

Pushing Perspectives: Closing the Gap: Increasing Diversity in Library Collections

Preservation Alumni's Anti-Racism/ Equity Initiative hosted this event on Tuesday October 25, 2022 7:30pm via Zoom

This is a transcription of the event. The transcript has been edited only to remove names of participants and other identifying information except in cases where permission was granted to use names; to insert, using [] symbols, phrases that were not captured by the transcription program and are necessary for comprehension; to add punctuation where important for clarity; and to clarify words that were not recognized by the transcription program.

[New Speaker]

... [There are a] couple of things that I need to tell you right off the top. One is this event is being recorded, and the second is that we have enabled closed captioning. So if you would like to ... you can turn it on. I believe you can each turn it on individually.

So my name is Claudia Kavanaugh, and I am the chair of the Preservation Alumni's Anti-Racism / Equity Initiative. These Pushing Perspectives events are organized by the Initiative as part of our mission to promote and support social justice and equity within the PA community, at Columbia's HP Program, and in the field of historic preservation in general. There are a number of members of the Initiative who are here tonight who are participating in this discussion. And they include [names here]. [Names here] are also members of the Initiative, and they helped prepare for this discussion.

So just a little bit of background. The idea for this event came about because of the Pushing Perspectives event that we held just about a year ago in the fall of 2021. That one was called Confronting Biases in Historic Building Materials Research. And just as a quick aside, recordings of all of the Pushing Perspectives events are available through Preservation Alumni's website if you'd like to watch any or all of them.

So one of the participants in that panel last fall was Hannah Bennett, and Hannah is the director of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library. And she leads Avery's research services and collection strategies. During the conversation last fall there were numerous times when she asked for the help of preservationists and of Preservation Alumni in particular in identifying new resources. She noted that the library needs to find new kinds of scholarship and - I'm pretty much quoting here - that the Library needs to find new kinds of scholarship, and really think about the kinds of materials that they are looking to collect. And she said: is what we have representative of the dialogue that we should be capturing.

So we took her up on her request. We had a meeting with her and other members of Avery staff, to learn what they're doing now, and to start a conversation about how we might help and so the discussion tonight is an outgrowth of that meeting. So we'd really like with all of you just to have an open discussion about some of these issues that we have been thinking about for a while.

What do we think libraries should be doing to work towards a more representative record of our history? What are the gaps? And how can they be filled? And importantly what can Preservation Alumni do to support changes. How can we help Avery become aware of alternative resources that they maybe should be exploring?

And so, before I go any further, I hope all of you have seen the poll that came up, and maybe just of the people who are here now if [Name here] can we put up the results of the poll? Just so we have a sense of who's with us now.

So we have . . . Oh, I'm very glad to see that we have some students with us tonight, and otherwise a mix of what people do professionally. Many people who use libraries as a resource, just wonderful. We're really eager to get your input. And many people who use Avery library, at least occasionally, but also frequently, which will be really helpful to this discussion - so great.

So I'm going to talk a little more in detail about how this evening will progress but first I'm going to turn it over to [name here] to talk just a little bit about what's happening currently at Avery Library.

[New speaker]

Thank you. It's really great to see everyone, as [name here] was saying. We at Preservation Alumni are in a pretty good position to help guide Avery in finding resources that not only tell a more complete story, but also are particularly useful to us as professionals. And one of the main ways that we currently are involved with the Library is through our project fund. For those of you who don't know it, it's a charitable fund that we as an organization administer, and I am the administrator within our organization, and we communicate with Avery to fund the acquisition of materials usually relating to trade catalogs or pattern books - other materials that we as preservations use that then go into the archive at Avery. And part of what we have done through our Equity Initiative is, we wanted to work to acknowledge the inherent biases in our focus on these very specific materials.

We tend to think of materials research and pattern books as being specifically neutral, but in being neutral we obviously may be leaving stuff out. So as we wanted to acknowledge how we can, how we can find a better, more equitable way forward, we came up with a few strategies in terms of being mindful of our spending and what sort of narrative we might be perpetuating in the materials that we acquire, and that means looking for materials that help represent some of these stories that are harder to uncover in the traditional sense. So as we are looking to spend real money on materials for Avery, it's a perfect time to evaluate the types of things that we are, that we are supporting with our funds.

There are a few questions, poll questions for this topic.

Questions 4 and 5, just relating to some of the materials that are at Avery. Just mark any that you are familiar with, or use and find to be useful in your work. This will help us understand the types of things that not only are we aware of that Avery is presenting as helpful resources, but the things that we're actively using and we find useful as professionals. I'm going to just click a few of the ones myself to answer the poll.

But so, as we move forward, some of the things that we're looking to do is think more mindfully about what we're acquiring, but also how access plays a role in this. So we've committed as a fund to providing funding for digitization efforts of things we acquire that are available - that will be available as we fund this scanning to make sure that materials that we're spending money on are accessible outside of, you know, the "ivory tower" of Avery which obviously until very recently has been even closed through COVID because of social distancing and because of limited access. So alumni haven't even been able to get into the Library for many resources. So we think that the digital access of anything that we acquire is really important to provide an equitable way forward. So as we can see from poll 4 almost everyone is aware of the Avery Index, Drawings and Archives, the Classics. Not as many are aware of other resources, such as the Seymour Durst Old York Library, which has a lot of real estate brochures and materials from the real estate industry of New York. Everyone - almost everyone's aware of the Real Estate Record and Builders Guide as we should be, and only half [of us] know about the Race and the Built Environment Library Guide, which does provide a really succinct but helpful guide for researching issues of the race and the built environment available on Avery's home page.

So I'm going to turn it over to our next section.

[New Speaker]

Okay, I guess that means me again. So I just wanted to go over very briefly sort of the outline of what we're going to do tonight, and a couple of housekeeping items, and then we'll get our discussion started. We divided the conversation that we want to have tonight into 4 basic topics, and we, as a group as the Initiative, have developed a few questions related to each one. So the 4 basic topics are: just general traditional library issues; general research issues; issues specific to use of Avery; and then, as the fourth one, the creation of a list of ideas that we, as a group, would like to present to Avery to help them in their efforts to diversify the collection and fill some of the gaps in that collection. So we're hoping that you can all stay to the end, so that you can help us with developing that list. We don't expect this to last much more than an hour, so hopefully, you can stay with us and help to create that [list].

So we really would like for this to be an open discussion. This is not your typical panel discussion where a few people present ideas and talk about them themselves. And, as I said, we've developed some questions. But what's really important to us is what's important to you, and what you would like to share about the topic. We don't pretend to be experts in this or know everything about it. We'd really like for us all to learn from each other, so please feel free to jump in to discuss the topics and I'm sure there are things that we haven't thought of so I hope you'll bring up related topics as we go along.

We are going to take some notes as we go along, and we are recording this. But I do want you to know that we are not specifically keeping track of who says what. And certainly when we share comments with Avery, those will be comments from a group, not from any particular individual.

So just a few housekeeping items we always have to do on Zoom. So I totally understand if some of you don't want to turn on your video. But for those who do feel comfortable doing it, we'd love to see your faces as we have a conversation together. We would, though, appreciate it if you keep yourself muted when you aren't talking, just to minimize background noise. But

please please do feel free to unmute yourself at any point during the conversation, to join in, ask a question, give a comment, and the chat is also open. So, if anyone would prefer that we read your remarks, you can write a comment or question, and we would be happy to share it with the group. I think that pretty much covers everything. Yeah, So I'm gonna turn this over to [name here] who is gonna get us started with our first topic.

[New Speaker]

Okay, so our first topic today is the general traditional library issues. As many of you probably know, the Dewey Decimal system and other means of cataloging are often biased and center white and Christian narratives. This isn't supposed to be a comprehensive history lesson on Melville Dewey, and I'm sure a lot of you have learned this a little bit in our profession. But the Dewey Decimal System was created and first published in 1876, and has been updated over time since then. There are 10 main categories which are then further divided. In more recent times there has been a lot of criticism for this system, which is . . . has been found to be racist and sexist and Melville Dewey himself was a problematic character. Large organizations, such as the American Library Association, have stripped his name away in an effort to create a more racially equitable library system.

Dewey is one system, and there are many traditional library systems. And there's challenges to overcoming the traditional library because of the volume of the physical material - the effort it takes to update these things, the constantly changing language that we use, and how we describe things. So in effort to kick off this discussion I'm going to throw what I hope to be in easy softball question for all of you. We would just like to hear how you use libraries, and how and what types of research you're doing at a library? What is the work that you're doing that requires research at a library, and . . . Yeah. And if anyone has . . . I can start off. I'm a preservation consultant writing National Register nominations and working on part ones of tax credit applications. So that often requires research at a library. I find myself using the local library section more than any other section of a library. So I'd be interested here how other people are using libraries in 2022.

[New Speaker]

All right. You know I found that through the pandemic, library access been so severely curtailed that I've really gotten so used to the digitization and what's available from home. And I have to say New York Public Library has been exceptional in this regard with respect to especially newspapers and journals and such. I'm also on faculty at [institution name here] so I have some privileges there that I'm able to access as well in terms of research - book scanning and things like that. But actually I think I have a fundamental question right now, which is: Has Avery opened up, opened back up yet to alumni? Or is it still closed?

[New Speaker]

I think I can answer that. I was on their website the other day that did say they were open to alumni. I don't know when that was updated, but it was not much more than a few weeks ago. If that's the case, it was still closed at the start of semester. I have not tested this theory yet, so I can - I can report back. I'm hoping to head up there pretty soon. But I think, according to the website, alumni privileges have been restored, and I do know that even prior to that, for at least the special collections, the drawings and archives, you were able to make appointments for

those materials but as far as going in and using the Library, outside of a research appointment, I know was off-limits.

[New Speaker]

Okay, I guess in the beginning of the pandemic they weren't even allowing those. But I understand that things got more lax as time went on. But just getting back to your question, [name here], I mean I would say that really the newspaper research for this particular research, which is similar to what you're doing as well is very much driven by, you know, sort of primary source material in terms of newspaper accounts, and then that can lead me on further into other areas.

So one of the things I notice with respect to the Race and Built Environment architecture finding aid was that they have many newspapers listed, but the access to them is actually through microfilm. Many of these have actually been digitized by New York Public, so that if students can get a library card, since they are residents of New York City at this point in time, presumably unless they're you know commuting into the city, that would be more practical for them and I don't know if Avery - they have a link to the Schomburg Center so I see no reason they wouldn't have a link to those resources as well.

[New Speaker]

Right. That's a really great point, [name here]. I know what you're talking about in terms of the New York Public Library does provide great access to newspaper materials through, I believe, ProQuest or Epscore or one of those. One in particular I was using that's very relevant to the topic of equity is, they do have a historically black African American newspaper collection, accessible through having the library card which has been really useful in researching some of my work up here in West Harlem so that's a really good point, that something that Avery could do is maybe point to resources that are already in place instead of trying to reinvent the wheel. As you note, New York Public Library is a great resource as well.

[New Speaker]

Yeah, that's interesting to bring up. Of course, we want to look at where other resources can be found. But I think it's telling to see how we're pointing people away from Avery in this context, and Avery has so much to offer. We know that but if people can't find it, it's not accessible, they'll have to turn to other sources,,.

[New Speaker]

So [name here], I'd like to focus a little bit on your point about cataloging issues, and how sometimes that makes it hard to find the resources that someone is looking for, particularly because the language that is used does change so constantly, and cataloging absolutely lags behind, and some of it is kind of archaic and I'm wondering if anyone has any particular comments about that, of things that you have tried to research and the terms that you're using are just not, you know the subjects you're using are just not coming up, which would suggest more importance on a library like Avery of taking a really hard look at what keywords it uses and how it classifies materials. I'd love to get some comments on that from people who are using the library.

[New Speaker]

Yeah, it doesn't have to be Avery specific, either, if anyone has examples from a local library.

[New Speaker]

But isn't it part of, I think, that we are asking not necessarily the right questions when we start our research, and that tends to lead us down a path because we're assuming what we've traditionally seen, but not necessarily what people who well, so for instance, [I know the most about paint]. While most of the catalogs and stuff I read about painters are basically white guys that are accepted within certain ethnic groups. And I think that, you know, if you're not careful, you're not going to see the other ethnic groups, or any kind of diversity other than this very narrow band of people who would meet and greet each other on a regular basis at their conventions or whatever –

[New Speaker]

So [name here] how to do you get around that?

[New Speaker]

You don't very well, because you try and read other newspapers to see if anybody's talking about - you know what people are doing and who they are. It's going to take an awful lot more digging, I think than we're all used to, and that's going to be part of it as well. But I think some of it is we just don't know where to look yet, and that as we start doing some of our research, that it's really important that we say, hey look, here is where I can go to find this type of information.

[New Speaker]

I'm gonna jump in here and add in some of our next topic, too, which is about just general research issues, because the two do seem to, just, you know, sort of meld together so much. But first one of the things that we as a group were talking about is whether people feel and particularly students who are using the Avery now, or have used it . . . recently. Do you feel that the library is providing sufficient training and sufficient resources? Do you see any issues with the, you know, with the fact that it's not a very diverse staff . . . I don't know if that's true at other libraries, at many other libraries. But at Avery that's what I have seen at times, and I'm wondering what concerns there are about those couple of issues in terms of the library, making more of an effort to give specific training. What kind of training are they giving now, and whether they really need to diversify more to have more voices in on the librarian staff.

[New Speaker]

But don't you think if we ask the librarians different questions that they would be able to start looking in a broader way?

[New Speaker]

I think that sometimes people, particularly people who are just starting out on their research don't know what questions to ask - perhaps I mean, I don't want to put words in people's mouth, but maybe need more guidance about how to go about the research. I don't know, do we have any students on the call, or recently graduated people who could speak to this issue?

We'd love to have your thoughts. Otherwise it's gonna be very much just our Initiative giving feedback to Avery, and we'd love to have a broader range of voices giving the feedback

[New Speaker]

Hi! I'm [name here]. Can you hear me? Okay, Okay, So I'm a [student] . . . And just to speak about what the experience has been so far, a number of our courses in that first semester take time, or an entire class period, to walk you through the special collections and Avery archives - so that has been really helpful. That definitely gets your foot in the door so it makes it easier to do when you need to do it for independent research. I know we also had it during orientation. The libraries came in and gave us a tutorial of like basically a quick run down and walked us through - they showed us where things were, and were very accommodating and available. So that was positive feedback. I know if I were having issues with research, I could go to them in terms of . . . It's only been a short month so no real troubles so far from my perspective

[New Speaker]

Yes. All right. Thank you. And anybody else who had recent experiences . . .

Well, then, I'm gonna move on to one of our poll questions that actually goes back to what [name here] was talking about in terms of using more digital resources.

So can we put up poll question number 6 that has to do with using digital resources. People could take a minute to answer this. I think it takes just a second to answer it. So when you can, I guess you can go ahead and put up the results of that.

But this is a question that the Avery Library staff were really interested in getting our answers to as they think about how much they should focus on digitizing materials. . . . So this is really interesting that people are mostly using digital resources. I have to have to say - I find it - I may be older than a lot of people on this call, but I have to say that I feel like I've gotten more out of libraries by just like going around and browsing in stacks, and I know when I was a student at Avery and I - maybe you can't do it as much as you could then - but I would find so much just by walking through the stacks and be looking for one thing, and then find 10 others that I hadn't thought of . . . I'd love to hear a little bit more from almost all of you who use the digital resources. So why do you do that? Is it more that it, you know, just became more the norm because of the pandemic? Are you finding that there's more available? Just please let us know why this is happening.

[New Speaker]

Hi! I don't know if you can hear me.

[New Speaker]

Yes.

[New Speaker]

Okay, perfect. I actually wanted to mention something about the last question, because at least in my case, and I cannot speak for other students. I'm a native speaker in [language here], so even though I can speak and understand English I know there is a language barrier for other students, international students specifically, in terms of finding resources and understanding sometimes some of the resources over in Avery. And there's also another aspect that I've seen already dealing with some other topics that are for some of the classes this semester that some

of the resources aren't in English so for example ... I found a book for example, about Cuba, and the document is Spanish. So if there's a student that wants to talk about that [topic] there's not a translation available of the document. So there's also an aspect of making these documents that might be in another language available for - you know - for the general crowd so that these resources can be available for everyone.

[New Speaker]

Sure. How do you think they would choose which ones to handle in that way? I'm not disagreeing with you but it seems like it could be a mammoth undertaking.

[New Speaker]

Yeah, I think I think that will mostly depend on terms of - what's the word - in terms of volume of how many students, how much students want a document to be available. And if there's the language barrier, maybe that can be like a sign of saying, Okay, maybe this one can be a document that could be translated - to English for example, - or just have someone or a tool available so that an international student - it could be more easy to browse through Avery's catalogs.

[New Speaker]

Okay, thank you. Anyone else want to join in with that? We have a comment in the chat that often it's easier to flip through resources online and although there is a benefit to engaging with the physical document, there is less of a barrier of entry to digital resources.

[New Speaker]

Yeah, hi [name here]. I'll just jump in a little bit to your question about why I think that digital resources are more used. Part of it is the sort of the barrier to accessibility. Not everyone lives near Avery and alumni haven't been able to get in for much of the pandemic - even students at the beginning. So there's that aspect that provided the shift. But I'd like to think that I'm still relatively young, and you know, when I was doing my undergrad in history I found that even just in the few years that I took off and came back to grad school, there was such a greater abundance of digital materials that I think it does get easier because of how many materials are being put online. So I think that ... it's sort of an induced demand in that, because it is so easy to find things through digital research that ... you really kind of learn to rely on it.

That being said, I do love the serendipity of browsing, and I think my favorite thing to do in Avery was either to look at the periodicals in the basement or more secondary materials that that you know provide context and background information for subjects where maybe you aren't doing full primary research in, but you need to have some scholarship to back up what you're talking about. You know it's just not realistic to buy a \$100 book every time. You know you want to paraphrase a paragraph, so I think that's where I find the library most useful - that and things that haven't been digitized but I find myself using digital materials a lot just because of how much has been available even in my relatively short professional career.

[New Speaker]

I'd like to follow up with that with something I read recently, and see if anybody wants to come back to it. I recently read the transcript of a talk by Burgess Jules - I'm not sure if I'm pronouncing that name right - and the title of the talk was: *Confronting our failure of care around the legacies of marginalized people in the archives*, and I think it brings up an issue related to use of

digital resources that we should be aware of and potentially concerned about. And the quote I wrote down from that talk is: "The more selective and specialized space of digital collections prioritizes professionalism, technical expertise, and standards over a critical interrogation of the culture character of our records. For digital collections, who gets represented is closely tied to who writes the software, who builds the tools, who produces the technical standards, and who provides the funding or other resources for that work." So I'm wondering what people think of those statements.

Have you found gaps, misclassifications in the digital materials that you use? Do you agree with that? Disagree with that?

[New Speaker]

I think that somebody is always making a choice about what's important when it comes to archives, you know. So a lot of the materials have probably gotten lost because someone made the decision that you know . . . maybe a person of color's documentation wasn't as important. So I think that's a really big question, how do we find some of these materials that haven't been archived? And then how do we make them accessible to people? I think there's a whole generation of people that want to know about their history, and it can be sort of intimidating to go to a library, whereas if it's digitalized it could provide them access. But I think yeah, people make decisions about what gets digitalized and what gets saved in the first place.

[New Speaker]

Does anyone else have a comment on that? Because I understand that there are a couple of people who wanted to speak further about the last topic before I jumped in with my poll question - so it is helpful if people have their cameras on. It makes a little bit easier for us to know if somebody wants to speak. But does anyone want to jump in on what we were just discussing previously?

[New Speaker]

Hi! I'm [name here]. I'm a [class year] in the program, and just to [illegible] on what the previous question was, I think, one of the real benefits of the digitization is that the software of text recognition has gotten so advanced in the last few years that it really like streamlines things. It's not perfect, but it does make a difference, and, as well, there are a lot of times when we have as a class we have been tasked with getting archival material but there aren't enough sort of like research spaces in a given week to go and get into the archive before the deadline so sometimes it just so happens that what you're looking for is already digitized, and that can really like save you in the end. So that's the one sort of real benefit.

[New Speaker]

Someone else wanted to speak also?

[New Speaker]

I wanted to add in as somebody who graduated quite a while ago, and has also donated materials to [library name] over the years that I was really interested in understanding the collecting mission. But I think temporary ephemera materials that provide a range of opportunities for people to provide classical materials of all different types. Like the Duke Library in advertising history and other places like that can really help to provide some source

material that would be available in places like Avery that is not readily available in the larger metropolitan library systems.

[New Speaker]

Does Avery collect ephemera?

[New Speaker]

Well, aren't trade catalogs and everything ephemera?

[New Speaker]

I guess so. Yeah, I was thinking of more about things like theater announcements or tickets and things like that.

[New Speaker]

I think that Avery does collect – trade catalogs is a perfect example for the construction classes that I took way back when. We were able to look at materials like trade categories and really use those source materials to see what was going on, whether they were from the seventeenth, the eighteenth, or the 21st century. They really ran the gamut and trade catalogs is a perfect example. So are travel materials . . . I used to work for [company name], and we were looking at all kinds of source materials, not just flat maps, not just architectural style materials to really create the historic record and that is where Avery could seek out materials that are - oh, like I said, a little bit off of the edges of what the municipalities are archiving through tax records and building department records, and also looking at a place to draw people in, because to really understand those kinds of materials, you do sort of need to see them. And you can really understand the ephemeral nature of them.

I do a lot of work with National History Day, So that's a community of working with students in the middle schools and the high schools and they've been able to understand the range of possible digital materials. But they're looking at and working with institutional homes and special collections across the United States, where libraries have sought out that kind of paper ephemera, and that has really provided a great deal of material to . . . tell community histories which would then talk about some of the other things that you're talking about – different underserved communities.

[New Speaker]

Yes, an important point. Thank you.

[New Speaker]

But you know it's almost I think people need to start collecting things like scrapbooks, photograph albums. I mean those have been incredibly useful, when you're trying to research some buildings that the only images you're ever going to get are people, you know, for special events in that building, and you'll see, you know, whether it's the family whether it's the whatever social group they were involved with – those are the places that you're going to find those images.

[New Speaker]

And places like the Queens Public Library, which [has an] enormously successful public history program. They are doing exactly that, and they're looking in immigrant communities to provide both visual sources of architectural settings for different events as well as community histories that talk about why those institutional public buildings, community sources, were important which is gonna again give those places historic preservation recognition. So you're absolutely correct on that . . .

[New Speaker]

Yeah, to [name]'s point. I went to a talk at [institution] this weekend and it was . . . Colored Compton was the name of the organization, and they're trying to build out an archive of Compton. And what they do is they have the students bring in photo albums, and they're starting to scan records because a lot of that is just like [name] said, I mean, that's one way that you can find information about buildings and local restaurants, and that kind of thing. And so that's been a really cool project that I wasn't aware of. But the photo albums have been really good and oral histories as well they have found have been one of the sources they can use to build the different narratives for other groups of people, and archives.

[New Speaker]

So I wanna turn this over to Bill in a minute. I know you've got some specific things you want to ask. But listening to people talk, I'm wondering: Do you think it's more important that we encourage Avery to do this kind of stuff more, or, as someone said previously, is it more important, that they are able to point people towards other organizations, repositories, resources that are already actively perhaps, actively doing it more than Avery is. What do you think?

[New Speaker]

I would say that it's probably both - that you absolutely want Avery to do what it can but the practical necessities of you know, funding and everything to make things comprehensively available . . . it's a tall order to put on the Library. I also just wanted to get back to the earlier statement that you read [name here] where I would say that certainly in the past that was more so than it is today with respect to who's controlling the archive and who's the audience. What I seem to be seeing in a lot of these libraries that I'm visiting now is a real focus on trying to address this issue. And so I'm seeing databases that are specific to you know, the black experience. Databases that are, you know, specific to the Latino experience, and what sort of archival information can those communities or people that are researching those communities, you know, look at being really sort of a one-stop shopping in terms of this digitization, and it's pretty fantastic. So I would say, you know, maybe pre-pandemic - but things are evolving and I'm glad that you are doing something like this tonight as well, to further this.

[New Speaker]

Okay, great, thank you. Well, that's encouraging. So it's good to know that I have something that's I think, related to what we've been talking about. And another question that Avery was specifically asking us - So if we could put up poll question number 7. And then, before we talk about it, I wanna just share another quote to get that conversation going. So as you all are answering that one, or thinking about it I just wanna as I said, I just wanted to share this.

So Charles L. Davis, when he was speaking about his contribution to Race and Modern Architecture - and I'm quoting here – "New types of narratives need to emerge because they haven't been written yet from any perspective other than the white elite. Different communities produce different relationships, and they produce different knowledges of space. So maybe, and possibly to a large extent, we have to accept that there just aren't a lot of relevant writings, particularly for people of color to turn to find their lived experience in historic document resources in the library. So it places more of an emphasis on using the current moment - what people are saying and doing - as a way to understand the past and how the past unfolded."

So this potentially suggests - this is me speaking now - that Avery should focus on individuals and groups that are speaking to the current situation, and of course, one way to get to that is through social media. And in our Pushing Perspectives discussion last fall Hannah Bennett specifically asked should we - meaning Avery - be collecting social media. So I see that there's something of majority of people who use it. So my question to all of you is, do you agree with Charles Davis's statement that libraries need to focus on what people are doing and saying now, and you know, as a part of historic preservation research, and do you think that this should be done through social media and then of course the corollary request is: If you think the answer is yes, you know what of the gazillion things out there should they be collecting and how do they choose? And could we potentially help them figure out what to choose. So I'm sorry, that's a lot of questions but can anybody speak to that?

[New Speaker]

I can speak to how I use social media for research purposes, and it kind of touches on what someone else was saying about you know, photos - It's like using a photo album in a lot of ways. A lot of the times I'll go to the town website or a town history specific page. And you have people that have lived there for their whole lives and they're posting photos and specific events they went to and it's personal, but also they might have a historic image of a building that, with the postcard that's at their house, or something – so that's typically what I do a research of on social media.

[New Speaker]

So, [name here], it almost sounds like the materials you're looking for are almost already organized essentially by place. And you know, with social media being so easily geotagged. So I know what you're saying in that I've usually used social media as kind of like a last ditch effort to find old images, but you know, you'll look for a place like Tribeca, and you know, find everything that's in black and white, and sometimes you'll stumble upon some image that someone posted that's from an old postcard that maybe isn't at the, you know, Museum of the City of New York. So I sort of see what you're saying, but I think, because I think things are geospatially so well arranged through social media . . . This is maybe a controversial question for this, but, like, you know, does the library have a role in that? Or are you going to be able to circumvent - and if that is the case what should the libraries be doing to curate or assist in your research like that?

[New Speaker]

It's a difficult thing. I mean, there ends up being so much, so much bias, whether it's unconscious or not, in what you choose of everything that's out there. I mean, should libraries really have a

role in that or should it just be something that is available that - you know - for people, researchers to find on their own? I don't know the answer to that.

[New Speaker]

I think there's too much data. And yeah, I think there's almost no way that you can just throw all of that data at people, you know, in a library even, and expect anything to come out of it. I mean cause a lot of it's rubbish. And to go through the rubbish would be phenomenal.

[New Speaker]

it almost seems to me that because there's so much data to sort through that part of the library's task or the historical association might be to come up with a system that allows you to search, say, relative hashtags compared with, you know, geolocation to sort of help filter out the noise. I'm not, you know, not sure what technology is available for that. But I think there maybe is sort of an opportunity for them to come up with at least, say, a research method to help comb through just the piles of information that are out there to find some good things. I mean, it's not a good system, but I know the hashtag "New York City history", people will post, you know, old photographs and everything, and you know I don't know if with machine learning in the future, if that's something that libraries, you know, the library is thinking about historic resources in particular will be able to grasp, but I think that might be a real sticking point for them to be able to adapt to the volume of data.

[New Speaker]

And I could add as well, the Library of Congress has done enormous work in mass review of people posting. They have a collection - They have an unidentified photographs . . . They are crowdsourcing identification of historic streetscapes constantly and the methodology underpinning it - I've been a little bit involved; I live in the [city name] area - has been phenomenal. The thinking that has gone into understanding what the methodology is, so that we integrate bias, and we understand that these photos are biased-related and what impact that has, and that's a real opportunity for an organization like Avery working with a student base to be able to participate in those kinds of things with a solid foundation. Not just some sort of arbitrary decision making, but a real connection. But it requires for the institutional home to provide the financial support to have digital historians on board, and from my experience the - and I've done a little work with the personal digital archiving organization that's been run by academic institutions across the country - they fund a digital Librarian position for a while, and then they don't, and that's partly because the higher management, Deans and Provosts, haven't quite themselves come to terms with the need to balance the competing interests. They still got to pay the curatorial staff; they still got to pay the archival staff for the eighteenth century or even before, of course, with Avery . . . and then they have to figure out how they're going to pay the digital historians to balance this and manage this work of crowdsourcing photographs but it's an enormous resource and it relates to some of the other things we are talking about regarding how useful these sources might be to tell the story going forward for the future.

[New Speaker]

Yeah, that's great. Thank you. I was not aware of that.

So thank you for that. [Name] do you want to . . . I think we can spend just a few minutes talking about maybe some other Avery specific things, and then we'll try and wrap this up within the next 15 min.

[New Speaker]

Sure, sure.

I think that this segue is very well until what I wanted to talk about. We've already touched some of the discussion questions I have. I wanted to sort of bring this back to how we're personally related as you know our organization and as a community to Avery. You know, I'm personally interested in the subject of administering the Plazcek funds, because in setting equity goals for our acquisitions we discovered some of the real practical barriers to implementing our commitments, and I think part of what has happened is, you know, we have - We've committed to digitizing what we purchase. At least, you know, funding for them to be scanned by the Avery - or the Columbia Libraries scanning lab. And I think that's going to do a lot for accessibility. But in terms of finding acquisitions that maybe are, you know, more on the periphery or on these other areas of interest, we've really sort of hit a wall and part of that is because the people that Avery relies on - their, you know, supply chain essentially - are rare book and manuscript dealers who really don't have a lot of these sort of things. This is something I've been speaking specifically with Teresa Harris, Librarian at Avery and in years past she'll give us a list of materials, that she thinks we'd be interested in acquiring and now that we want to - for example, I think our organization to meet our requirements would be very interested in, you know, a real estate brochure advertisement that, you know, maybe advertises a community that's now predominantly a, you know, an area of black culture, or some sort of ethnic community. Those are things you'd be interested in. But hey, they're sort of assembling their list, based on these rare book and manuscript dealers that are really going to be the slowest to adapt. And back to your point [name here] about crowdsourcing and the need for digital historians - like, I couldn't agree more because well, we're running up against it, without dedicated thought and effort - actually putting hours towards finding new supply chains, finding new resources, we likely won't be able to meet our goals sort of using the old referral system that we're using before. So I think part of why I wanted to bring this discussion together was because we can set goals but we also need to identify real strategies to meet them, and I think part of that already we've touched upon the need for, say, digital historians and outsourcing - crowdsourcing information.

I think that that's a concrete path forward that we can express to Avery - that we, you know, we need someone that can look in unusual places instead of just turning to the same sort of tired sources. And we as an organization, where you know, we can help by - anyone here can, you know, forward me some information if there's an interesting thing we want to support bringing to Avery or digitizing for Avery but beyond us putting in volunteer hours, I think we don't have quite the support to implement our goals from Avery. You know they have their own priorities, but this is something that we can relate to them.

So I think conversation has already been very productive. So I've talked enough about our sort of personal, and, you know, my story about why I'm interested in this. I'll open it up for a discussion question. Avery is doing a collections assessment. So, what advice can we give them in assessing their existing collections and identifying gaps in their collections? I think one thing that we can refer to them is that they should have - they should put more person power onto these sorts of projects but beyond that I'm just wondering if anyone has any sort of ideas about what Avery is doing well and what's missing? And where can we help fill in these gaps?

[New Speaker]

Well, I'll speak up again because I knew Professor Plazcek was one of my professors. I go back that far, but I think that - and then I had ... I was downsizing. So you're guessing my age, and you could take advantage of the alumni. You know I'm looking to give I have maps that are going to the Library of Congress. I gave books to Avery 15 years ago, and if you looked at the travel ephemera that you know some of my professors did, and some of the work that I did in graduate school at Columbia with Professor Fitch, you'd find some gems, and the kinds of things, but people have to be willing to think that Avery will take it, and then be able to integrate that into the larger historical collections. [Institution name] took stuff from me - literally my third grade class picture, because they then use that to teach freshman history of what it was like to grow up in Long Island in the 1960s and early seventies. ... So she sent me ... I was thrilled because the photograph was no longer my personal collection, and I didn't have to worry about the archivists and the curators in my universe, you know getting on me that it's in a box in the basement, and likewise she was truly using it to work with, you know, the neighborhoods that are then going to be historic in the 1950s and 60s that [name here] may be working on National Register nominations for in 10 years. So that's the way you want to keep us involved and keep thinking about collecting and then build that support through the alumni, through the management to really oversee this effort

[New Speaker]

That's really good advice. And I think that's something that we can really think about is, you know, in addition to sort of funding acquisition, we might be able to serve as sort of a central contact point, where, maybe, if we are already looking at something that someone wants to give to a library our vetting and recommendation of the materials might go a long way into sort of officially getting them into a collection like Avery, because of our relationship and I think that's a really great point, that it's something that we can crowdsource as our community.

Okay, well, I think we'll have time for another sort of question on this topic in terms of - you know, I'm looking at a lot of my questions, and we've really touched upon a lot already in our discussion. So I have more of a Avery specific, almost like a yes or no question for any of the students on the call.

Does Avery usually have the resources that are on your course reading lists and/or do they tend to really thoroughly cover topics that you've been assigned in class, or been steered to through your readings and discussions?

[New Speaker]

I can attempt to discuss that. I, for the most part I haven't run into a circumstance where that hasn't been the case. It has met all of our needs. I don't know if that's by design by the professors or, granted, it is an extensive resource. So far everything has been that, and then, while I'm speaking, I also wanted to bring up just back to that conversation of digitizing libraries. One of the ways I use it as a student is to see if a resource is worth going to see in person - if it's the type of what I'm looking for - the resource I'm looking for. Sometimes it could be just like a very poor quality photo, and just a big idea that would probably take a lot of development and some funding but if you could find a way, that if the student who is looking at a book could take a photo and send it to someone or upload it so that it doesn't take - it's kind of like outsourcing just to get an image of, like, this is the idea of the book or context of it, just because

people are taking photos of them constantly. Anyways, that could be a way to kind of streamline the process.

[New Speaker]

That's a really interesting point, and I know what you're talking about. Sometimes I drag myself down to a library just because of one keyword, and it turns out to just be completely not what I'm looking for. So you're right that even just being able to maybe not access the full object, but having at least a greater digital record to sort of verify sources.

[New Speaker]

Any other students still with us who wanna chime in on that?

[New Speaker]

I think I agree with [name here], and the fact that, besides resources being available in Avery also in Cleo, for example, Professor Dolkart, besides taking us constantly to Avery to see the resources that the library has, he also - most of the readings he's given this semester for Traditional American Architecture are available through CLIO. So it also helps in terms of instead of having to buy a book, for example, we can have the resources through the platform and in any other case we can see the articles or the books in the library. So in that sense it's been very helpful, to actually have the readings available at the library.

[New Speaker]

All right, great. Thank you. [Name here] any other last things? I want to wrap this up pretty soon and I want to go through a few last poll questions. But did you have any other last things, or last comments?

[New Speaker]

Sure, I think my final question for this, seeing as we're talking about how the materials have been, you know, pretty . . . the curriculum and the materials match pretty well . . . For students, I'm wondering if there's sort of some sort of benefit in - perhaps we might be able to come up with a list of research topics that we are either working on in order to sort of match acquisitions to our curriculum as well, maybe that we should be, you know, trying to crowdsource a list to find out [Name here] what are you working on? You know, [name here], are you working on? For example, I'm working on . . . I just completed a large [location name] district and doing other research in [location name] and, you know, I think it's kind of silly how little I've been able to either find - or just because of barriers to access at Avery - about the Harlem community. Perhaps if we are able to provide some sort of list of what people are working on, then that would have sort of a way for them to prioritize it. As [name here] was saying earlier, what questions are we currently asking.

[New Speaker]

That's a great idea. And we could poll more preservation alumni members, you know through the [PA] Newsletter, or whatever it is to get more, feedback on that. That's a really good idea. Does anybody else want to comment on that?

So okay, I think I've gotten a lot of really great ideas here, [name here] were gonna add something before I go on? Yeah, okay, sorry it looked like you wanted to say something. So I do

just want to go quickly through, while I still have you all here, just a few very specific poll questions of things that were of interest to us, and of interest to Avery. So there's just there's just 4 of them. If we go through those quickly and get you to answer them, and then just see if there are any final comments.

So [name here], can you put up number 8 for me, please? We'll get people's answer to that.

Okay? And do you guys want to see the answers too or should we just collect those for later? Yes, you want to see them. Okay, all right, let's see the answer to that one.

We'll go on to the next one. So okay, yeah, I think we're all pretty much in agreement about that. Yeah, and poll question 9 - And this one is specifically about how to use resources, find resources for looking at telling a comprehensive story, not just how to use the library in general. And if we could see the answer to that one?

Yeah, okay, more feedback that we can give to Avery.

Number 10 - and the responses to that. Okay, interesting. Okay, great. And the very last one. So one thing that we have talked about is the use of digitized documents, the importance of perhaps of digitizing more. And so we're wondering if members of the preservation community might be interested in helping with this effort. So what does this group think of that - of being part of that?

[New Speaker]

Question for you: Does this mean that we do the personal digitizing, or we provide materials for digitizing?

[New Speaker]

This would be actually doing the digitizing. I think we do already have the sense from this group that, you know, perhaps to provide materials as an interesting avenue for us to be thinking about more. But this question was specifically about helping to digitize, since it is such a massive effort when you think about the numbers of things that could be digitized.

Okay, so that one looks like a little bit less strong feeling about it.

Does anybody wanna speak to why they're not feeling like that's such a great idea - just before we finish up, because I'm curious about that.

[New Speaker]

I don't have the time.

[New Speaker]

I would second that.

[New Speaker]

Likewise, I personally, I mean, I feel like I'm already doing it, since through the Plazcek Fund we're trying - I've been implementing that. That's a personal feeling but my general feeling is that in

being a volunteer board, you know, we're pulling volunteers already, and just the amount we have work to do, and it almost kind of seems to me like as much as we want to crowdsource we should help the librarians do their work but that maybe it's best handled by the organizations themselves.

[New Speaker]

So I was just thinking that, as in some cases when I have been in the library, and I have been scanning pages, you know, I wouldn't be averse, certainly to saving that document for others to use. You know maybe that's a way to at least try to get a foot in the door with this.

[New Speaker]

That's a really great point. I think that ties in really well with [name here]'s point earlier about if you're already taking a photo of something could we upload it somewhere. I know there are all sorts of copyright issues with this. But I guess that's part of the discussion about how to figure this out.

[New Speaker]

I think, yeah and I mean in this case, because it is a research facility I would think, to make it accessible to other students and alumni, and all, it wouldn't be, maybe, as heavy a lift - I don't know. And also it would be, I guess, very important that whatever was scanned is in the information about what's available in that book, because clearly we're not always scanning entire books or anything like that.

[New Speaker]

And just to add on that, I know the library offers - You can request a scan of a specific page or topic in a book. If that could be saved too that would also be reduced redundancy which would be cool.

[New Speaker]

Yes, I think that's great.

[New Speaker]

Any other final comments here?

All right, well, great! Well, thank you all so much. I think we've gotten a lot of really great ideas tonight, which we will be bringing back to Avery for sure, and we'll also be following up to let you know what happens. We'll be reporting back through the - probably mostly through the PA Newsletter - we'll be reporting back on how these conversations are going, and what any next steps might be. So thanks all very much for taking the time to chat with us, and I hope you'll have a great rest of the evening.

Thank you. Good night.