

## To the Editor:

In an essay published in *The Atlantic*, Ibram X. Kendi defines white privilege:

White privileges are the relative advantages racism affords to people identified as white, whether white people recognize them or deny them. To be white is to be afforded one's individuality. Afforded the presumption of innocence. Afforded the assumption of intelligence. Afforded empathy when crying or raging. Afforded disproportionate amounts of policy-making power. Afforded opportunity from a white network. Afforded wealth-building homes and resource-rich schools. Afforded the ability to vote quickly and easily.<sup>1</sup>

From an archival perspective, we can add, "Afforded value in one's stories, perspectives, experiences, and histories. Afforded representation in archives. Afforded inclusion in history."

Frank Boles's article, "To Everything There Is a Season," argues against a social justice imperative in archives. I'll focus on Boles's argument against the idea that archivists should create a "universal" record of human activity to illustrate how the article and its selection for the *American Archivist* brown bag lunch at the 2019 SAA Annual Meeting is an example of systemic racism in academic publishing and scholarly communication and its impact on knowledge construction.

In arguing against representation in archives (conflating representation with universality), Boles sets up a false dichotomy between institutional policy and representative collecting. Whether representation is included in institutional collecting policies is a matter of interpretation. The departmental responsibilities of the university archives at my institution read, "the University Archives serves as the primary repository for the historical records of Iowa State University. The University Archives collects, describes, preserves and exhibits university records that contain historical, administrative, legal, or fiscal value."<sup>2</sup> Does this statement exclude the acquisition of records generated by marginalized communities on campus? A social justice lens, which focuses on power imbalances and seeks equity in access to resources and opportunity, says no.

Whiteness,<sup>3</sup> however, leads us to assume that work around diversity, inclusion, and social justice is "peripheral" and "activist." As Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo write, "Because dominant institutions in society are positioned as being neutral, challenging social injustice within them seems to be an extra task in addition to our actual tasks."<sup>4</sup> If an archives' role is to document the functions, activities, and history of its parent institution, then ensuring that the minutes of the Asian American and Pacific Islander staff affinity group are acquired is just as much part of that mission as acquiring the minutes of the Faculty Senate.

Boles goes further to argue, “[t]he archival community should concede that the hope to holistically document society be abandoned because of the continued failure of the community to articulate how to fund and how to define this goal.” Advocating for an abandonment of the goal to ensure marginalized communities are represented in the archival record is, in effect, dismissing the contributions by and about archivists from marginalized communities. It also conflicts with SAA’s strategic plan and goals, which call for completeness and diversity in the historical record.

The publication of this article, which has been criticized for being poorly argued, reliant on logical fallacies, and lacking a deep understanding of and engagement with the literature,<sup>5</sup> and its selection for the *American Archivist* brown bag session rightfully raises questions about the peer review process and organization of brown bag sessions at SAA annual meetings, which fall outside the purview of the program committee.

Boles positions his article as being about appraisal. Was the selection of peer reviewers limited to those with expertise in appraisal, or was it also sent to reviewers knowledgeable about inclusion and social justice? The Areas of Expertise selection menu in the *American Archivists*’s user registration form does not include diversity, inclusion, or social justice. Who was involved in the planning of the brown bag luncheon? The selection of the article generated controversy and in doing so, definitely stirred discussion—but in doing so, it created a spectacle of diversity and inclusion. If the intention was to highlight an article on diversity, why not choose an article that centers the perspectives and experiences of marginalized communities? If there were no such articles in the publication queue for the journal, what obstacles exist that are pushing scholars writing by and about marginalized communities to publish in alternate venues?

It’s important to think about this article and the canceled brown bag within the greater context of systemic racism in academic publishing and scholarly communication. The dismissal of scholarship by and about communities of color is not uncommon. Education scholars Delores Delgado Bernal and Octavio Villalpando argue that “by marginalizing the knowledges of faculty of color, higher education has created an apartheid of knowledge where the dominant Eurocentric epistemology is believed to produce ‘legitimate’ knowledge, in contrast to the ‘illegitimate’ knowledge that is created by all other epistemological perspectives.”<sup>6</sup> Likewise, psychology professor Stanley Sue writes that the methodologies and theoretical grounding employed by scholars of color and other marginalized identities as well as those who employ social justice approaches are frequently criticized for being too narrow, biased, and/or lacking in intellectual and scientific rigor.<sup>7</sup>

This incident is one of many recent examples in which academic journals have published pieces that are poorly written or challenge the contributions by scholars of color:

- Weeks before the SAA Annual Meeting, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* published a critique of the Black Lives Matter movement that was characterized as lacking intellectual rigor;<sup>8</sup>
- Over the summer, *College & Research Libraries* published a review of Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho that centered the defensiveness and fragility of the reviewer, rather than on the experiences of the authors who contributed to the book;<sup>9</sup>
- In 2017, *Third World Quarterly* published an article that argued that the Global South benefited from colonialism;<sup>10</sup> and
- In 2017, the *American Historical Review* published a review of Ansley T. Erickson's *Making the Unequal Metropolis: School Desegregation and Its Limits* that criticized the author for not referencing sociobiology, a discredited theory that naturalizes racism and justifies racist viewpoints.<sup>11</sup>

In this letter, I am not arguing that theory and practice related to social justice within archives should be free from critique, nor that Frank Boles is racist. We all grow up socialized in whiteness, which impacts how knowledge is created, through archives (in its role as the primary sources of history) and scholarly communication. This article and the brown bag luncheon must be viewed as part of a pattern in which the construction of knowledge, through academic publishing and scholarly communication, continue to marginalize communities of color and the work of archivists of color in addressing these systemic issues. I call on the editor and editorial board of the *American Archivist*, with input from SAA membership, to develop and publicize a plan to reduce bias in publishing the journal and increase the representation of authors from marginalized communities.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Ibram X. Kendi, "The Greatest White Privilege Is Life Itself," *The Atlantic*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/too-short-lives-black-men/600628>.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.lib.iastate.edu/about-library/organization/departments/special-collections>.

<sup>3</sup> I am using whiteness in the sense defined by April Hathcock as "a marker for the privilege and power that acts to reinforce itself through hegemonic cultural practice that excludes all who are different." April Hathcock, "White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS," *In*

- the Library with the Lead Pipe*, October 7, 2015, <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2015/lis-diversity>.
- <sup>4</sup> Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2017), 196.
- <sup>5</sup> See Eira Tansey's blog post, "Peer Review for Archivists (or, WTF Is Going On with This SAA Pre-print)," for example, <http://eiratansey.com/2019/08/01/peer-review-for-archivists-or-wtf-is-going-on-with-this-saa-pre-print>.
- <sup>6</sup> Delores Delgado Bernal and Octavio Villalpando, "An Apartheid of Knowledge in Academia: The Struggle Over the 'Legitimate' Knowledge of Faculty of Color," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 35, no. 2 (2002): 177.
- <sup>7</sup> Stanley Sue, "Science, Ethnicity, and Bias: Where Have We Gone Wrong?," *American Psychologist* 54, no. 12 (1999): 1070–77, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.54.12.1070>.
- <sup>8</sup> Zuleyka Zevallos, "Whitewashing Race Studies," *Other Sociologist* (blog), July 29, 2019, <https://othersociologist.com/2019/07/29/whitewashing-race-studies>.
- <sup>9</sup> College & Research Libraries, Twitter post, July 16, 2019, 4:45 pm, [https://twitter.com/CRL\\_ACRL/status/1151246509473767424?s=20](https://twitter.com/CRL_ACRL/status/1151246509473767424?s=20).
- <sup>10</sup> Sahar Khan, "The Case Against 'The Case for Colonialism,'" *Duck of Minerva* (blog), September 19, 2017, <https://duckofminerva.com/2017/09/the-case-against-the-case-for-colonialism.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> Scott Jaschik, "The Wrong Reviewer," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 18, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/04/18/history-journal-apologizes-assigning-review-book-urban-education-and-inequality>.