

# Turning the Gaze Inward: Collections, Identity, and Archival Autoethnography

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**Abstract:** In performing appraisal and other archival functions that involve decisions about the values contained in records and collections, archivists in cultural heritage institutions must recognize and engage with the interests of various stakeholders. With an eye toward increasing transparency, accountability, and collaboration, this poster calls for research on the construction of identities and power relations through collections and collecting practices. Recognizing the power of authoritative interpretation inherent in the archivist's position, the author discusses how archival practices have sometimes followed the general cultural tendency to naturalize economic and social inequality. One way this occurs is through the removal of collected objects from their original contexts and their subsequent recontextualization. Issues to be considered include the collector's psychological motivations and the effects on social relations that result from the status and value attributed to commodities and objects in a capitalist economy. Drawing on discourses in comparative literature, anthropology, and Native American and cultural studies this presentation will argue that archivists should engage with the dialectic between cultural categories. Specifically, we will explore the concept of autoethnography—a hybrid of autobiography and ethnography—wherein the practitioner explores both one's membership and distance from different, often competing, cultural categories. The author suggests that archival autoethnographic practices could be useful in two ways. First, archivists could encourage autoethnographic discourse by members of the cultures represented in collections, and second, archivists' own autoethnographic exploration of their own cultural spaces could increase transparency and accountability as well as serve to augment the scope of archives by facilitating a critical examination of archival culture and the dominant cultures of which they are often a part.

## About the Author:

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