current desire to hold onto objectivity as an archival value and standard. He also presented himself as a greater advocate for the importance of the work of archivists, something that he seems to dismantle by the tenor and title of this article.

- <sup>4</sup> Society of American Archivists, Membership Needs and Satisfaction Survey, Spring 2012, <http://files.archivists.org/membership/surveys/saaMemberSurvey-2012r2.pdf>. Page 13 contains information on the ethnic/racial breakdown.
- <sup>5</sup> Although I share Todd Honma's and the Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group's criticisms of the concept of "diversity," I use the term as a strategic rhetorical device that mirrors current discourses around racial difference in archival organizations. See Archival Education, "Research Institute (AERI), Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group (PACG) (2011) Educating for the Archival Multiverse," *The American Archivist* 73, no. 1 (2010): 69–101. Todd Honma, "Trippin' over the Color Line: The Invisibility of Race in Library and Information Studies," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2005).
- <sup>6</sup> Anthony W. Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started," *Archival Science* 6, no. 1 (2006): 109–29, doi:10.1007/s10502-006-9022-6.
- <sup>7</sup> Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse," 110.
- <sup>8</sup> Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse," 117.
- <sup>9</sup> Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse," 113.
- <sup>10</sup> Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse," 113.
- <sup>11</sup> For additional information on Critical Race Theory (CRT), please see Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward," *Connecticut Law Review* 43 (2010): 1253.
- <sup>12</sup> George Lipsitz, "Libraries and Memories: Beyond White Privilege 101," *Librarian* 32 (2009): 3–9.
- <sup>13</sup> George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).
- <sup>14</sup> Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Peace and Freedom* 49, no. 4 (1989): 10–12.
- <sup>15</sup> McIntosh, "White Privilege," 10–12.
- <sup>16</sup> Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* (1993), 1707–91.
- <sup>17</sup> Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1726.
- <sup>18</sup> Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1714.
- <sup>19</sup> Harris, "Whiteness as Property," 1714.
- <sup>20</sup> Honma, "Trippin' over the Color Line."
- <sup>21</sup> Among the works cited by Honma are Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*; David R. Roediger, *Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past*, vol. 10 (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2002).
- <sup>22</sup> Honma, "Trippin' over the Color Line," 5.
- <sup>23</sup> Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," *borderlands* 3, no. 2 (2004): 1–15.
- <sup>24</sup> Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness," 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness a Lacanian Analysis of Race* (London, New York: Routledge, 2000), ebrary, <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10054250>.
- <sup>26</sup> Honma, "Trippin' over the Color Line," 15.
- <sup>27</sup> Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996), 129.
- <sup>28</sup> Greene states, "... troubling is the notion that a moral imperative exists for archivists to 'work against the grain' by deconstructing both the recordkeeping systems that sustain privilege (but that also hold the privileged accountable later) and the very power relationships that establish privilege as well." Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative," 306.
- <sup>29</sup> F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *The American Archivist* 38, no. 1 (1975): 5–13.



- <sup>30</sup> Honma, "Trippin' over the Color Line," provides an insightful critique of the use of the rhetoric of multiculturalism and diversity by white LIS professionals to circumvent contending with racism and "social and institutional structures of discrimination," 9. In particular, see pp. 9–13.
- <sup>31</sup> Honma, "Trippin' over the Color Line," 303.
- <sup>32</sup> Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009).
- <sup>33</sup> Jimerson, *Archives Power*, 328.
- <sup>34</sup> Although Caswell, Harris, and Wallace are themselves, in particular, critical of the prevailing whiteness of archival discourse (see following footnote), Greene's references to their work indicates his keeping of the conversation about diversity and archival power bereft of any representation/representatives of racial difference within the profession. In addition, I point toward the masculinist bent of Greene's choice of Jimerson insofar as it indicates a profession that, as noted earlier, has become increasingly female, if not feminist, but that is butting up against an older establishment that remains predominantly male and white.
- <sup>35</sup> Michelle Caswell posed a similar critique in her response to Greene's essay, "Not Just Between Us: A Riposte to Mark Greene," *The American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 605–6. Verne Harris also noted the problematic nature of the overarching whiteness and male tenor of archival discourse in his essay "Concerned with the Writings of Others: Archival Canons, Discourses, and Voices," in *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective*, ed. V. S. Harris (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007). Greene's response to Caswell's statement can be found in a letter to the editor in *The American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 607–8.
- <sup>36</sup> Among the works that Greene cites are Michelle Caswell, "Khmer Rouge Archives: Accountability, Truth, and Memory in Cambodia," *Archival Science* 10, no. 1 (2010): 25–44; and Caswell, "Hannah Arendt's World: Bureaucracy, Documentation, and Banal Evil," *Archivaria* 70, no. 70 (2010).
- <sup>37</sup> Verne Harris, "Jacques Derrida Meets Nelson Mandela: Archival Ethics at the Endgame," *Archival Science* 11, nos. 1–2 (2011): 113–24, doi:10.1007/s10502-010-9111-4; Harris, *Archives and Justice*.
- <sup>38</sup> Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative," 304. This is a curious assessment given that Greene is more often than not critical of Harris for being vague and, indeed, "nonsensical," see pp. 306–7, for example.
- <sup>39</sup> Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative," 308. Emphasis added.
- <sup>40</sup> Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative," 308.
- <sup>41</sup> For Jimerson's response to some of these statements, see "Archivists and Social Responsibility: A Response to Mark Greene," *The American Archivist* 76, no. 2 (2013): 335–45.
- <sup>42</sup> Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative," 8, 329.
- <sup>43</sup> Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative," 310.
- <sup>44</sup> Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative," 311.
- <sup>45</sup> Greene, "A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative." For an elucidating critique of the concept of neutrality, see Anne Gilliland, "Neutrality, Social Justice and the Obligations of Archival Education and Educators in the Twenty-First Century," *Archival Science* 11, nos. 3–4 (2011): 193–209, doi:10.1007/s10502-011-9147-0. Also interestingly, Howard Zinn, who Greene cites as having given rhetorical birth to the concept of the "activist archivist," was highly critical of the archivist's insistence on being divorced from the sphere of the political. He stated, "The archivist . . . tends to be scrupulous about his neutrality, and to see his job as a technical job, free from the nasty world of political interests. . . . But I will stick by what I have said about other scholars and argue that the archivist, in subtle ways, tends to perpetuate the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business." He went on to note that this neutrality is false and that " . . . the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role is not . . . the politicizing of a neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitable political craft." Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," *The Midwestern Archivist* (1977): 14–26, 20.
- <sup>46</sup> Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," 312.
- <sup>47</sup> Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," 312.
- <sup>48</sup> Barak Orbach, "On Hubris, Civility, and Incivility," *Arizona Law Review* 54 (2012): 443; Philip Smith, *Incivility: The Rude Stranger in Everyday Life* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

- <sup>49</sup> Smith, *Incivility*, 313.
- <sup>50</sup> Smith, *Incivility*, 331.
- <sup>51</sup> Smith, *Incivility*, 27.
- <sup>52</sup> SAA, Membership Needs and Satisfaction Survey.
- <sup>53</sup> Society of American Archivists, *Strategic Plan (2013–2018)*, draft, <http://www2.archivists.org/governance/strategic-priorities/draftFY2013-18>.
- <sup>54</sup> SAA, *Strategic Plan*. See comments section for select member reactions. In a move that belies his complex and contradictory relationship to difference, Mark A. Greene was one of the first individuals to critique the absence of diversity as a primary goal of the plan. He stated, “Diversity of membership is not a matter of advocating for archives but of either advancing the field (by making its practitioners as diverse as the material they seek to acquire) or meeting members needs. I would argue we need (whether we know it or not) diverse colleagues to fully realize ourselves as professionals.”
- <sup>55</sup> SAA, *Strategic Plan*.
- <sup>56</sup> Society of American Archivists, “Poll: What Does Diversifying the Archival Record Mean to You?,” <http://www2.archivists.org/news/2013/poll-what-does-diversifying-the-archival-record-mean-to-you>.
- <sup>57</sup> For more information, see Society of American Archivists, “Mosaic Scholarship,” <http://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section12-mosaic>; SAA, “Diversity Committee,” <http://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section7/groups/Diversity>; and SAA, “Harold T. Pinkett Minority Student Award,” <http://www2.archivists.org/governance/handbook/section12-pinkett>. It should also be noted that I was the recipient of a similar fellowship from the American Library Association (ALA), the Spectrum Doctoral Fellowship.
- <sup>58</sup> Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*. This issue also arises in the broader library and information studies field. Even when programs are deemed a success, the adherence to a benign desire for diversity proves challenging to maintaining them. See Nicole A. Cooke, “The Spectrum Doctoral Fellowship Program: Enhancing the LIS Professoriate,” *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 10, no. 1 (2014), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7vb7v4p8.pdf>; and again, Honma, “Trippin’ over the Color Line.” For a resounding critique of the ineffectiveness of these “diversity” programs in addressing structural problems, see again, “Research Institute (AERI), Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group (PACG)(2011) Educating for the Archival Multiverse.”
- <sup>59</sup> SAA, “Poll: What Does Diversifying the Archival Record Mean to You?” See comments by Jenny Swadosh and “astanley@athens.”
- <sup>60</sup> SAA, “Poll: What Does Diversifying the Archival Record Mean to You?” Comment was provided by “stev1084A.”
- <sup>61</sup> V. Chapman-Smith, “Societal Trends and Archives Outreach: Constructing Roadmaps for Program Growth and Sustainability,” presentation at the Center for Jewish History for its series of annual seminars, “Archival Leaders Advocate,” New York, November 11, 2011. See Power Point presentation for further information, <http://www.cjh.org/pdfs/11092011ArchivalLeadersAdvocateSeminar.pdf>. For a video of the presentation, visit <http://www.cjh.org/videoplayer.php?vfile=11112011CHAPMANSMITH.mp4&iframe&width=481&height=360>.
- <sup>62</sup> Chapman-Smith, “Societal Trends and Archives Outreach.”
- <sup>63</sup> Although not discussed here in great length, the Archival Education and Research Initiative (AERI) goes just a step further with its Emerging Archival Scholars program by recruiting and funding the attendance of potential doctoral students from diverse backgrounds at its annual summer institutes. See <http://aeri.gseis.ucla.edu/fellowships.htm>.
- <sup>64</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 106.
- <sup>65</sup> Ann Russo, “Between Speech and Silence: Reflections on Accountability,” in *Silence, Feminism, Power: Reflections at the Edges of Sound*, ed. Sheena Malhorta and Aimee Carrillo Rowe (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 39.
- <sup>66</sup> “Research Institute (AERI), Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group (PACG)(2011) Educating for the Archival Multiverse,” 70.
- <sup>67</sup> Verne Harris, “The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa,” *Archival Science* 2, nos. 1–2 (2002): 63–86.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

---



**Mario H. Ramirez** is a third-year doctoral student in the Department of Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, where he is also pursuing a Certificate in Experimental Critical Theory. Previously, he worked as a project archivist at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College, City University of New York, and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. He holds a master's degree in library and information science and a certificate in archives and records management from Long Island University, C.W. Post; a master's degree in rhetoric from the University of California, Berkeley; and a bachelor's degree in American studies from the University of California, Santa Cruz. His current research is focused on the documentation of human rights violations in El Salvador.