

Archivists and the Collecting Reflex

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Abstract

One of the core values of archivists “identifying and preserving essential records that document the cultural heritage of society.” (SAA) Archivists believe documenting to be a social responsibility which contributes “to preserving individual and community memory for their [the archivists’] specific constituencies. But to preserve, one has to get. The weight of this “social responsibility” combined with fear that evidence will be lost, unavailable or unattainable has led to a reflexive collecting practice in the aftermath of tragic events. This study questions whether this reflex de-prioritizes the individual during these traumatic times by emotionally separating them from coworkers and their larger community, many of whom may be unencumbered with professional obligation. In answering the powerful pull of the collecting reflex, the archivist may set aside their own personal grief and mourning process. The presenter will share the results of a study conducted in the Winter of 2025. The results of a survey and interviews shed light on the following questions: . Where does an archivist’s obligations lie? With whom do archivists share responsibility for documenting. And where is the human in the midst of it all? Pulling from a Feminist Ethics of Care framework, the presenter questions whether archivists can privilege care of themselves and other archivists before collecting, even while maintaining their affective responsibilities to researchers and the cultural record

About the authors:

Brenda Gunn is the Associate University Librarian for Special Collections and Preservation at the University of Virginia (UVA). She is a certified archivist and a Distinguished Fellow of the Society of American Archivists (SAA). Brenda has held leadership positions in archival organizations at the state, regional, and national level, including a term as President of the Academy of Certified Archivists, a three-year term on SAA’s Council, and a term on SAA’s Foundation board. Recently, Brenda was elected as the Vice President/President Elect of SAA and will begin her term in August 2025.

Brenda teaches a course on Archives and Society at the University of Mary Washington (in Fredericksburg, Virginia). She is currently co-writing, with Steven Booth, a monograph on archival revolutions since 1980, which will be published by the Council of Library and Information Resources in 2025. She is also conducting research on the archival collecting reflex. Brenda was a member of the 2010 Archives Leadership Institute Cohort, the ALI Steering Committee 2013-2018, and is currently the Director of ALI at UVA.