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## Forum

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### Not Just Between Us: A Riposte to Mark Greene

In his article, “A Critique of Social Justice as an Archival Imperative: What *Is* It We’re Doing ~~That’s that’s~~ All ~~That that~~ Important?,” Mark Greene argues against an archival call for social justice. While I do not think Greene’s opinion piece merits a lengthy response, I am compelled to clarify just a few points regarding my own work and how he has characterized it.

Firstly, Greene fails to define “social justice.” A more thorough investigation would have revealed that most conceptions of social justice entail the more equitable distribution of life chances, a thorough unveiling and analysis of power, and greater opportunities for self-representation.<sup>1</sup> The two articles of mine that Greene cites are not about social justice, but about good old-fashioned legal justice, *i.e., that is*, culpability and adjudication for crimes committed. Greene seems to have missed this fundamental difference. That said, I am also an advocate for social justice, and have written on this issue elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> I believe that social justice is a human imperative and not just an archival one. In the face of overwhelming inequality, we have a primary ethical responsibility as humans to work toward a more just society. It is only logical that archivists should use archival skills to work toward social justice, just as physicians should use medical skills to work toward social justice and lawyers should use legal skills.

Secondly, Greene misses the basic observation that power is imbricated in the creation of records that reflect or document injustice. Contrary to positivist conceptions, records aren’t

neutral by-products of activity; they are discursive agents through which power is made manifest. Records both produce and are produced by violent acts. To use a recent example, the photographs from Abu Ghraib were not neutral by-products of torture, but part and parcel of it. The torture was staged for the camera; the photographs are not only records of abuse, but vehicles through which that abuse was enacted. Lynndie England and Charles Graner were not neutral record creators documenting the torture so that their fellow soldiers could later be held accountable (as might logically be concluded from Greene's argument); they were active participants in that torture. This is less an "ambiguity" in my work as Greene claims, but a nuanced illustration of the complex nature of power and how it can be both exercised through and reflected by documentation. Records creators, records managers, and archivists all have ethical responsibilities; the obligation to engage these responsibilities is present at every stage in the social life of records, from their creation, to their appraisal, acquisition, representation, digitization, and use.

Finally, I would like to caution against the canonization of the work of a few scholars (Rand Jimerson, Verne Harris) in the field's discussion of social justice. There is a robust body of literature about social justice and archives that Greene ignores. Most egregiously, Greene fails to acknowledge both Anthony Dunbar's seminal article on critical race theory, social justice, and archives, and Anne Gilliland's work on social justice and archival education.<sup>3</sup> An article I co-authored with my students on using a social justice framework for introductory archival classes is also missing, as is an article on measuring the social justice impact of archives by Wendy Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David Wallace.<sup>4</sup> In limiting the discussion to the work of Jimerson and Harris, Greene unintentionally exposes how power animates the politics of whose voices get legitimated and whose get silenced. In categorizing my response as a letter to

the editor to appear in the Forum section and Jimerson's as a formal article to appear alongside Greene's, the editor of this journal has further exacerbated this disparity. We must not be fooled into thinking that the conversation about social justice has been solely between the senior white men in our field, nor can we allow this conversation to continue as a dialogue that privileges their voices. Power, voice, silence; these are fundamentally archival issues, and yet they are exposed here as an egregious and persistent blind spot.

There is much more that can be said about Greene's article—its assumptions about the archivist's positionality, its failure to acknowledge community-based archival practice, its gross misreading of Verne Harris's work—but I leave that detailed critique to the readers. Rather than expend any more effort debating the merits of an obvious ethical imperative, I plan to continue to focus my energies on the difficult and messy task of enacting social justice through an archival lens, as I hope my colleagues will as well.

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1 For a more detailed definition, see Anthony Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started," *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 117.

2 Michelle Caswell, Giso Broman, Jennifer Kirmer, Laura Martin, and Nathan Sowry, "Implementing a Social Justice Framework in an Introduction to Archives Course: Lessons from Both Sides of the Classroom," *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 8(2), no. 2 (2012): <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2jx083hr>.

3 See: Anne Gilliland, "Neutrality, Social Justice, and the Obligations of Archival Education and Educators in the Twenty-First Century," *Archival Science* 11 (2011): 193–209; Anthony Dunbar, "Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started," *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 109–129.

4 Michelle Caswell, Giso Broman, Jennifer Kirmer, Laura Martin, and Nathan Sowry et al., "Implementing a Social Justice Framework in an Introduction to Archives Course: Lessons from Both Sides of the Classroom," *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 8(2) (2012): <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/2jx083hr>. Wendy Duff, Andrew Flinn, Karen Emily Suurtamm, and David Wallace, "Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation," *Archival Science* 2013, e-publication ahead of print.