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Review of Archival Values: Essays in Honor of Mark A. Greene

Gregory Wiedeman

University at Albany, State University of New York, gwiedeman@albany.edu

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Christine Weideman and Mary A. Caldera, eds. *Archival Values: Essays in Honor of Mark A. Greene*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019.

Remember when we used to honor a person with a book of essays? That was weird, right?

Archival Values: Essays in Honor of Mark A. Greene is an archetypical *Festschrift*, a genre peculiar to academia where faculty distinguish a particular academic career while also publishing to advance their grueling tenure tracks. The genre often prioritizes celebrating achievements that seem to be conjured into being over helpfully clarifying the contexts of their creation. This tradition doesn't seem quite right for archivists, most of whom do not have the same requirements to earn stability or salary. There is, however, precedent here in 1992's *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, when a number of mostly Canadian archivists contributed case studies or essays on appraisal.¹ I was assigned photocopies from *The Archival Imagination* in graduate school where I was mostly confused about who Hugh Taylor was.

First, I want to be clear about the limited magnitude of this criticism. *Archival Values* is certainly not some terrible misstep. The essays within it are quite good—at times exceptionally so—but the book also seems like a remnant from a previous era. It has some characteristics, conscious or not, that make me a bit uncomfortable and that I think archivists should discuss and consider leaving behind.

It is not that Mark Greene is unworthy of this treatment, as he might be the most impactful writer on archives of the last few decades. It is also easy to find numerous personal accounts where Greene was particularly insightful, gracious, and generous with his time. Still, is it appropriate to select any archivist and dedicate a book to them? As Dennis Meissner lists in his afterword, archival scholars writing on appraisal, management, access and use, arrangement and description, or diversity and inclusion all must engage with Greene's work, ensuring that it will be considered and cited for years to come (271–72). This seems like we are currently valuing Greene's contributions sufficiently. Ideas, like people, are imperfect and products of their particular contexts. Our collective mission is to improve on them over time. Some of Greene's ideas have already been enriched or revised by other authors, and all of them eventually will be.² We should think twice about holding up any specific archivist as particularly embodying archival ideas or values, which is precisely what a *Festschrift* offers.

This is a book about archival professionalism. Scott Cline's concluding essay in particular frames *Archival Values* by claiming that the value of professionalism in the Society of American Archivist's (SAA) Core Values of Archivists is not a value in itself but a virtue that encompasses holding and demonstrating the archival values as “integral to the archival endeavor” (264). The SAA Publications Board heartily agreed and selected it as the fourth of SAA's annual “One

¹ Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, Ont.: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992).

² Two notable cases are Daniel A. Santamaria's enrichment of Greene's ideas on processing and Mario H. Ramirez's criticism of Greene's reluctance to privilege marginalized communities in appraisal. Daniel A. Santamaria, *Extensible Processing for Archives and Special Collections: Reducing Processing Backlogs* (Chicago: Neal-Schuman, 2015); Mario H. Ramirez, “Being Presumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative,” *American Archivist* 78, no. 1 (2015): 339–56.

Book, One Profession” series, as the volume can readily foster conversations about what it means to be a professional archivist.

But SAA needs to consider if it is making publication choices to best expand access to this conversation. There can be more barriers to accessing chapters of published books than even paywalled journal articles. A book requires a personal or previous library purchase of the individual work. Even from my advantageous position in an academic library, asking a subject librarian to purchase a copy could easily be met with, “Sure, maybe after July 1 when my budget is renewed.” In fact, with *Archival Values*’ substantial \$55.99 retail cost (or \$39.99 for SAA members), getting a free copy was actually a factor for me in agreeing to write this review, and unlike many (or most?) archivists, I have a stable and relatively well-compensated position.

The book format has other drawbacks. *Archival Values* is destined to violate *respect des fonds* and be split up, as archival educators are likely to split off some of the premier essays and make them available as course reserves under fair use, potentially even resorting to photocopies if they only have access to a print book. It is almost as if *Archival Values* was designed specifically for this end, which in practice limits both access and purchases and seems like the sign of a broken system. The born-digital PDF version for purchase lessens some of these problems but raises other questions, like could SAA avoid spending resources to create an index when a PDF is easily searched?

The personal anecdotes often pervading *Festschriften* can also lead to a somewhat clubby atmosphere that does not lend itself to inclusivity. We must be careful not to correlate professionalism with the privilege of book publication, membership in SAA, or travel to the annual meeting with the opportunity to have a conversation with Mark Greene. While these factors do not change how useful the essays can be, I expect that packaging them in a restrictive print format and using a conservative genre for a book on professionalism will undermine its readership and place in the profession.

With the problems of genre and publication aside, the content of *Archival Values* can be quite effective. It includes twenty-three essays, each centered on one of the society’s Core Values of Archivists. There are typically two relatively brief essays for each value with one often featuring a general summary that brings together the prevailing literature in context alongside a discussion of challenging cases where the value comes into play. A second essay is usually more critical and features a leading expert who seeks to transform how archivists understand the value in question. Some essays go as far as reinventing or questioning the value entirely. This juxtaposition can get a bit awkward at times, such as when Tim Pyatt’s perfectly cromulent summary of custodialism follows Michelle Light’s extremely well-cited complete and utter demolition of that very idea.

Overall, synthesis is more the mission here than original research, but while most of even the more forward-thinking ideas have been bouncing around some circles in the past few years, the authors articulate them clearly and concisely. On paper this arrangement seems like it would be perfect for graduate courses, but some of the essays that take fewer chances can be a bit unexciting. In a few cases, older articles that establish our understanding of a value might be more engaging. Most often it is the more critical essays that really stand out. If even veteran

archivists are interested in the latest discussions on post-custodialism, archives as processes, the ethics of care, or how climate change should impact archival practice, these essays are an excellent précis. Still, this makes the complete absence of any of the more recent literature on appraisal particularly glaring.

A few essays stand out as being particularly outstanding or memorable. Jennifer Meehan starts off *Archival Values* with an effective essay that changes the value of history and memory to “story and meaning.” She reframes the basis of archival power from the passive records (the stuff) to active meaning making (the story). To Meehan, it is the *process* of making history from archives that is valuable, which centers the labor of archivists—as well as creators and users—within this vision.

Hillel Arnold calls out SAA’s seemingly intentionally vague value of social responsibility, arguing that archivists’ failure to clarify this responsibility could cause archival work to perpetuate injustice. He proposes using Feminist Care Ethics, which calls for empathy and actions in everyday life that prioritize the marginalized over the empowered. This requires centering archival processes on the people they impact, including the subjects of records, rather than abstractions. Arnold stresses that archivists must not let ambiguities or the lack of a perfect code of ethics prevent them from providing care for the people they impact.

Joel Wurl directly confronts the profession’s diversity burnout. Finding himself without the originality or energy for yet another call to action, his essay is more like crowdsourced soul-searching on what diversity means and what can be a meaningful path forward for archivists. He asked a number of different archivists who have worked on making the profession more inclusive, “What does it mean to value diversity?” (57). Wurl recalls that diversity was at the forefront of archival discussions at the time of Mark Greene’s 2008 SAA presidential address but acknowledges how these conversations had some problematic understandings. There is debate on whether diversity is limited to making archivists more representative demographically or requires something more—which risks a wandering focus and a watering down of outcomes. One coauthor simply states that “diversity isn’t a value; it’s a fact. Either something is diverse or it isn’t” (59). There is also skepticism of whether diversity is a path forward or merely a tool for the powerful to address calls for equity. Another author stresses that diversity must work to actively confront “the realities of racial and class privilege” (62). The authors conclude that diversity is a central endeavor everyone must undertake to ensure that all of us can participate, where progress is assessed by actual outcomes.

In her essay, Michelle Light asks why custodialism is an archival value considering the concept has been under criticism for much of the past forty years. She argues that the value must be revised to accommodate post-custodial electronic records management, cultural sensitivity in Native and colonial archives, and the community archives movement. She explains how custody is a poor indicator of responsible care for digital records since ownership is not always feasible or even desirable. It is also not always responsible for archivists to remove the records of marginalized groups. Community archives see custody as power and aim to distribute that responsibility, with archivists providing expertise and guidance and creator communities retaining ownership. Light highlights SAA’s failure to endorse *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* in 2006 and Mark Greene’s discomfort with privileging certain communities

as signs many archives and archivists are resistant to post-custodialism. She uses Greene's "middle way" idea to offer stewardship as a concept to incorporate post-custodial critiques into more mainstream or traditional repositories. She offers a definition for a value of responsible stewardship, which extends the American Anthropological Association's "do no harm" principle, allows for multiple ownership models, and emphasizes documentation as a service based on trust.

Among the twenty-three essays in *Archival Values*, Frank Boles's piece on appraisal stands out as being particularly incongruent with current scholarship. Boles outlines a number of appraisal approaches looking for a "guiding star," "underlying principle," and "practical mechanism" (122). He argues that since what society values changes over time, and many often prefer "treasures" over evidence, archivists must provide a cogent selection theory to justify their decisions and ensure public trust. Boles's search for a single way of knowing concludes that the Minnesota Method developed by Mark Greene and Todd J. Daniels Howell is the best approach since it pushes each individual repository to develop its own collecting program based on its individual context. For Boles, if archivists simply document from a variety of different *types* of power, their bases are covered. He is particularly uncritical of how academic archives are empowered, instead relying on them as an independent third party to counteract repositories collecting for corporate or government interest (133). Boles's essay completely fails to engage with the prevailing literature on appraisal that is critical of documenting from the perspective of power and calls for privileging marginalized communities.³

Ben Goldman's essay works to center climate change within archivists' understanding of preservation. Since digital preservation practices are powered by fossil fuels, he asks how archivists will be judged since these methods are the exact cause of the climate crisis. Goldman argues that sidelining climate change as merely an economic or resource problem is insufficient since a substantial part of archival data growth is not just growth in volumes of collections but growth due to duplication and monitoring decided on in ignorance of its climate impact. This work demonstrates that even with efficiency increases, archivists must bring environmental considerations into their basic practices, otherwise the emissions impact of collections is still likely to grow. Moreover, the long-term access that archivists are committing to will require significant energy usage, which makes climate change a direct preservation risk. Goldman stresses that archivists should plan to collect less, utilizing appraisal strategies championed by Mark Greene and F. Gerald Ham, and even suggests that acceptable loss might be the sustainable reality for many digital materials. The essay makes it clear that archivists certainly need to be thoughtful about current and future climate impacts when collecting archival materials and committing to their long-term availability.

The second essay on preservation by Rachel Onuf is also notably effective, calling for the further integration of preservation within archival practices. She makes the case that since the publication of Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's "More Product, Less Process" (MPLP)

³ Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory and the Archives in South Africa," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 63–86; Ramirez, "Being Presumed Not to Be"; Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23–43; Michelle Caswell, "Dusting for Fingerprints: Introducing Feminist Standpoint Appraisal," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3 (August 25, 2019), <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/113/67>.

article, preservation has been under threat with diminished focus and resources.⁴ While Onuf contends that Greene and Meissner’s depiction of preservation was often caricature, she agrees that prior to MPLP, much of preservation was not systematic. But with a higher priority on access and use, there is now some concern that the profession has neglected hands-on preventative measures that can make a substantial impact with little time commitment. Onuf calls SAA’s value of preservation a lost opportunity to confidently redefine preservation to focus on a set of techniques that can be integrated holistically into collections management and a concept that *supports* rather than opposes use. Her vision of preservation “allows materials to persist, to be kept alive, or at least to be able to be enlivened” (195).

Dominique Luster’s critique of SAA’s value of professionalism is also particularly insightful. She identifies as an advocate for records creators, the communities they document, and the stories that come from their work. Luster argues that archivists’ understanding of professionalism must include public trust and acknowledge the impact of power on “the public’s willingness to participate in the archival process, either as users or donors.” She is critical of thoughtlessly using graduate education as a marker of professionalism, which fails to value “personal knowledge” acquired from sources like creator and user communities, and particularly warns of the danger of using professionalism “as a weapon” to privilege and exclude (252). To Luster, the work of professionals must provide a public benefit, cultivate community trust, and amplify traditionally silenced voices.

While these essays are the most memorable, there are a number of other strong pieces. Elise Dunham shows how the value of access can help tackle tricky problems in research data management. Trevor Owens is critical of the neoliberal framing of archives service as customer service that is “transactional,” valuing archives as end products over the labor of archivists and seeing users as customers who passively receive knowledge rather than take an active role in creating it (230, 231). Similar to Jennifer Meehan, he uses crowdsourcing and community archives to redefine archival service as coproductive and participatory, where archivists are knowledge facilitators and the lines among creators, archivists, and users are blurred and collaborative.

Many of the essays in *Archival Values* are standout works and helped me to better understand some of the more cutting-edge ideas reshaping how archivists think of themselves and their work. The editors deserve credit for their arrangement of engaging and thoughtful archival authors, many of whom have a real vision for the value in question. Still, I fear that the book’s publication format and conservative genre serve to undermine the effort, and many of the essays deserve a much broader readership than I fear they will receive. Overall, *Archival Values* seems to suggest that engagement with the ideas in these essays is a mark of professionalism. Yet outside of Luster’s excellent essay, the book as a whole fails to be sufficiently critical of how this requirement—or professionalism in general—can be exclusionary. The book also lacks awareness of how its own publication and framing choices imperfectly address these challenges. This makes minor qualms about the uncomfortable genre and lack of open access a bit more problematic.

⁴ Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *American Archivist* 63, no. 2 (2005): 208–63.