

Brett Bodemer  
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Note: For the sake of your reading ease, I have footnoted all references, except for page citations from the critiqued article itself, which I have rendered à la MLA.

Julie Herrada's "Letters to the Unabomber: A Case Study and Some Reflections," published in *Archival Issues*, is a highly personal account of an acquisition that foregrounds several ethical issues that archivists might confront in the course of their careers.<sup>1</sup> In detailing the acquisition of papers from the serial murderer Theodore John Kaczynski – more famous under the moniker of the Unabomber - Herrada probes issues of privacy, archival integrity, and access, as well as wider theoretical grounds for collecting controversial materials.

Herrada, who attained an MLS degree with a Certificate in Archival Administration from Wayne State University, is a long-time social activist.<sup>2</sup> She is currently Curator of the Labadie Collection at the University of Michigan (46), and due to her political interests was already familiar with this "largest collection of anarchist and social protest literature in the country" prior to being hired there as an assistant archivist.<sup>3</sup>

Several months after the arrest of Kaczynski, and after reading his anarchic, techno-phobic manifesto that had been published in *The Washington Post*, Herrada felt that a set of Kaczynski papers would be suited to the Labadie Collection. In February of

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<sup>1</sup> Herrada, Julie. "Letters to the Unabomber: A Case Study and Some Reflections;" in *Archival Issues*, Vol. 28, No 1, 2003-2004, pgs. 35-46.

<sup>2</sup> [www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA200618.html](http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA200618.html) "Julie Herrada: Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Archiving Alternatives, March 15, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

1997 she approached Kaczynski via his lawyer while he was awaiting trial. Even before signing any proper Deed of Gift form, Kaczynski started mailing items to Herrada. As he was only allowed to keep twenty letters in his cell at a time, he sent envelopes filled with letters people were writing to him in prison. Because as of yet there was no formal Deed of Gift, Herrada left the envelopes unopened, and stored them until such time as Kaczynski had signed one. This was by no means automatic. Kaczynski wanted strong restrictions that included a closure period of decades and the perpetual exclusion of all journalists. Herrada, in her role of conscientious archivist, could not agree to such restrictions, but worked to try to gain his trust, in the hope of reaching mutually acceptable terms. University of Michigan officials, however, growing uneasy at the prospect of the negative publicity the collection might inspire, and wanting to protect the university legally, took negotiations out of her hands and placed them into the hands of the university lawyers.

The lawyers succeeded, and as soon as a Deed of Gift had been signed, Herrada immediately accessioned the collection and began processing the materials. As a part of this she had to read the letters Kaczynski had been sending. Hundreds of people from all over the world had written to him, many opening up to him “as if they were old friends, discussing their personal problems” (40), and as she read through the letters she was “struck with various emotions: sadness, compassion, and pity” (40). “I struggled with the sense that these letters represented but a microcosm of the people in our society,” she wrote, and “waves of despondency crept over me for weeks” (40). As an archivist, she now found herself in the “difficult position of being responsible for people’s privacy, at the same time making a professional pledge not only to care for these materials but to

make them available to the public” (41). Her gut reaction was to close the collection. In the end, she followed one of Kaczynski’s first suggestions, which she had previously rejected: she mutilated the documents, blacking out the names and any other features that might serve to identify the authors. She made every effort to preserve the content of the letters while concealing the identities of the writers.

By this point, the existence of the Kaczynski Papers had been made public, and members of the press had arrived with inquiries, complaints, and innuendos – one radio talk-show host even asked Julie Herrada if she had found Kaczynski attractive! This tendentious and invasive behavior on the part of the press confirmed her sense that she had been justified in choosing to black out the names and identities of those who had written letters to the Unabomber.

While Herrada’s article focuses on technical and ethical aspects of this particular acquisition, she puts it to other ends as well. In its widest scope, the article gives her a platform for stressing the importance of collecting contemporary materials, “*especially* if they are controversial”(43). More narrowly, she justifies the appropriateness of her original solicitation of Kaczynski, describing how his anti-technological outlook fit the acquisition goals of the Labadie Collection, and she unequivocally declares that that even if he had not been a notorious serial murderer, his materials would have been worth collecting. On the most personal level, the author tries to assure us that seeking the papers from Kaczynski did not make her a bad person, and she takes pains to let us know that she feels far more comfortable in the accessioning of items related to the “anti-Iraq War” movement.

While there is much to commend in this skillfully written and thoughtful article, it does beg one or two questions. Though she creates empathy for herself in telling her tale, it seems that some of her soul-searching might have been avoided. For instance, if, as she claims, she consulted the SAA's *Code of Ethics* for guidance, couldn't she have formulated her dilemma more clearly, simply by demonstrating which articles were in conflict, and then explaining why she prioritized one over the other? Armchair decisions are always easier, but in looking directly at the code can we determine where, specifically, her problem arose. The largest dilemma comes when she tries to simultaneously satisfy the directives of articles VI and VII. Article VI states:

Archivists protect the integrity of their documentary materials of long-term value in their custody, guarding them against defacement, alteration, theft, and physical damage, and ensure that their evidentiary value is not impaired in the archival work of arrangement, description, preservation, and use.<sup>4</sup>

While Article VII states:

Archivists respect the privacy of individuals who created, or are the subjects of, documentary materials of long-term value, especially those who had no voice in the disposition of materials.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, she violated Article VI – willfully defacing the materials by blacking out the names and other identifying information – yet she did so only in order to satisfy Article VII, which declares that archivists respect the privacy of individuals, “especially those who had no voice in the disposition of the materials.” In other words, she violated VI only insofar as it satisfied the requirement of VII. From a logical standpoint, at any rate, it appears that she was well within the mandates of the Code. In a less-than-ideal

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<sup>4</sup> The Society of American Archivists, *Code of Ethics for Archivists*. LIS 652 handout.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

situation one has to take less-than-ideal measures, and while soul-searching is admirable, it can also be inflated to needless proportions.

Another issue Herrada raises – and one of much greater interest – appears when she speaks of the need to collect more documents from under-represented segments of society. This, she says, in order to have what she terms “complete records documenting social history” (43). She writes: “Historical societies and other institutions documenting local history should be collecting materials relevant to their communities, *especially* if they are controversial. These materials may otherwise be destroyed or discarded out of shame, embarrassment, fear, or misunderstanding. If we, as keepers of history, collect and protect only what is appealing, socially acceptable, or politically correct, we are hardly doing our jobs” (43).

Included in this manifesto is an extremely high estimate of the archivist’s calling: a keeper of history. Very grand, indeed, unless one holds the idea of history in somewhat suspect light. And though personally I am ambivalent in regard to “history,” I do think records offer the best equalizing potential for multiple and balanced *histories*; so in principle I am quite in accord with her call to gather and preserve the records of the marginalized and under-represented. Unfortunately, a part of me cringes to think that an archive might one day ask me to gather and preserve records of an upstanding organization such as, say, the Klu Klux Klan. Evidently, Herrada’s true keeper of history must at times have a very strong stomach.

All in all, “Letters to the Unabomber: A Case Study and Some Reflections” is a fine article, well worth reading for its intrinsic interest, and more so for the larger issues that it urges us to contemplate.