

Dear Students: Becoming an Archivist in a Time of Uncertainty and Unrest

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ABSTRACT

This contribution to the special issue is written in the form of a letter addressed to current students in archives. Written in response to the November 2016 election, it considers how the archival profession can navigate issues of racial tension, economic inequality, immigration, and hateful political rhetoric. Archival work is nothing if not critical and cannot be isolated from societal concerns. This letter of personal reflection will consider the interconnections among archives, political issues, and professional practice.

November 9, 2016

Dear students,

Yesterday millions of Americans effectively turned their backs on racial equality, tolerance, inclusion, and diversity. I woke up in tears this morning because I considered this election result a personal affront to my sense of decency and the ideals that brought me to this country. That a man who campaigned using hateful rhetoric against immigrants and people of color, who sowed fear, and who emboldened white supremacists was elected as the next president of the United States has brought me to tears. I cried because as an immigrant, a teacher, and a person of color who exercised the right to form a same-sex union, I felt rejected by a significant portion of this country. This defeat has grave symbolic and practical consequences for me and for all marginalized groups of this nation.

I know what it is like to live under a repressive regime. I grew up in the dark days of dictatorship in the Philippines. For 20 years, Ferdinand Marcos and his cronies controlled mass media and all layers of government, which condoned human rights abuse. Ironically, this was all in the name of protecting democracy against the perils of communism, criminality, an undisciplined public, extreme poverty, and oligarchy. Under dictatorship, protest and dissent were not tolerated, so we spoke in hushed voices. Neighbors were afraid of spying neighbors. The police and the military wielded so much power that they tortured and killed with impunity.

Dissidents and activists disappeared, presumably summarily executed. Families are still searching for missing relatives to this day.

I have seen how demagogues can twist facts and convince a subservient public that giving away their rights, freedoms, and values are necessary costs of democracy. If I learned anything from growing up under a despotic regime, it is that oppression happens gradually, often founded on a platform of fear, and with populist support. My experience growing up taught me to never surrender my freedoms for a strongman's rule.

Thus, today I'm pleading for you to guard and value your rights, to never give them up. I rely on you to express your dissent and to firmly hold onto your values. As archivists, more than ever, you must commit yourselves to becoming agents of truth, accountability, and social justice—and to remembering that if these values do not lead to specific action, you are condemning archives to irrelevance, a mockery of truth, and worse, the very tools of oppression.

It saddens me that there are those who consider truth, accountability, and social justice to be inherent values of the profession and therefore not necessary to articulate, guard, and make manifest in every action. These archival values must be reaffirmed regularly in professional practice. If I have learned anything from the history of our profession and my years of engagement in this field, it is that the generations before us fought to achieve gender equality, adequate representation of underdocumented communities in our collections, and respect as professionals beyond the classist and gendered perception as handmaidens of historians.

If the statements given during the campaign are any indicator, this newly elected regime is an existential threat to archives. A person who benefited from a platform that rejects evidence, denies fact, and promotes falsehood will not suddenly become a defender of truth. When elected, he will only become emboldened with sense of mandate. Expect that he will act on his extremist rhetoric. In a regime founded on twisting facts and peddling falsehoods, agents of truth, accountability, and justice are under threat.

In this context, you are under threat, as are archives, and it is important that you acknowledge this. In a professional setting, we archivists do not often enough acknowledge our emotions and vulnerability. I think it is alright to show frustration and anger, to shed tears when your personal and professional values are affronted. I write to you to openly express my fears and, in the process, communicate that neutrality in this political climate will not save you and will only contribute to the profession's irrelevance.

Know, however, that there are groups and communities that are more at risk than you and that you still possess a measure of relative privilege. Allow your feelings of existential vulnerability to guide you in serving those who will be further marginalized by this regime, including the poor, people of color, the LGBTQ community, and immigrants. Hence, I challenge you to become the vulnerable archivist who will act as a cowitness to the struggles of those who have been in the margins of our society. They need you more than ever.

Activate the democratic process by participating in protests and marches. Bring your professional skills to bear in these moments of solidarity by ensuring that people's voices of opposition are well represented in the archives. Create a documentation strategy to solicit protest ephemera and social media activities of your local community. Future generations will thank you for documenting the struggle.

Do not stop at just capturing those moments of organized protest. Make archival sources that contextualize the long American tradition of resistance publicly available. Celebrate the connectedness of our current struggles to similar past actions within your own community.

Above all, demonstrate that archivists can build communities and elevate people. Some will accuse you of bias when you express solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, advocate for transgender rights, or rally against a proposed Muslim registry. But always remember, the fight against bigotry and racism is all about equality and is never about superiority. This is how you set yourself apart from the alt-right movement, or those who claim that somehow white supremacist ideology is in the same legitimate category as your quest for equality.

While conditions are ripe for losing hope, do not fall into despair. It is a weapon the powerful will use to bring you into submission. Build resilience with hope and be determined to outlive your oppressors. It may take years to undo their legacy. I was 11 years old when the People Power Revolution of 1986 ended the 20-year Marcos regime in the Philippines. The country is still reeling from the effects of dictatorship. You have to endure, rebuild, and continue the fight.

Becoming an archivist in these times of intense political uncertainty and unrest can be one of the most radical decisions you will ever make. I think you have made the right choice. I am proud to have been part of your journey.

Yours truly,

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