

# Documenting Justice - Archivists and the Fight Against Covert Racism in the Contemporary United States

Christopher Anglim

University of the District of Columbia (USA)

doi: <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.135.2>

## ABSTRACT

Pursuing an archival perspective, this study emphasizes documenting the experiences of activists involved in contemporary social justice movements (such as Black Lives Matter) to develop the historical record more fully, especially the need to include the voices of those from underrepresented groups. This study analyzes how archival practices can help develop and preserve a fuller record of the social justice movements and the ideas of those who fought covert racism both within academic settings and the greater society. To answer our research issues, the study used a literature review and a survey of activists and archival institutions. Our findings establish the value of archival research in academic institutions for students and the community in developing a fuller understanding of historically underrepresented and marginalized groups. Therefore, we conclude archives can play a major contribution to the understanding of contemporary social justice movements and to the issues of concern to these movements.

**Keywords:** archival practices, contemporary social justice movements

## 1 Introduction

“There should be a space for alternative realities, alternative ways of knowing, in the archive. There should be room for imagining a world in which justice, not injustice triumphed. —Hazel V. Carby, “The National Archives”. Never has it been more important to document history when it happens today, and never, has it been easier for the archivist to do so than with the tools that are widely available today. This paper will review organized archival efforts to capture events in social justice movements that oppose covert racism.

### 1.1 Archival Neutrality: Professional Obligation or Failure to Serve the Greater Good

Archival Neutrality is the traditional concept that archivists are the neutral stewards of history. This position implies that archivists: 1) objectively develop policies considering institutional missions; 2) are concerned about the authenticity of records but not the truth of records; 3) make selection decisions based on the records and the context of their creation; 4) use standards for description that support access to materials; 4) create use policies that support equal access within institutional restrictions and the law; and 5) as public institutions assume a more active role in movements for social justice, archivists such as Rachel Wachtel questions the neutrality of archivists selecting materials for display in a university gallery. Contextualized within theories of archival activism demanding that archivists acknowledge their authoritative role in shaping public discourse (Wachtel, 2018) (Note, 2019).



A dramatic change in archival thinking was marked in 1970, at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, historian Howard Zinn gave a seminal speech in which he challenged one of the core foundational principles upon which modern archives practice was built, that of neutrality. The whole notion, said Zinn, was a “fake,” a cop-out, a dangerously passive avoidance of the inherently political nature of the archival endeavor. Neutrality allowed the archivist to perpetuate the status quo, reflect and reinforce society’s economic and political disparities, and preserve the interests of the rich, powerful, literate, or otherwise privileged, at the expense of the less so (Zinn, 1977).

Zinn added that “the existence, preservation, and availability of archives, documents, and records in our society are very much determined by the distribution of wealth and power. That is, the most powerful, the richest elements in society have the greatest capacity to find documents, preserve them, and decide what is or is not available to the public. This means that government, business, and the military are dominant” (Zinn, 1977).

Zinn challenged archives’ unwitting acquiescence to entrenched power, campaigned against government secrecy, and to acknowledge and confront the societal biases that ignore the marginal, the poor, the non-literate, and even the ordinary; in essence, to embrace an activist rather than passive mindset (Zinn, 1977).

Zinn’s speech was highly controversial at the time. In the half-century, numerous writers and participants in archival discourse have invoked the word activist in calling for new approaches to a range of archival concepts and practices, including ownership, diversity, non-textual cultural heritage, information rights, community archives, the definition of the record, user participation, ethical codes, and the responsibilities of the archivist (Zinn, 1977).

Archivist thought has changed dramatically during the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as Terry Cook (1997) described in his well-regarded article on archival history and theory. He observed that trends have moved from a product-focused activity to a process-oriented activity, and this process makes archivists active catalysts of history (Note, 2019). Other key changes during this time were that archival access came to be understood as more than just finding aids, but also reference, outreach, education, and connecting with communities. Furthermore, the archival profession realized that they must better document the diverse communities they serve. To do so, archivists needed to be more inclusive in their practices, engage others with cultural competency, and understand the broad information needs of contemporary archives users. As opposed to seeing archives as just the neutral construction of the product, archivists came to perceive their work as actively processing history and preserving our collective memory (Note, 2019).

Seeing a balance between the archives’ community’s traditional role and its newer obligations to serve as agents of social justice, Randall Jimerson, author, and former SAA President, provided the following provocative interpretation of the archivists’ role in the early 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

“Archivists should use their power—in determining what records will be preserved for future generations and in interpreting this documentation for researchers—for the benefit of all members of society. By adopting a social conscience for the profession, they can commit themselves to active engagement in the public arena. Archivists can

use the power of archives to promote accountability, open government, diversity, and social justice. In doing so, it is essential to distinguish objectivity from neutrality. Advocacy and activism can address social issues without abandoning professional standards of fairness, honesty, detachment, and transparency” (Jimerson, 2007).

## **1.2 The Society of American Archivists on Black Lives and Archives: Providing Leadership and Support**

Like many other professions, archivists have a large national professional organization that represents them. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) is the largest and oldest national professional association of archivists. In June 2020, The SAA issued a statement on Black Lives and Archives that emphasized archival repositories in the United States must be concerned with the safety of archives workers and explicitly commit themselves to the causes of social responsibility, justice, and anti-racism in the work archivists perform and the organizations archivists work with (SAA, Statement on Black Lives).

On June 12, 2020, The SAA Council convened at the Community Reflection on Black Lives and Archives to encourage healing and understanding. This was the first such meeting in the organization’s history. The SAA invited all archivists to participate in a reflection on the continuation of anti-Black violence and an affirmation of the importance of Black lives. The forum also provided an opportunity for SAA to gather constructive feedback and develop anti-racist goals. Dr. Meredith R. Evans, Director of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum in Atlanta and 74th President of the Society of American Archivists moderated the session. The speakers included: Zakiya Collier, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library; Dorothy Berry, Houghton Library, Harvard University; Courtney Chartier, Rose Library, Emory University; and, Erin Lawrimore, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro SAA Community Reflection, 2020).

## **1.3 The Case for Archivist Involvement and Activism Against Racism**

As Zinn and the early progressive archivists observed, archives and archivists are essential to the preservation, continuity, and persistence of memory, but archivists are agents of transformation and change too (Zinn, 1977). The traditional role of archivists is to appraise, collect, preserve, organize, and provide access to archives in adherence to archival standards and codes of ethics. In recent years, archivists and archival organizations provided increasing support and interest for the development of tools and resources to dismantle structural racism in collaboration with the community.

Because archivists determine what becomes a part of the historical record, archivists also have the responsibility to safeguard accurate representations of contemporaneous events. Because records provide evidence for factual claims, it is archivists’ responsibility, as stewards of records, to stand against their exploitation or abuse (Archives for black lives).

Over the years, critics have criticized archives for several reasons related to structural and covert racism, including that: 1) archives are often situated within institutions of power that historically have reinforced systemic oppression; 2) archives have historically been inaccessible or unwelcoming to marginalized groups; 3) archival collecting strategy has often focused their attention and preservation efforts on the narratives of wealthy, white,

heterosexual, males while ignoring or erasing the narratives of marginalized communities; and, 4) archival practice and theory include concepts such as provenance that promote social hierarchy and privilege document-creators (those who have the means to create and preserve records) over subjects (Archives for black lives).

After decades of discussion, changes in technology, and most importantly, a realization that archives in the past have been used to promote racism, and that archivists have a professional duty to oppose racism in our professional practice, archivists are increasingly committed to critically examining archival theory and practice, to educate ourselves about the active relationship between archives and social justice, and to engage collaboratively with marginalized communities, and thus bring about a revolution of learning and sharing authority for creating and, maintaining the shared memory (Archives for black lives).

Specifically, archivists are increasingly committed to these specific examples of social justice by 1) advocating for appropriate policies and practices on police and correctional records (Archives for black lives); 2) promoting policies that would place police dashboard cameras and body camera footage into the public record, with appropriate documentation, retention, access, and citizens' privacy rights; 3) supporting community-based documentation and archival practice; and, 4) promoting records retention, archival selection, and preservation decisions that affirm the importance of Black lives in the historical record (Archives for black lives).

#### **1.4 Rising to the Social Justice Challenge: New Activist Archives and Activist Archivists.**

This study considered several activist archives for the Literature Review. They included the Documentation Center of Cambodia which houses documentation engendered by advocacy groups or individuals in the course of their work; Columbia University's Human Rights Web Archiving project, which is a collection developed to house the history of social justice work; the National Security Archive, which has been developed through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to declassify, collect, disseminate and analyze government documents; or an approach, in which archives engage actively and directly in the documentation and record-collection process itself (the Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, i-Witness Video). Other organizations such as Archivists Without Borders and the Documentation Affinity Group work on projects worldwide to deal with several different archiving and documentation projects and challenges (WITNESS Media Archive)

NB: Archives for Change was the first name of an SAA committee formed in 1971 in response to Zinn's speech; it later became ACT, and later still, Progressive Archivists (Zinn, 1977).

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Survey on Actions taken by Institutional Archives to Oppose Racism**

This chart reports our findings of the actions taken by institutions nationwide to act against racism, either through anti-racism policies and procedures, efforts to raise awareness of racism and antiracism efforts creating anti-racism collections, postings showing support for organizations that oppose racism such as Black Lives Matters, contextualizing racist

collections and materials, removing “honors” for racists who supported the collection in the past. This is a selective list.

**Table 1: Actions of Selected University Institutional Archives to Oppose Racism**

<b>Held Exhibits to Raise Awareness of Racism and Anti-Racism Efforts</b>	<b>Anti-Racist LibGuide</b>	<b>Created Anti-Racism Collections</b>	<b>Flagging Own Collections for Racist Materials</b>	<b>Conceptualizing Racists Materials</b>
American University	Fashion Institute of Technology	Columbia University	Drexel University	
CSU	Northwestern University	Denison University	Georgetown University	
Carnegie Mellon University	Rutgers University	Ohio State University	Princeton University	
Duke University	Simmons University	St. John’s University (NY)	Wake Forest University	
Princeton	UC Davis School of Law	University of Michigan		
Sacramento State University	University of Iowa	University of Virginia		
San Diego State University	University of Michigan	West Virginia University		
Simmons University	University of San Francisco			
Stratford University				
University of Minnesota				
University of Washington				
Xavier University				

## 2.2 Video Archives

As part of their commitment to reaching out to the community and social justice, organizations such as WITNESS Media Archive collect and curate original media compiled by human rights activists – covering both the issues for which they advocate and materials documenting the evolving nature and practice of human rights activism. WITNESS Media Archive works with activists to promote best practices in audiovisual documentation, and

advocates for the value of archives as a critical activity serving social justice and human rights movements.

In interfacing with the community, and particularly community activists, WITNESS asks those with relevant videos, the following questions to build a collection that would consist of videos of interest to the community in pursuing an end to racism wherever it may occur, an end to police brutality, promoting social justice, and promoting human rights. These questions are provocative and encourage prospective donors.

Do you want your videos to be available in the future?

Do you want your videos to serve as evidence of crimes or human rights abuses?

Do you want your videos to raise awareness and educate future generations?

If the answer is yes, it is important to begin thinking about archiving before it is too late (WITNESS: Activists' Guide; WITNESS: Community-Based Approaches).

Still not sure? Here is what might happen if you do not take steps to archive:

Your videos may be accidentally or deliberately deleted and lost forever.

Your videos may exist somewhere, but no one can find them.

Someone may find your videos, but no one can understand what they are about.

Your videos cannot be sufficiently authenticated or corroborated as evidence.

Your videos' quality may become so degraded that no one can use them.

Your videos may be in a format that eventually no one can play (WITNESS: Activists' Guide; WITNESS: Community-Based Approaches).

These types of video collections are essential for community members to document and prove their cases in a variety of contexts. Even in the most benign of circumstances, photographs and video have a compelling force that written text simply does not have. If the video and photographic evidence are so compelling in a memoir, a genealogical study, or a local history, this type of evidence is all the more important where the stakes are extraordinarily high such as in documenting police brutality, human rights abuses, racist behavior, and racially-based terrorism. In the court of public testimony, video is highly influential in proving arguments in a manner that the written or oral word cannot, often because many in our society would either ignore or disbelieve the story. Even in the killing of George Floyd, if there was no video, this incident would not have been as influential in shaping public opinion. In a legal proceeding, often the word of a community member would not nearly carry as much weight as the word of a police officer due to both covert and systematic racism. Also, under the rules of evidence, both on the federal and state level, the word of a police officer is often given more weight than the voice of the accused. In many instances, the only factor to level the playing field and establish the truth of the matter is that a community member has taken and presented a video.

Because this study is a literature review, it uses a qualitative approach to the issue of archives and racism. This literature review presents an objective and critical survey of published literature relevant to the Archival profession and racism. This literature review

includes scholarly articles, news articles, articles from archives organizations, and web pages from several representative institutions addressing archives and the actions they have taken against racism. Literature reviews help identify valid and unbiased studies and produce a synthesis of the relevant findings.

### **3 Results**

While archivists continue to adhere to traditional rules of professional responsibility (including archival neutrality in certain contexts), members of the profession are increasingly aware that their work and how they do it have social justice and anti-racist implications. They are increasingly taking antiracist positions in their policy and procedure statements, reviewing their collections for racist interpretations or content, contextualizing any racist collections, creating antiracist collections, and inviting community members into the archival process, to ensure they are represented both in the decision-making process and in the collections themselves. The study documents an ongoing revolution in the archival profession, which will place archivists at the vanguard of the antiracist cause and ensure that antiracist material is readily available and accessible for all researchers to use.

Archivists take the challenge of racism seriously and believe the archival profession has a responsibility to oppose racism on several grounds, including reviewing their own materials (such as finding aids), issuing policies condemning racism, contextualizing racist materials in collections, and holding programs that condemn racism. The available literature supports the underlying hypothesis of this study.

### **4 Discussion**

This study focused on how the archival profession confronts covert and systemic racism, and how their acts impact higher education. Archives provide the raw material for history and a better understanding of our society. Therefore, being aware of racism and its effects, taking a stand against racism as an institution, developing anti-racism collections, and presenting anti-racism programming is essential to a meaningful effort against racism. While many archives are affiliated with an institution of higher education, many are not. These archives still serve student, faculty, and staff research needs, so, therefore, how archivists manage their collections ensures programs have an anti-racist message.

Further research on this topic would include an extensive quantitative study using surveys among various stakeholders, including archivists, archive users, faculty members, historians, and students from a variety of different universities in different parts of the United States. The study would seek to determine the attitudes and perspectives on approaches archivists should take against racism, particularly on issues regarding public programming, collections, and policies and procedures.

#### **4.1 Recognizing Uncomfortable Truths, Interpreting Them, and Answering the Call to Action.**

Systemic racism, particularly pervasive racism played a major role in the development of a society and was allowed to flourish in that society will most likely pervade almost every aspect of this society. One uncomfortable truth is that archives in a society cannot avoid being

a product of that society, meaning that the taint of racism is reflected in the archival collection, and may have affected the interpretation of the archives in the past, or may be reflected in the finding aids and other documents that the archives created. While “neutrality” has been a major principle in archival practice for years, this principle must be rethought when it comes to the evils of racism. The archival community has recognized racism and archives throughout the United States have taken action to fight racism, including activities such as public programs.

The broader significance is that archivists chose what becomes part of the historical record, and therefore have a role in shaping society’s understanding of key events in a society’s development by deciding what items are worthy of preservation and what items are not. The archival profession has long contended with the issue of racism. The evils and dangers of racism became particularly apparent during the time frame of the Trump presidency, along with an unprecedented anti-racism response that is reshaping the nation in ways that few saw possible even a few years ago.

The issues discussed in this paper are timely today and are likely to be timely for decades to come. Racism has been an enduring issue with deep roots in our society. It will only be eradicated with time, effort, and historical perspectives provided by archivists in their daily work of preserving and documenting the past.

In the past, archives disproportionately housed historical records associated with the rich, powerful and well-positioned. Archives are more than ever now focused on the experiences of the marginalized and dispossessed and are more willing to focus on the darker side of the American story and the lives of people who suffered under American racism. There needs to be much more research, documentation, and scholarship on several different issues of American racism.

## **5 Conclusion**

This study focuses on how archivists respond to racism. Racism has had a long and ugly history in the United States. Over the past four or five years, the ugliness of racism has been revealed in video footage of racist marchers in Charlottesville, police brutality in several instances, including the police killings of George Floyd in Minneapolis and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, and the insurrection at the US Capitol building. As covered throughout this study, the archival community has taken several steps to act against racism, yet much more is needed to eradicate racism. Archivists have and continue to play a major role in this effort.

The Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, the irresponsible rhetoric and policies of the Trump administration, the growth of hate crimes, the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and the insurrection at the US Capitol, all reflect the extent of racism in society, and the need to confront and defeat racism wherever it may be found. In some cases, racism may find its way into our finding aids, our collections, or even past collecting decisions. In some cases, racism can be open and readily apparent. In other cases, racism can be more subtle or nuanced, and harder to detect. In both cases, the issue must be addressed and dealt with. Our researchers should find that our repositories are spaces that welcome diversity and are inclusionary.



The impacts of racism are corrosive and destructive to our profession, our society, our relationships, the integrity of higher education, the values we purportedly share as a nation, and our standing in the world. The archives community must continue to speak out against racism and build upon the actions taken to oppose racism. It must continue the dialogue on the effects of racism and its impacts on society and take positive action to effect real change.

## 6 Declarations

### 6.1 Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my colleagues at the University of the District of Columbia and in the archive's profession for their work on behalf of social justice and for their support in documenting the lives and careers of the marginalized and the underprivileged.

### 6.2 Competing Interests

The author certifies that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

### 6.3 Publisher's Note

AJR remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

## References

- A people's archive of police violence in Cleveland. <https://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/>
- Archives for black lives in philly (a4blip), statement of principles. <https://github.com/rappel110/A4BLiP>
- Archives So White. Bibliography from the SAA Issues & Advocacy Roundtable <https://issuesandadvocacy.wordpress.com/2016/04/18/archivessowhite-intro-bibliography/>
- Bliss, D. (2019, February 6). Archival Neutrality and Archival Authority. [avidallynbliss.com/2019/02/06/archival-neutrality-and-archival-authority/](https://avidallynbliss.com/2019/02/06/archival-neutrality-and-archival-authority/)
- Cook, T. (1997). What Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift. *Archivaria* 43, 17-63.
- DocNow: Ethical considerations for archiving social media content generated by contemporary social movements: Challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. <https://www.docnow.io/docs/docnow-whitepaper-2018.pdf>
- Drake, J. (2016, June 27). *Expanding #ArchivesForBlackLives to Traditional Archival Repositories*. Medium. <https://medium.com/on-archivy/expanding-archivesforblacklives-to-traditional-archival-repositories-b88641e2daf6#.fr1uexerh>
- Harris, V. (2002). The archival sliver: power, memory, and archives in South Africa. *Archival Science* 2, 63-86.
- Jimmerson, R. (2007, Fall-Winter). Archives for all: Professional responsibility and social justice. *The American Archivist*, 70 (2), 252-281. Retrieved January 25, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40294571>.
- Libraries 4 Black Lives* (L4BL). <http://libraries4blacklives.org/>. An online space for libraries to support Black Lives Matter.
- National museum of african american history: let's talk! dialogues on race initiative. <https://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/educators/lets-talk>.
- North Carolina House of Representatives (2015). House bill 97. <http://www.ncleg.net/Sessions/2015/Bills/House/PDF/H97v5.pdf>
- Note, Margot (2019, December 2). Archivists: Neutral or Active? <https://lucidea.com/blog/archivists-neutral-or-active/>

- Pagowsky, N. & Wallace, N. (2015, April). "Black lives matter! Shedding library neutrality rhetoric for social justice." *College and Research Libraries News (ACRL)*, 74 (4), 196. <http://crln.acrl.org/content/76/4/196.full>.
- Poole, A. (2014, Spring/Summer). The strange career of jim crow archives: Race, space, and history in the mid-20th century jim crow south. *American Archivist*, 77 (1), 23-63.
- Schwartz, J. M. & Cook, T (2002). Archives, records, and power: The making of modern memory. *Archival Science*, 2, 1-19.
- Society of American Archivists (2020, June 11). SAA Community Reflection on Black Lives and Archives. [https://www.pathlms.com/saa/events/1996/video\\_presentations/162192](https://www.pathlms.com/saa/events/1996/video_presentations/162192)
- Society of American Archivists. SAA Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-statement-on-diversity-equity-and-inclusion>
- Society of American Archivists (2020, June 2). SAA council statement on black lives and archives. <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-council-statement-on-black-lives-and-archives>
- Society of American Archivists. SAA Code of Conduct. <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-code-of-conduct>.
- Society of American Archivists. SAA education: cultural diversity competency. <https://www.pathlms.com/saa/courses/4839>
- Rhizome: digital resources for a movement against police violence. <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2020/jun/03/digital-resources-for-a-movement-against-police-violence/>
- Sixty inches from center: the blackivists' five tips for organizers, protestors, and anyone documenting movements. <https://sixtyinchesfromcenter.org/the-blackivists-five-tips-for-organizers-protestors-and-anyone-documenting-movements/>
- WITNESS: Activists' Guide to Archiving Video. <https://archiving.witness.org/archive-guide/>
- WITNESS: Community-Based Approaches to Archives From the Black Lives Matter Movement <https://blog.witness.org/2015/09/community-based-approaches-to-archives-from-the-black-lives-matter-movement/>
- Wellburn, W.C. (2007). To 'keep the past in lively memory': William carl bolivar's efforts to preserve african american cultural heritage. *Libraries & the Cultural Record*, 42 (2), 165-79.
- Zinn's address was later published as "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest" in *Midwestern Archivist*, Vol II, Number 2, 1977 pp. 14-27 : [http://www.libr.org/progarchs/documents/Zinn\\_Speech\\_MwA\\_1977.html](http://www.libr.org/progarchs/documents/Zinn_Speech_MwA_1977.html)