

Richard Saunders

## Editor's Note

---

Because this issue has run short (sorry about that; editorial complications), I've indulged myself with a bit more of a reflective essay than what normally occupies this spot. COVID has sparked in me a fair bit of thought about the work we do and what we write about as working professionals. Part of my learning has involved looking outside myself. Now, as we are beginning to emerge from the ordeal of isolation, I encourage you to take the same opportunity.

ALA policy allows the *RBM* editor to serve three consecutive three-year terms if they choose to do so. Though I very much enjoy my role as scholarly editor, nothing good can last forever (and thankfully, nothing bad does either). My second term as *RBM* editor concludes in July 2023 and I plan to step aside for an eager successor. The search for a new editor will not kick off for a few months, but I mention the pending change now to encourage some individual reflections among readers. I've said before that a discipline is only as strong as the commitments made to its functions in the present. Serving as editor of a peer-reviewed professional journal is a systemic commitment but one that is manageable by someone committed to the discipline. Thankfully, an editor does not work alone; we operate with the support of good people on the editorial board and very competent people in the ACRL Publications Office, including a staff liaison to the editorial board. If you have learned from *RBM*, think about what else you might do to further your field as a reviewer, and potentially as an editor. Consider your own circumstances and obligations. No one who does this job is a genius, we're just energetic and committed. When questions come up in your mind, I'm happy to respond to any interested individual, and watch for an announcement later this year.

Now to the meat of my editorial reflection.

Some readers know that, while my day job is working as an academic librarian, my alter-ego is as a social historian of recent America, from World War II to the present. My particular field is postwar race and culture. A few years ago, my eyebrows went up as I searched *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts* looking for what might be in the scholarly literature relating to cultural-minority librarianship. There wasn't much. As I set down this comment, I went back to *LISTA* to see what may have changed. No surprises there.

There are literally thousands of international research and magazine articles on special collections and archives, a subset of tens of thousands about librarianship and cultural custodianship generally. If one limits the results only to scholarly / peer-reviewed publications, the numbers don't fall by much. They reflect the challenges of documenting student movements, staffing reading rooms, mounting exhibitions, and training and employment. They examine the challenges of language, space allocation, with donor relations, fundraising—all things that working librarians and archivists deal with daily. Other than grant-funding announcements, I notice, however, that marginal communities have not fared as well in the literature, though parsing the general corpus into meaningful groups and subgroups is challenging. I think it is fair to observe that we, as a discipline, have not done as well in terms of examining special-collections service and collections in terms of cultural minorities. A critic might rightly charge that it should not be surprising that studies of minority-serving collections are in the minority. They'd be correct, but the existence of professional writing about collections documenting classes, cultures, minority populations, gender, and subgroups is disproportionately small.

So, what's the difference between simple expedience and systemic bias as we build and describe collections? After a lot of thought I have to conclude that there probably isn't much. If we intentionally collect the papers of "important" people and institutions in a community, doesn't that just as intentionally ignore those who are "unimportant?" What got me thinking about this was a comment made in 1947: "Conflict makes news, and news makes history, yet men live rich and quiet lives outside the boiling currents of their times, and who shall say whether the thousand existences in quiet do not more nearly express the shape of human experience than the fiercely spotlighted existence that survives as history."<sup>1</sup>

Out of those thousands, merely 53 peer-reviewed articles address Hispanic culture in American libraries. Seven document Southeast Asian populations or collections, only one of which involves the United States, and it is a website review. There are 254 studies involving special collections or archives in any variation involving present or past black citizens, though many and perhaps most listed are literary studies—more writing has been generated on Native peoples in special collections (which still isn't much). Merely four have been generated on historically black colleges and university collections, none of which are actual research articles. Several sound studies examine alienation, omission, and erasure from special collections (including at least one recent article in *RBM*). Women and research on women's collections and services appear so often in the literature that writing in those sub-

---

1. Dale L. Morgan, *The Great Salt Lake* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), 325–32.

jects now effectively *are* the mainstream. To date, the most successful challenger of mainstream omission has been the LGBTQ movement, which has successfully contributed to a degree that no other group has been nearly so successful voicing. Making this observation isn't an assertion that nothing remains to be done, merely that an international effort toward balancing gendered subfields has seen the most activity.

Now let's be fair—*no* collection is ever absolutely or equitably representative, and documenting minority and mainstream populations often involve processes rather than discrete actions. In this case, similarities are not the issue, differences are: different assumptions, values, perspectives, world views, and experiences. To illustrate using an automotive example, both my 1949 Chevrolet pickup truck and our family's 2016 Chrysler Pacifica have the same elements: wheels, motor, brakes, steering, passenger compartment. Notice that I didn't include things like "sound system" or "climate control" or "lights." The truck never had a radio, the windows are the only means of climate control it ever had, and it was built before turn signals or brake lights were standard equipment on trucks. (I still signal turns by sticking my arm out the window.) Despite their structural similarities, driving either vehicle provides a functionally and qualitatively different experience than does driving the other. They are simply not the same.

For a profession dedicated to inclusivity, those earlier numbers reflecting our professional literature should spark some concerns. I don't raise the issue to generate guilt trips among librarians in and of the mainstream; I do it merely to acknowledge that, despite how far the country has progressed toward at least *de jure* forms of equality and inclusion, the profession itself and certainly its professional writing have not reached anything like *de facto* inclusivity. We are still unintentionally wearing blinders, to some extent, but blinders nonetheless. As a social historian, I can peg one important cause for librarians' lack of attention to the influence of the Consensus school of historians who wrote from the 1940s through 1960s. The Consensus approach reflected the (selective) sense of unity created by the Second World War. Generally, the Consensus approach was "that America owed more—and particularly more of its successes—to a tradition of consensus about fundamental principles than to a tradition of internal conflict" over things like labor or race.<sup>2</sup> Its theme was the basic applicability and continuity of American values. Its proponents producing affirming narratives emphasizing the nation as a unified (and, though unstated, entirely white) society of common goals, minimizing the conflicts of slavery, Western settlement, labor, and the "authentic color" of ethnic-

---

2. J.R. Pole, *Pastmasters: Some Essays on American Historians*, eds. Marcus Cunliffe and Robin W. Winks (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1969), 211.

ity, regionalism, and local dialect.<sup>3</sup> In the hands of writers like Richard Hofstadter, Louis Hartz, Daniel Boorstin, Henry Comager Steele, and Allan Nevins, and in the name of unity, the Consensus version of US national history intentionally turned a blind eye to the social and economic immunities that color afforded mostly to Euroamericans, a group that was quickly accommodating white ethnic minorities into a unitary and “colorblind” form of economic, social, and racial nationalism.<sup>4</sup> The Consensus approach thus rested on unstated but inherent assumptions that the American mainstream simply took for granted because it was the mainstream. Omissions weren’t a problem then, for America was still starkly segregated, anyway. The powerful image of America as a cultural “melting pot” had grown out of the Progressive era nearly a half-century earlier; the Consensus approach reflected a strain of largely white, inspirational, and definitely nationalist ethicism.

In the emerging world of special collections and archives, the Consensus underpinnings in postwar society supported large-scale developments in cultural institutions, like colleges and universities, and in social assumptions about the nation and its people. Those assumptions set the foundation for both academic librarianship and archives. It was the unstated approach shading even the choice of editorial projects, like *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* or *The Papers of Andrew Jackson*, and the creation of the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC). It privileged the admission of cultural-mainstream students to graduate programs. All of this development happened precisely as college and university libraries were expanding dramatically; at the same time, segregation remained a defining and as-yet unchallenged reality in public accommodations, including community and academic libraries—especially where segregation remained in place in higher education.

Yes, that was a long time ago, but with comparatively few exceptions, because our disciplines matured during that period, our collections and our professional writing still largely reflects those past approaches. For instance, Latin American and Hispanic populations make up between 8 and 35 percent of most urban settings in the United States—some are much greater. I previously lived and worked in a rural Southern community where practicing Jews had represented a large part of the twentieth-century business community. A generational shift and changes in the local economy encouraged families to migrate away, but their long presence in the region was invisible within the collection I curated. Does your own collection

---

3. cf. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The Objectivity Question and the American Historical Profession* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), chap. 11; Peter Charles Hoffer, “The Rise of Consensus History,” *Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Fraud* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2004); Mario DePillis, review of *History’s Memory* by Ellen Fitzpatrick (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002) in *Journal of Social History* 37 (Summer 2004): 1116–18.

4. cf. Richard Moss, *Creating the New Ethnic Right in 1970s America: The Intersection of Anger and Nostalgia* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017).

reflect the percentage of Hispanic residents within your community? What about other populations?

Folks, the message of this editorial musing is that our discipline may not need many more case studies about special collections exhibits, but there remain huge opportunities to think beyond the mainstream, cross lines, involve people and communities, and engage what has too long been left unaddressed. This issue of *RBM* presents a couple of challenges to mainstream assumptions and thinking. Please step outside yourself and your privileges inherent to color, or economic standing, or education, or physical ability. Look into your communities and ask questions. Which *RBM* readers could write about engaging children or care-facility residents in special collections? Who will write about the challenges of including oral tradition and oral communities? Do we document the experience of the undocumented or homeless? If so, how? How are laboring people included in archives when they generate comparatively few records? Archival collections and rare books are one form of cultural monument. If that is the case, then perhaps it is time to consider who doesn't have a monument within your collection(s). Then tell our professional community what they might consider in addressing their own silences.

As you read this issue's contents, I hope you begin to read between the lines through your own lenses. Ask yourself who is part of the community but not represented in your collection. Then take a risk: start a conversation with people from one or more of those groups who don't have a monument among your collection. Ask individuals in those groups how they might expect to be included in the institutional collection, or why they may not want to be, and listen to their responses. Special collections are not only sites of privilege and domination, but also of trust. Trust, like culture, must be created. Only by listening to concerns and acting in good faith can trust be earned, whether as professionals or as institutions.

The answers might surprise you. They certainly have surprised me.

I conclude with a short list of works that I think raise issues that special collections librarians, archivists, and museum professionals could find useful to address their own microcosms. They won't apply to every reader; nevertheless, I encourage you to read them for what they can do to turn your head and widen your professional eyes.

Alex H. Poole. "The Strange Career of Jim Crow Archives: Race, Space, and History in the Mid-Twentieth-Century American South." *American Archivist* 77, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2014): 23–63. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.77.1.g621m3701g821442>.

Jessica S. Johnson et al. "Practical Aspects of Consultation with Communities." *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 44, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2005): 203–15.

Maggie Schreiner and Claro de los Reyes. "Social Practice Artists in the Archive: Collaborative Strategies for Documentation." *Urban Library Journal* 22, no. 2 (2016): 1–8.

David A. Hurley, Sara R. Kostelecky, and Paulita Aguilar. "Whose Knowledge? Representing Indigenous Realities in Library and Archival Collections." *Collection Management* 42, no. 3/4 (July–December 2017): 124–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01462679.2017.1392805>.

Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez. "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives." *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 56–81. <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56>.

Elizabeth Dunham and Xaviera Flores, "Breaking the Language Barrier: Describing Chicano Archives with Bilingual Finding Aids." *American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 20014): 499–509. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.77.2.p66l555g15g981p6>.

Elizabeth Joffrion and Natalia Fernández. "Collaboration between Tribal and Nontribal Organizations: Suggested Best Practices for Sharing Expertise, Cultural Resources, and Knowledge." *American Archivist* 78, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2015): 192–237. <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.78.1.192>.

Elaina Norlin and Patricia Morris. "Historically Black College and University Libraries in the 21st Century: Accomplishments, Challenges and Recommendations." *Journal of Library Administration* 33, no. 3/4 (April 2001): 183–97. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J111v33n03\\_02](https://doi.org/10.1300/J111v33n03_02).