

Archives Chat with Alexis Antracoli (edited transcript)

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Marlee Newman: Hello everyone, and welcome to our Archives Chat with Alexis Antracoli. Alexis is the Interim Assistant University Librarian for Special Collections at Princeton University Library, where she leads the archival description and processing team and three curatorial divisions.

Previously, she worked at Drexel University Libraries and the University of Michigan Bentley Historical Library. She has published on web archiving, inclusive description and the archiving of born digital audio visual content. Alexis is active in the Society of American Archivists where she serves as the Vice-Chair/Chair-Elect for the Acquisitions and Appraisal section and is on the steering committee of the Archival Educator section. She's also active in Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia, an informal group of local archivists who work on projects that engage issues at the intersection of the archival profession and the Black Lives Matter movement. She's especially interested in applying user experience research and user-centered design to archival discovery systems, developing and applying inclusive description practices and web archiving. She holds an MSI in Archives and Records Management from the University of Michigan, a PhD in American History from Brandeis University and a BA in history from Boston College.

We've asked Alexis to join us to speak in particular about her work with Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia and how this work impacts both her personal and professional archival work. This chat will be done in a Q&A format, first from me and then we'll open up the virtual floor to any additional questions at the end.

As a quick note, the chat is being recorded ... and will be posted on the SOURCE website for those members who couldn't attend today. To begin, Alexis, I wanted to thank you so much for joining us here today. We really appreciate you taking the time to speak with SOURCE.

Alexis Antracoli: You're welcome.

Marlee Newman: So, as I said earlier, you've got your MSI in Archives and Records Management at the University of Michigan, your PhD in American History at Brandeis university and your BA at Boston College. Could you tell us a little bit more about how you came to be an archivist? The inspiration for it, so on and so forth.

Alexis Antracoli: Sure. So, I actually had a job when I was an undergraduate at Boston College working in the archives and I really enjoyed it, but I was young and I kind of didn't know what to do with my life and I was trying to figure it out. And I ... thought about just going to graduate school and I had some professors who encouraged me. So I went off and I got this PhD and then I got a teaching job. And while I like teaching and I especially like teaching my classes at Rutgers and archives. I just ... the traditional academic career path wasn't a great fit for me, personally. And so as I started to explore what my other options were, I kept coming back to that time I spent working in the archives and the more I talked to people who did this work, the more it seemed like the right thing for me.

And so I made a decision to go back to school. I got a part-time job in an archives and kind of launched a career from there. So a little bit of, I guess, not a linear path to the archives, but I don't think that many people have a very linear path to the archives. Nobody grows up thinking I want to be an archivist because, mostly, I think most people don't know what an archivist is.

Marlee Newman: Sure, sure. Out of curiosity, what was your PhD thesis on?

Alexis Antracoli: My PhD thesis was, I actually studied the history of the book. It's kind of funny because I don't do rare books now even though I work in a place that has an amazing rare book collection. But it was a cultural history of the Bible in colonial Massachusetts. So I looked at the Bible, not so much as a text, but really as an - I mean there was a little bit of that - but a lot of it was about the Bible as an object -

Marlee Newman: Sort of a material culture -

Alexis Antracoli: as a material culture approach to it.

Marlee Newman: Awesome. I'm very interested in the history of the book, so I'll have to talk to you about that ... later.

Alexis Antracoli: I did social and cultural history of the book and religious history.

Marlee Newman: That's fascinating. Okay. So, before I let myself get down on that track, because we can have a whole other conversation about that ... Could you please tell us a bit about Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia? When did the group form in Philadelphia, and how did you get involved? What are their goals within the specific community there?

Alexis Antracoli: So it was formed - I don't even remember exactly the year it was formed, so I want to say in 2016. I'm pretty sure that's right. But I could be off, it could have been 2015, but I'm pretty sure it was 2016.

And it was really started by an archivist at Temple University - Rachel Appel. She does mostly web archiving work. And she started the group because she saw ... the need for archivists, which, as I think we all here probably know, is a profession that's almost 90% white. It's ... something like 87.7% white as of the last SAA census. And she really saw this need for archivists to ... tackle issues related to the Black Lives Matter movement head on.

And so she started this group and it ... started with a statement of our goals or our reasons for being and what we saw as the issues that ... I'm trying to think of how to put this ... where are the intersections between the Black Lives Matter movement and archival work ... and you can actually find it on our website. We have a WordPress website. It's a pretty basic website. There's a copy of it there. It's available on GitHub, too. And I can look up the exact web address before the end of the chat. And it started that way ... Actually, at first, I didn't go to very many of the meetings. I tried to go remotely, because most of them were in person in Philadelphia. But I tried to go as I was able and contribute to the writing of the statement. And then once that was done, there was an effort to think about what next steps were. And the two things that the group came

up with at that point were to try and do some community archives work and to see if there were community members or Black organizations that might need support with archival projects.

And also ... we created a group to work on anti-racist description guidelines and that actually came out of discussions we had with a Black Lives Matter activist in Portland at SAA where we did a combined presentation with an activist there about this issue, and she had come across racist description in her own research and was asking us a lot of questions about it, and whether there was any work being done on this. And we kind of realized that there wasn't guidance. So, I took on the leadership of that ... group. The community archives group has done some projects in Philadelphia working with local community activists; doing processing and then giving them back their records processed and with the finding aid for them ... to provide access as they want. One of them is accessible on a community center in Philadelphia.

And so right now we're kind of figuring out what our next steps are, now that we've just released the guidelines.

Marlee Newman: So, with that in mind, what has been your favorite or most rewarding project to work on as part of the Archives for Black Lives? Has that been the Anti-Racist Description Resources?

Alexis Antracoli: For me, yes, because it's the one that I've really been involved in the most. I was somewhat involved in the writing of the statement but not intensively, but I really sort of took ... a real interest in the Anti-Racist Description project and basically led that ... and by lead I mean, made sure that we met and that we were getting the next thing done. It took about two years from beginning to end, from the time we started doing the research to the time we released it was almost two years, exactly ... A little short of two years.

And so for me, that was the most rewarding and meaningful and to see that out there and to have heard from people that they're already starting to find it useful. And I do hope that people will continue to find it useful.

Marlee Newman: Absolutely. How do you think that your work with Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia has impacted how you approach your archival work at Princeton and other traditional archives? Do you think that it's caused any sort of shift in your praxis or you were kind of already there and it's just a continuation of that?

Alexis Antracoli: I mean, I wouldn't say one or the other. I would say they kind of feed each other. Like, you see things in your work. I see things in my work or I'm like, Oh, we should do a better job describing that ... I learned things. So I would say that they inform each other and that ... I hope that my practice is always changing. I think that I always want to be someone who is constantly ... being thoughtful about how I do description and any other part of my archival work. And that I'm not just doing the same thing I was doing yesterday or last year or doing things the way we've always done them, but to constantly be stopping and saying, 'why are we doing this? What are we hoping to achieve?'

Marlee Newman: So this is really leading into the next question that I have, which is that you

currently lead the archival description and processing team. We've already discussed that the Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia has recently released the Anti-Racist Description Resources. In many of our classes at Rutgers we discuss the impact of words ... cataloging, classification and description. We've already started to talk about it, but could you talk a little bit more about inclusive description and how you interact with the archive and archival description process while interpreting archives as a non-neutral space?

Alexis Antracoli: Okay. So, yeah. ... I guess I'll take the part of [the question], what is inclusive description or how do you practice that? And for me, inclusive description is about - you know, we talk a lot about equity, diversity and inclusion in Higher Ed spaces and increasingly in corporate spaces and other spaces. And for me, inclusion is about when someone ... I think of it as when someone walks into our reading room or looks at our finding aids or our catalog or whatever, do they see themselves there? Do they feel like they belong?

And so for me, inclusive description is applying the idea of, or ... the effort to be inclusive to description. Because I think just like if someone walks into a reading room and sees a bunch of portraits of people who don't look like them on the wall - And this is my experience, actually, because most of the places I've done research that have portraits on the wall, they're of old white guys, and I'm not saying none of those guys belong there or that they didn't ... [or that] their collections don't belong in archives. But ... if you never see yourself reflected, or you feel like you don't see other people like you in that space, either working there or doing research there, that might make you feel a little nervous. Archives are already intimidating. I mean, I know people who are very smart and well-educated, who feel nervous about coming to an archives or special collections because it's not something they're used to doing. There are rules, there are regulations ...

So for me, inclusive description is about taking that effort and that desire to make people feel as comfortable and included and represented in the space as possible, and also reflecting it in our description and making it very clear by the language we choose to describe things, or by the context we provide for the language that's already there. Because ... one of the things we haven't said in our recommendations for anti-racist description is: change all the language. Sometimes there's offensive language as part of the materials and we don't actually recommend getting rid of that, but we recommend providing context for that. And so, for me, it's about creating an environment through the description, that when people interact with our description, they feel like they're included, that they've been seen there, that they've been cared ... that their experiences have been handled with care, right? And that ... they also matter, right?

And so, for me, that is ... my public services colleagues are going to do inclusion a little differently because they're dealing with a different part of the process. But inclusive description is ... I want people - regardless of who they are, right? A Black person, a disabled person, a woman, a man, a non-binary person, whoever it is, really, who's coming to our description, to feel like that description is ... for them, has been thoughtful about who they are and that they are as represented as anyone else in the archival description. Does that answer that question?

Marlee Newman: It does! It really does. And it leads again very nicely into the next question, where ... I was reading through the ARDR, and in the resource, you and your co-authors

explicitly call on archivists to "de-centralize neutrality and objectivity in favor of respect and care" as well as avoiding the passive voice when describing oppressive relationships. You note that the use of the active voice "embeds responsibility within description." And this leads me to a few questions. One, do you think that the proponents of what I call more traditional archival praxis would argue that approaching records from a point of neutrality as they've done in the past is centering respect and care? And what would you say to those arguments? And what about those who would say that it's not an archivist's job to assign or acknowledge responsibility?

Alexis Antracoli: So, I would say that they're fooling themselves if they think that the archive ... was neutral ... has been ever been neutral. And ... this is obviously my very particular ... position on this and I know that not everyone would agree with me, but ... you talk about that neutral space as being about care, but if you look at ... if you went to archives and you looked at what's there and who's described, it becomes pretty clear very quickly that these aren't neutral spaces. ... For those of you who've taken my class, and you have, I assign ... I will probably never take this article off my syllabus, but I assigned Patricia Galloway's article on Dunbar Rowland and the Mississippi State Archives. And part of the reason I assign that is I want people to see that these are constructions, right?

And I don't doubt the sincerity of people who are making that argument or who have ever made that argument. But I think that you can see, I mean, that's a really obvious case. It makes it easy to see, but I think even someone ... I also assign an article about Mary Ritter Beard and the Sophia Smith collection. I don't think that's a neutral effort either, right? It's an effort to center women ... in particular white women. It's an effort to center, in that particular case, white women who were left out of other repositories. And so I think that once you start to see that, it becomes really hard to argue that these spaces were ever neutral. And I have this ... probably because I went and got a PhD and I had to read a lot about post-modernism in that process, I just ... I think that as human beings, we all have our own perspectives and biases.

And I think that ... sometimes when people hear you say "you're biased" or "you're not neutral," they take it as offense? But I don't. Of course I'm biased. I'm a person. I've had experiences that only I have had. Right? I see the world through ... what it's like to be a white, cisgender woman in the world. That's just my experience. And I don't assume that other people necessarily experienced the world in the same way I do, even if they have, on the surface, the same identity, because ... we all have our own unique experiences. And so I don't - of course I'm biased. Of course I'm not neutral. And I don't think that's a bad thing. I think it's just part of being human. And I don't think that you can ever create an archive that effectively doesn't have silence or ... doesn't leave someone out. But I think you can be thoughtful about what you're creating, and honest about what you're creating and why you're doing it. And that's why ... this term for the first time I assigned Michelle Caswell's new article on feminist standpoint appraisal. I don't know if anyone else has read it, but I think it's a fantastic counterpoint to a lot of archival theory and a really great new way of thinking about how to apply some of this. And I don't know that I agree with every single point she makes in that article, or that it's even possible to do in most institutions. But it's ...

I think we desperately, as a profession, need to think about the fact that we're people and of course we're not unbiased. And of course we're not neutral because we're human beings. And

that's not a critique. It's not a bad thing. Archives are repositories, in many ways, of the human experience. One of the things that draws me to them is that people's stories and their lived experiences ... live in these places, it's where they're preserved. And I wouldn't expect that a place that tells people's stories is always going to tell the same story, or is going to be neutral about how it tells that story. So that's, I think I answered the first part of your question. Can you repeat it again to make sure I've answered it all?

Marlee Newman: Okay. So it's basically - what would you say to those arguments? What about those who would say it's not the archivist's job to assign or acknowledge responsibility?

Alexis Antracoli: So, the responsibility part of it. I mean, that's a good question. And this is what I would say, is that there's this tendency, and I think – [for example] using the terms enslaved and slaver - to call someone a slave versus enslaved is a very different thing. To say that Person A enslaved Person B sort of changes ... what you're saying as opposed to Person B was the slave of Person A, right? It puts everything on the status of the person who is enslaved and not on the person who's doing the enslaving. So I think we're always making choices about responsibility and there's a way in which saying, well, this person is a slave of Person A is in some ways saying no one is responsible. But people *are* responsible ... I think you could make the argument that ... that construction of language [is], maybe, putting the responsibility on the person who's enslaved. And so I can sort of see that. But the truth of the matter is ... One of the things I learned when I first started in my archives program was that the archivists ... there's this idea that the principle responsibility of the archivist is selection, right? It's ... archival appraisal. And so the archivist ... is deciding what it is even possible to write ... Sometimes people outside of our field don't understand what we do, or think of what we do kind of like we're file clerks -

Marlee Newman: Handmaids of history.

Alexis Antracoli: Yeah. But we're making these decisions about what's worthy of preservation, which then shapes what stories can be told. So we already ... we ourselves bear a heavy responsibility and are responsible to a certain extent for the writing of history, or what history can be written in the future, and so I think to abdicate responsibility, or to say it's not the archivist's job to assign responsibility, sort of bleeds too much back into the idea that we can escape ... bias and human nature. And it sort of is a way of eliding our own responsibility. And, you know, the fact [is] that ... we've chosen to preserve some records and some people's records and not other people's records. So ... I think avoiding that is worse than not avoiding it.

And it gets back to the inclusive description thing, which is that, is the African American genealogist coming to a collection of plantation records, let's say, for example, and they're not the creator ... the people, the enslaved people who are represented in that collection potentially are not the creators of that collection, but they're the subjects of the collection. And if we only pay attention to the creator and we don't assign any responsibility to the creator of those records for that ... enterprise ... then ... I would say, are we actually really doing our jobs? Are we really being inclusive? Is that inclusive description? How does the person who's marginalized in that situation, when they come to those records ... did they feel included? So ... I guess I would fall on the side of ... it's going to be upsetting potentially to some people. But, I think that we just need to be upfront about it and be upfront about the fact that we're not neutral and someone else may

come along in several decades and change what we've done. I always joke at work actually, but, you know, we look back on the people that did things 40 years ago and we're like, what were they thinking? And I wonder what they're going to say about me in 40 years. What was she thinking? Because ... the world will have changed.

Marlee Newman: Awesome. That's a great answer. Thank you. So also in the resource, you and your co-authors state that one should describe archival materials "using accurate and strong language such as ... lynching, rape, murder and hate mail when they are appropriate" and - I found this part particularly important and interesting - "do not let your discomfort with the terms censor the material. It is okay to be uncomfortable with racist material. It is not okay to privilege your discomfort above accurate description." This, to me, feels particularly significant to the process, particularly as a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman. You've talked about it a little bit, but can you expand on this a bit? Dealing with your own discomfort as someone who is often - as you were saying, the archival profession is 90% white, roughly - part of the oppressive community ... the demographic that is by and large doing the oppressing or have historically done the oppressing as opposed to being part of the marginalized community.

Alexis Antracoli: ... I think there's this tendency, I think we've seen it in some of these yearbook controversies that happened after Ralph Northam was outed as having been in blackface and it was found in a yearbook ... suddenly people ... I've heard lots of stories at universities of people wanting to, for example, censor the yearbooks or not put them online or take them down if they're online. And I think there's this impulse to say, Oh my God, we're embarrassed ... or uncomfortable. ... It's hard to ... those words you use ... if you're describing materials where those things really apply, that's emotionally difficult. And so I think there is this tendency to just not want to deal with it. And as the white person in our society, we have that privilege to choose to not deal with that, I think, if we don't want to.

And so what that's really saying is, if you have yearbooks with blackface in them, call it blackface and don't hide it. Even if that's part of your institutional history. And I would say this – this isn't the reason to do it - but in my experience, the more institutions try and hide that stuff, the worse it is for them. So ... there's a lot of both personal and institutional reckoning that I think needs to happen in ... not just in archives, but in society in general. And so it's a small way of saying, don't privilege yourself. Right? Don't privilege ... we all work in institutions where there are limits on what we can do. And we are employees of institutions ... and the [ARDR] guidelines try and recognize that ... we all may not be able to do all of these things, but that when we are able to, we should try and ... we should be honest ... And we also should not privilege the feelings of people who might be upset about that.

You know, I think back to one time I was teaching and ... I was teaching the first half of the survey of American history and I would assign the narrative of Frederick Douglas every term. And I always thought of it as this very standard thing that's often assigned in U.S. History survey courses. I'm sure many of you have read it, either in college or high school. And I had a student who was really taken aback by it and ... I don't know for sure, but I think it may have been the first time that the student had ever been exposed to a more honest portrayal of American slavery and was just like, I didn't like this, it was violent.

And you know, my response to that, well, as ... someone teaching you American history and as a history professor, it's my job to present to you, the best I can, the reality of American slavery and the reality of American slavery is that it was an extraordinarily violent institution and it was enforced with violence. You don't enslave people without violence. And it made him uncomfortable, clearly ... the student. And so I think it's that same kind of work. ... Yeah, you're going to make some people uncomfortable, but it represents the materials you're describing more accurately than trying to dance around it potentially. And ... the people who are uncomfortable with it - and I know this is true for me, there are many things that I've been uncomfortable with initially, and over time ... being exposed to different ways of talking about things or more strongly worded ways of describing things has required me to spend time thinking about my own reactions and what those things are really describing. And then I have grown. So that's how I look at that.

Marlee Newman: Wonderful. I know that certain institutions, even ones with a goal toward inclusivity and with experts and wonderful resources to guide them, have internally struggled with certain language shifts, such as plantation owner or slave owner to enslaver. How much pushback do you encounter from institutions when archivists try to change or adjust language, descriptions and labels to reflect more inclusive language and how can we respond to that pushback in a way that achieves our goals?

Alexis Antracoli: I have certainly had situations where I have had to modify the language I've used in some situations. And it's hard ... there are terms that I might personally use that in an institutional context, the institution doesn't want to use. And sometimes you have to ask yourself what your goal is. ... do you want to use the term or do you have a bigger goal you're trying to achieve? And you're going to say, okay ... here is where ... I want to push and here is where I don't want to push. And so it's never perfect and I think, sure, I've made mistakes. You're not going to win all your battles. I think, also, making the point, I definitely have worked for institutions that were reticent about ... some skeletons in their closet and I think that's a natural reaction for institutions. But I think making the case that hiding it is worse, right? Dealing with it openly allows you to take control of the narrative, in a way ... not that that's the reason to do it, but to say ... we know that this happened, we know it was wrong. This is ... we're not going to hide it. We're going to engage with it. We're going to find ways ... because I think a lot of it is about ... they're afraid it's bad PR, but if you acknowledge it and deal with it and find ways to make restitution if you can ... that is much less damaging than having someone come into the archives and find out and then say, Hey, X institution has been hiding this for 30 years, or 50 years, or however many years.

And this is ... I'm not calling out any specific institution at all. I think no institution is perfect. And it could be related to gender, race, LGBT issues. I mean, there are a wide range of ... there could be so many things ... Archives, in general, are both these things that institutions like having, because they can use them to tell their story, but they're really nervous about because you don't totally know what's in there. And so I think that that's just the nature of ... institutional archives, no matter where you are.

So one way you can sort of try and push an institution maybe to be more comfortable with some of the less ... the things in its past that maybe it's less proud of is to make an argument about how

it's better to get out in front of it. I know I have colleagues at other institutions that are doing similar work. I know Temple has a statement up. I know Yale is engaging in an audit, so I think that it's ... we're at a point ... the older institutions have started to do projects where they've looked at their relationships to slavery ... the Princeton and slavery project ... Yale did one, Rutgers did one, Brown - Brown was the first to do it. Harvard has done it ... those projects have ... made a space to do this kind of work, that maybe wasn't there 10 years ago.

Marlee Newman: Okay. Is there any ... if you were to receive any pushback, is there any particular language that you feel is integral to the larger goal that you'd be like, this is the field that I'm going to plant my flag on ...

Alexis Antracoli: I can't think of any ... I mean, I can definitely think of phrases or terminology that people would ... That would be controversial maybe. And actually, this was something, so when we wrote the original statement, there was a lot of discussion and some people were really - in the Archives For Black Lives group - were uncomfortable with using the term white supremacy, because I think a lot of people hear that and they automatically assume the KKK. And in that particular context, which of course is not an institutional context, I said, we can't let our discomfort with this term - I'm not particularly comfortable with that term either, it raises the same ... I have the same defensive reaction to it as you, but don't get caught up in your emotional reaction to that term and think about what is it really saying ... Ask yourself, is what that term is really saying true about this profession? But that term still ... it can be a hard term in certain contexts. I don't know that I'd plant my flag on it, depending on the context and what I was trying to achieve ... So, you know, that's - it's a hard thing that you have to decide ... where you're going to fight those battles.

And one of the things that I've discovered, too, is that a lot of good can be done outside of institutions to facilitate institutional change. So like the Anti-Racist Description Resources and the work that other people, and I want to say that Black archivists have done in this area ... the toil and the difficulties that they endure in a mostly white profession are changing the field and the profession. And as that happens, it becomes easier. ... And this is true of many things, not just this issue - as the field moves on, it becomes easier to convince your home institution ... this is the direction the field is going in and we should be going in this direction, too. So, one of the things is that I hope a resource, like ... the ARDR can help a lot of people in a lot of institutions say, "Hey, this is this thing that this group of archivists, who are respected archivists in our field and are involved in SAA, have put together and we can use it as a resource." It's one of the reasons we're pursuing sponsorship by TS-DACS. To get ... To be a companion standard because it helps people make those arguments in their institutions, that they should be doing that kind of work. So you can actually make institutional change from outside of institutions, I've discovered ... and so I try and take that tack a lot. And it's gradual and it's slow and it's not going to happen overnight. ... I think we're doing better than we were five years ago and that's not nothing.

Marlee Newman: Sure. Absolutely. So the ARDR repeatedly mentions centering the humanity of the people in the communities documented in the materials, contacting experts, consulting, alternative cataloging schemes. In short, you're encouraging, as we've discussed, a very thoughtful, intentional description process, which inevitably takes time. So how does Archives for Black Lives, the ARDR and archival activism fit in, or not fit in, with the ongoing push for

rapid processing, in order to deal with backlog and make materials visible at all? You know, MPLP and all that.

Alexis Antracoli: ...So ... I once heard someone say that MPLP was a hill they were willing to die on. And I was like, *yes*. Because I'm a huge proponent of efficient, modern processing. I think that the impulse to granularly describe everything is unbelievably misguided and is the path to making almost none of your stuff available. I have really strong opinions about that. I think that this is a case, where the argument can be made ... there always are going to be some collections with more ... that are more important than other collections and have more research value and are going to get more use than other collections. That's just the reality of it ... we're going to spend less time on a set of records that we think are going to get very little use than we're going to spend on the Office of the President's records ... Just as examples.

And so what I would say is this is a place for us to stop and think about ... taking some of what Caswell says in feminist standpoint appraisal and ... [it] says when we do that extra description, when we say we're going to take the time to do that extra description, we are going to put people who have been previously marginalized to the front of the line. Yeah, it does take more time ... but I would say that's a case where the lack of care, the historical lack of care means that we should now overcompensate. So ... and it might mean that people who have previously been privileged in these situations get a little bit less time and attention. And I think that's okay.

And I'm not ... I also think there are opportunities to look for ... there's a lot of talk about hidden collections and minimal processing and iterative processing to make hidden collections available. I think you could argue that within collections that are minimally processed, or even well-processed but have not been processed with some of the subjects of those records in mind, as much as the creators of those records, you could make the argument, I think ... that these are hidden collections in collections. One of the things, I think, is that there are probably an incredible amount of resources for African American history and genealogy ... hidden in collections of non-Black creators. And it's about taking the time to go through those records and describe them in ways that surface the subjects ... the Black subjects of those records in ways that they're find-able by historians and by the Black community and genealogists. And is that going to take time? Yeah, maybe there's grant funding out there for it. Maybe we decide that we process one more collection or two more collections more minimally than we would have before. And spend the extra time doing that work. So ... I guess you're right. They don't necessarily always go together, but I think that as archivists, we owe it to the people who've been marginalized in the records to actually take the extra time we do have to do more description and give it to those communities.

Marlee Newman: Well, it's like you were saying earlier, archival work is all about choices. And I think I agree with you that anyone who says that it's not is fooling themselves. So it's just making those choices in a different way than you might have previously been making them or making them in a more intentional way.

Alexis Antracoli: Yeah, you're making them in a different way. You're deciding, ... I'm going to spend my time on this collection. And you don't have to do it all at once. It can be iterative. You can take your time and it can be iterative.

Marlee Newman: Absolutely. And along these same lines, and this may be backtracking and ... but something that I often think about ... is the concept of neutrality and the ongoing discussion regarding the archives as a neutral or non-neutral space. Can you talk about how you came to view archives as a non-neutral space? Is that something that was introduced to you when you were in a school for archives? Is it something that you kind of ... came across as you were working? And how do proponents of archives as non-neutral spaces and archival activism in general, teach and recognize the early history of archives and the ... more Jenkinsonian tradition while also advocating for marginalized or silence communities in archival activism?

Alexis Antracoli: So, I don't know that there was one crystal clear moment where I was like, archives aren't neutral, but I know that even when I was doing my own research, I kept asking myself ... there are things I would look for that wouldn't be there and other things that would be there. ... Since I was studying material culture and ... the book as an object, I'd go to look for Bibles and people would be like, well, we have a few, but ... we just tore out the genealogies and tossed the Bibles. It's all the same book, right? And that's not the same thing as what we're talking about, but it's clear someone was making a value judgment about what mattered about those books. And it was the ... the family histories, it wasn't the book as an object or the binding or how ... any writing that may have appeared in the book or whatever else ... It was only the information about the family that were ... So they took that. ... the New England Historic Genealogy Society has thousands of these. They're just ... they took them out of the books and they chucked the books ... And this is common all over. And of course, I'm horrified because my whole dissertation is about this single book and I want to see as many surviving examples of it.

Now when I went and studied archives, I was like, Oh, I see why they did it ... it ... was not cool for me as a researcher, but I understood the decision, what they were probably thinking when they made that decision. And so I think on some level I always kind of knew there were these decisions happening and people were privileging certain parts of the record over other parts of the record.

And as a historian, I always knew how hard it is to do. It's harder to do women's history, it's harder to do LGBT history, it's harder to do Black history. It's harder to do Native American history, because there aren't as many records. And the records that do exist are created by ... the state or the people in power. And so you're spending a lot of time either reading between the lines or you're ... I always think of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* ... I don't know if anyone's read that, where she takes this one diary of this midwife in late 18th/early 19th-century Maine and writes this whole book about this woman and her life and it's really about the history of women in this period, but ... she only has one document from a woman and the rest of it she has to piece together. ... And so, because that diary ended up in the archives as an afterthought, probably, I mean, that's not what people thought of as important history ... probably, at the time it was acquired ... I don't know whole history of its acquisition or how it ended up where it ended up. So I always kind of knew, but I think it was ... studying archives and being involved in the profession gave me the language for it ... in a professional context that I didn't have before. And historians don't typically think a lot about how the archive got to be the way it is. They just think of the archives as the source of raw material. Does that make sense?

Marlee Newman: Well, I had original training as a historian, so absolutely. [laughter]

Alexis Antracoli: So I knew, but I didn't have the professional language.

Marlee Newman: Yeah, sure.

Alexis Antracoli: And the second part of your question?

Marlee Newman: How do proponents of archives as non-neutral spaces and archival activism in general, teach and recognize the early history of archives and the Jenkinsonian tradition, while also ... I think if you drill down the question, it's ... how do you present the early history of archives in a neutral fashion? Is it worth presenting it in a neutral fashion or is it like, this is what we used to do? And -

Alexis Antracoli: I mean, I sort of present it ... I try not to put my thumb on the scale too much, I'm sure I do more than I think I do. But it is part of our history. It's important to understand it. It's important to understand why people feel ... there are people who still feel so passionate about neutrality. It's part of what we do. Even if a lot of newer archivists might think that, like, what are you thinking? It's important to understand where that comes from ...and ... how our profession emerged, what its goals were, why we do things the way we do. What's valuable .. I mean, it's not to say there was nothing valuable about that thinking. It's like, you know, I joke that Schellenberg is the worst, right? Because everything can have primary and secondary value. I could make an argument that my receipt for lunch today has secondary value ... [it's] doable. I wouldn't preserve it archivally ... but I mean I still think that that concept has value ... in the work that we do. ... Jenkinson is a little harder, because he's just like, the archivist just takes what they're given ... but understanding that that's a part of our history and a part of ... how our profession operated helps us understand what we're doing today, and how it is or isn't different or why we do things. And so I just approach it from that point of view of, you're not going to understand ... these discussions about neutrality in the archives and objectivity make no sense if you don't know that history.

Marlee Newman: Yeah.

Alexis Antracoli: Like, why are we even having this debate? You've got to know the background. So that's how I approach it. And that's probably also ... that's my bias, maybe. But ... I always cover it.

Marlee Newman: Of course. Yeah. I think it's ... as someone who feels very, very strongly about archives being non-neutral spaces ... I'm always interested in people's ability to just present it and see what we think as students, and watch that trajectory. Because it is this ... you can see it as you go through the discussion boards of this ... Well, of course you should be neutral, you shouldn't bring bias into it and all of these things, and then the thought process starts going. So I always find it very interesting -

Alexis Antracoli: Yeah, teasing that out. Like, well, can you really be neutral? Is that really possible? Sometimes it's easier if you give people an example that's not particularly controversial

or polarizing.

Marlee Newman: Sure. Right. Interesting. So winding up a little bit ... or winding down, I should say, a little bit. Has your work with Archives for Black Lives impacted your perception of user experience research and how we can better design archives to center the user experience? And if so, how?

Alexis Antracoli: You know ... I actually I saw that question since you gave me these questions in advance and ... I have never thought about it before. ... for me, it's part of this even bigger ... umbrella, which is that I'm interested ... So, I am a technical services archivist ... I manage the processing team. We write EAD, right? So people think of what we do as very "back of the house." What I do is so that people can find our stuff, right? We're creating the metadata that drives the descriptive systems. We're thinking about how those systems should work. We're applying the content standards ... so, for me, thinking about inclusive descriptions, thinking about how people ... user-center design ... they're all part of this attempt to inform technical services or ... for me, it is about centering technical services work on our patrons, on the people who are using our materials. And so that comes in a lot of different forms, whether that's user-centered design or usability research or ... and testing or inclusive description. ... When this ... new ... issue of the *American Archivist* finally comes out there's an article that I and some colleagues wrote about the usability of the Archive-It user interface.

Marlee Newman: Okay.

Alexis Antracoli: So, for me, they're all under this umbrella of, how do we best serve our patron needs, right? And ... I want our patrons to be everybody. And I don't want to just think of our patron as the typical history professor. And so the inclusive description work, for me, personally, falls under that umbrella. But your question did make me think about whether usability research can actually think or ask questions to people from different demographic groups about whether they experience our description and our discovery systems in the same way. Are there gender or race or other differences and how people experience our systems are our systems biased ... in addition to our description? Or are they serving one population more than another population? I don't know, but it just made me think, that's a really interesting question to think about. I don't have an answer, but it's a great question. Someone should do that research project.

Marlee Newman: Okay, good. Excellent. Someone *should* do it. Alright. So, how can archivists, ... who are white, [or] identify as white, work toward a more inclusive archival praxis, both in terms of our theoretical approach to archives work and the industry as a community, while simultaneously not centering themselves and typically white and male traditional archives?

Alexis Antracoli: That's a tough one. I mean, I think that, honestly, a big part of it is shutting up. And I say that with all the love in my heart. ... Listen. Listen to what your colleagues who aren't white and ... or who aren't male or who aren't binary or who aren't straight, listen to what they're saying and what their experiences are and what you can do, and don't be defensive about it ... what you might hear. You might feel defensive inside and that's okay, but don't put that onto your colleagues. Don't ask them to solve your problems.

One of the things I was really adamant about is that, because we all ... the seven of us who wrote those guidelines, only two of us were Black. I said, we've got to get feedback from people. We're mostly white women. We've got to get feedback from Black archivists and we have to pay them. We cannot assume that they're going to fix our problem. Part of that is that, the problem of racist description done by white archivists is the problem of white archivists. And it's not the problem of Black archivists or Black patrons. ... and yet at the same time, you sort of feel in a catch-22 because you're living inside your own world and experience and you don't always see the mistakes you made. And so it's about saying, okay, I need help and you have expertise and, it's not your job ... to fix my problem.

So, I think it's little things like that and I am very certain that I do it imperfectly and that I screw up a lot. It's being able to hear feedback from people and say you're sorry and do better. So I would say those things, but I'd say probably the number one thing is just listen and take seriously the experiences of your colleagues who are from marginalized communities. It's probably, for me, that's how I've learned the most. And I think ... and I say this with ... at the end of the day, it's up to my colleagues and marginalized communities to say if I'm doing a good job or not, or even a halfway decent job, it's not up to me to say that ... I hope that listening is a way that I've learned.

Marlee Newman: Sure. Absolutely. And then the final question from me, and then I have one question from someone who emailed in and then I'll open up the floor. So ... my last question is how can we get involved or participate in Archives for Black Lives in our local areas or ... at Rutgers or anything like that ...

Alexis Antracoli: We do have a listserv, a Google group that you can join. I can actually send you this information. In fact, let me actually look up the website right now,

Marlee Newman: Yes, please. Yeah.

Alexis Antracoli: So the website's very easy. It's just archivesforblacklives.wordpress.com, one word ... And I'm going to put it here in the ... [typing to chat box]

And if you go to this website, you can see the statement of principles, which will link out to the GitHub. You can join the conversation, that links to the Google group, which you can join the Google group. There are resources that include the ARDR, there's information about the community archives work ... Because it started in Philadelphia, most of the people involved are local to the Philadelphia area. That's where most of our projects are. It doesn't mean that people in other areas can't be involved. But I think, partly, we were always hoping that people in other locales would start their own groups. And anyone is welcome to do that. We did it, we started a listserv, we created a statement. We got involved and did these different projects. So one way would be just to ... find like-minded people and start meeting either virtually or in person, create some kind of Google groups so you can share information. But, ... I think probably from our perspective, from my perspective, what we can offer you are the resources we have and the listserv, to start thinking about these things. Does that answer the question?

Marlee Newman: Yes, absolutely. That sounds great. And then the question that was emailed in

is that they would like your take on whether or not momentum is slowing with university libraries like Washington University in St. Louis, Canada College in Redwood City, California, collaborating with local Black Lives Matter chapters to archive primary resources relating to the movement in those local communities, if you have any sort of thoughts on that.

Alexis Antracoli: I don't know much about the second one. I do know a little bit about the Wash U example. I think part of that is that Meredith Evans, the woman who started it moved to the Jimmy Carter Library. She's the head of the Jimmy Carter Library now. So that might've had something to do with that. I mean ...I don't think so. I think ... one of the things I assign ... in my class, in the week on ethics is Jarrett Drake's article on collecting the Black Lives Matter movement. And he has strong opinions about these things and, of course, he takes the position that traditional repositories shouldn't even be collecting this stuff. But that they're going to do it ... people pointed out to him they're going to do it anyway. And so he gave a talk at ALA and published [it] online ... And so, do I think that it's slowing? No, not necessarily. I think that it may be, too, in 30 years, places will suddenly ... just like how collecting Civil Rights history is something people want to do now. You may see [collecting Black Lives Matter materials] start to happen. I think the point that Jarrett makes that is really important to keep in mind is that when you're doing that kind of work to really be mindful of being partner with the community.

I think that Jarrett is 100% right, that if you're going to do that kind of collecting, you need to build relationships with the communities whose records those are, because there have been ... our institutions are in many ways founded in colonialism. And so it's hard to get out of that mode of - we're just acquiring stuff that then becomes ours. And it's not even that we do it ... we do it with everything, right? It doesn't matter ... what community it's from. And so I think that we'll continue to see collecting of that stuff. I hope that it continues to be mindful in the way that the Wash U work was mindful partnering with the community. And so I hope that people don't forget that.

Marlee Newman: Sure.

Alexis Antracoli: I don't know if that totally answered that question, but I don't know enough to ... I think it's an area ... I think people are interested. People may not have developed collecting policies around this in a solid way that they absolutely know, this is an area we're collecting in. So you might maybe see a little bit of [rising and falling gesture] that, but I think that we should just be mindful as representatives of our institution to do it in a way where we're partnering with communities and being good stewards for the communities that we're working with.

Marlee Newman: Excellent. Alright. Does anyone have any questions before we finish up for the evening? You can type them in. You don't have to speak if you don't want to. Anybody? Nope. Alright. Well, unless anyone shoots in a question really quickly, thank you so much. This has been *such* an interesting conversation. I'm so glad that you took the time to speak with us. I really appreciate it. And this has been Alexis Antracoli doing an Archives Chat with SOURCE at Rutgers. Thank you so much.

Alexis Antracoli: Alright. Thank you.

