

# **Mediating colonial archives: Notes from Charles Jeurgens' "Building better archival futures by recognizing epistemic injustice"<sup>1</sup>**

## **A mediação dos arquivos coloniais: Notas sobre "Construindo melhores futuros arquivísticos através do reconhecimento da injustiça epistémica" de Charles Jeurgens**

ANA CANAS DELGADO MARTINS

Directora, Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino/DGLAB;

Investigadora Auxiliar, Universidade de Lisboa, Faculdade de Letras, Centro de História

[ana.martins@ahu.dglab.gov.pt](mailto:ana.martins@ahu.dglab.gov.pt)

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0566-0836>

### **ABSTRACT**

The commentary on "Building better archival futures by recognizing epistemic injustice" by Charles Jeurgens begins to approach some of the ideas and concepts that he analyses, namely "epistemic justice" and, in special, "hermeneutical injustice". Follows a mention to diverse researches and initiatives revisiting colonialism in Portugal and a critical

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mention on the extensive use of the term decolonisation applied, for instance, to the archives. The “myth of impartiality and neutrality” of the archivists deserves a specific attention, as well as the difficulties surrounding their practices’ transparency. The uniqueness of the colonial archives is questioned, in comparison with other archives equally demanding a rigorous study. Finally, doubts are raised on the role of archivists and archival institutions regarding the colonial archives as a matter of justice.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonial archives; Epistemic justice; Decolonisation of knowledge; Archivists; Historians.

### RESUMO

O comentário a “Construindo melhores futuros arquivísticos através do reconhecimento da injustiça epistémica”, de Charles Jeurgens, começa por explorar algumas das ideias e conceitos analisados pelo autor, nomeadamente a “justiça epistémica” e, em especial, a “injustiça hermenêutica”. Segue-se a menção de diversas investigações e iniciativas que revisitam o colonialismo em Portugal e uma crítica ao uso extensivo do termo descolonização aplicado, por exemplo, aos arquivos. O “mito da imparcialidade e neutralidade” dos arquivistas recebe uma atenção específica, bem como as dificuldades que envolvem a transparência das suas práticas. A singularidade dos arquivos coloniais é questionada, em comparação com outros arquivos que também exigem um estudo rigoroso. Por fim, são levantadas dúvidas sobre o papel dos arquivistas e das instituições arquivísticas em relação aos arquivos coloniais, tratados como uma questão de justiça.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Arquivos coloniais; Justiça epistémica; Descolonização do conhecimento; Arquivistas; Historiadores.

The reading of “Colonial archives: spaces of knowledge and power” authored by Prof. Charles Jeurgens was really stimulating. It also gave me the opportunity to pay attention to different areas of study, and namely to revisit chapters of the always suggestive *Processing the past* (Blouin Jr. & Rosenberg, 2011).

My commentary — or, I should rather say, my notes — on the text reflect my experience as an archivist and as one responsible for a Portuguese

public archival institution with mainly governmental colonial holdings. They also reflect a historian's point of view.

Finally, they are not impermeable to personal concerns with respect to two issues:

- Firstly, on what appears to be a certain disjunction between, on the one hand, the academic research and debates and the relevance of the acquisition of knowledge and, on the other, the archivist's professional practice (as shaped, among other factors, by the need to give quicker public access to records and, in smaller organizations, by the variety of activities which he or she has to undertake);

- Secondly, a difficulty in widening and updating the ways of representing archival resources corresponding to the variety of today's users and the search behaviour supported by new technologies (the artificial intelligence posing a formidable challenge in this regard).

## **First note, on some ideas and concepts**

At the very outset, I would like to stress the richness of contributions from different areas of knowledge and authors. Prof. Jeurgens's work intersects areas such as Anthropology, Philosophy, History, Literature, Post Colonial Studies, Information and Archival Studies and Sociology and appeals to ideas and concepts from several scholars (over 44). I will mention just a few:

- Ann Laura Stoler, an anthropologist, and her study *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense* (Stoler, 2009) — probably better known in the Portuguese academia, namely among anthropologists and historians concerned with the archives and researchers of information studies than by professional archivists.

- Achille Mbembe, a philosopher and political scientist, in his analysis of museums as epistemic spaces and the "decolonizing of knowledge".

- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a literary theorist and feminist critic, with her reading of the British colonial administration records on India while studying a relevant Indian woman of the nineteenth century, Rani of Sirmur. Her theory on the heterogeneity of subaltern groups and the impossibility of dialoguing with authorities due to their subaltern position in the social hierarchy is, likewise, important. Jeurgens points out that she considers the colonial administrative archives as a mirror of a European view of India, and that "these distortions, misinterpretations and fictions

are not without consequences for the later use of these archives" (Jeurgens, 2025, p. 152)<sup>2</sup>.

- Michel-Rolph Trouillot, an anthropologist, and the attention which he advocates must be paid to silences generated by power in history, in archives, as well as in society more generally.

- Marisa Fuentes, a specialist in African-American Studies, and her questioning of the ways in which one can use "archival fragments to bring into focus the lives of individual women in eighteenth century Bridgetown in Barbados" and to give visibility to enslaved women (Jeurgens, 2025, p. 152).

But the newest to me, and I am sure to many in the archival field, not only in Portugal, was the key concept of epistemic justice as employed by Miranda Fricker, a philosopher<sup>3</sup> and especially Jeurgens' idea of reflecting it in the "new digital spaces" so as "to help archival institutions" avoid further injustice (Jeurgens, 2025, p. 152). Explaining what Fricker understands by testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice, Jeurgens centres himself on the latter. It seems worthwhile to quote his explanation: "Hermeneutical injustice is connected to the way people interpret their own lives and how others are able to understand those lives and experiences". And he goes on: "Some groups in society have few or only very distorted resources at their disposal" extending these resources, Fricker's "hermeneutic resources", to the archives. At the same time, Jeurgens observes that these resources are often shaped using categories not shared by groups with which they are related. This leads to the notion of archival power. It makes us aware also of the limits of the conception of archival institutions as the "guardians of the collective memory" (a claim that, in Jeurgens words, "is in itself debatable"; Jeurgens, 2025, p. 152). I agree that they are not the only providers of past information or the owners of this social memory. Instead, however, they may contribute to its construction — as they collect, preserve and give access to archival documents.

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<sup>2</sup> Apropos, it is interesting the different use of this theory made by the Polish historian Agata Bloch in her recent study on the networks of the Portuguese empire. Bloch (2022) analyses how subaltern groups used petitions in the colonial administration in their favour. Africans. This kind of approach has some similarities with the studies of Catarina Madeira Santos (and initially also of Ana Paula Tavares) on the Ndembu / Dembos in Angola and their appropriation of "colonial power – writing and the bureaucratic culture associated with it". See Santos (2010), mainly 14-17, and bibliography cited.

<sup>3</sup> She defines herself as a philosopher in the areas of moral philosophy and social epistemology as well as a feminist philosophy. She serves as moral philosopher on the UK Spoliation Advisory Panel (Fricker, n.d.).

To the above I must add two further questions concerning the notion of archival power by Trouillot and Fuentes, as mentioned here. I quote Jeurgens based on these two authors: “[a]rchival power which represents a space of domination shaped and defined by white voices who had the power to name and categorize, to break and create identities, resulting in malicious archives that are nevertheless, constitutive of knowledge production” (Jeurgens, 2025, p. 153). Archives and specifically archives created by the colonial administration certainly reflect the power, values and categories of those who governed, headed and served this administration. However, is it “malicious” — in the sense of “having or showing a desire to cause harm to someone” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) — a suitable or right term to characterize them? They are, to a certain point, one-sided archives and, therefore, often misleading. This, when they are not globally analysed, critically studied and confronted with other information resources. On the other hand, nowadays, in societies as divided as ours, will the expression “white voices” be operational in this debate — even if it is not interpreted literally? It seems to me that dismissing both expressions would not affect Jeurgens’ equalling of “[t]his form of archival power” to “archival injustice” — which is to say, to “a clear form of hermeneutical injustice” (Jeurgens, 2025, p. 153).

## 2. Second note, on revisiting colonialism and “decolonising the archives”

In connection to the issues raised about “the archival decolonization-debate” some quick references related to Portugal become relevant.

Colonialism has been revisited in Portugal more intensely, probably within the last two decades<sup>4</sup>, by social sciences and humanities researchers, namely historians<sup>5</sup> and anthropologists<sup>6</sup>, political scientists<sup>7</sup>, philosophers<sup>8</sup>,

<sup>4</sup> The names mentioned in the following notes are just simple examples, a little random and more limited in areas with which I am less familiar.

<sup>5</sup> Diogo Ramada Curto, Cláudia Castelo, Francisco Bethencourt, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo, José Pedro Monteiro Nuno Domingos, Pedro Aires Oliveira, Filipa Lowndes Vicente, Maciel Santos, Valentim Alexandre, António Hespanha, Pedro Cardim, Mafalda Soares da Cunha, Ângela Barreto Xavier, Ângela Domingues, Arlindo Caldeira, Catarina Madeira Santos, Dalila Cabrita Mateus, Aniceto Afonso, Carlos Matos Gomes, Fernando Rosas.

<sup>6</sup> Ricardo Roque, Cristiana Bastos, Paula Lobo Antunes, Ana Paula Tavares (simultaneous fictionist).

<sup>7</sup> Bernardo Pinto da Cruz, António Costa Pinto.

<sup>8</sup> Eduardo Lourenço, António Pinto Ribeiro.

sociologists<sup>9</sup>, and, in different ways, architects (generally in a more technical and less social approach<sup>10</sup>), specialists in cultural studies<sup>11</sup>, artists<sup>12</sup> and writers<sup>13</sup>, as well as film makers and curators or journalists, many of whom often cross disciplinary frontiers<sup>14</sup>. Phenomena like racism, slave trade, the colonial penal system and resettlement, colonial war or the African presence in Portugal became subjects more studied and visible in the academic and public spaces (Henriques, 2020; Curto, 2021)<sup>15</sup> and even within institutions like the Catholic Church (Gonçalves, 2024). Exhibitions in private and public organizations are more frequent<sup>16</sup>. Blogs appeared and go on disseminating texts and events on these matters<sup>17</sup>.

Political apologies for the massacre of Wiriyamu, in Mozambique, on 16 December 1972, during the Portuguese Colonial War, were made by the country's former Prime Minister António Costa in a 2022 visit to Maputo. One year later, the presidential speech during the 25th of April commemorations had as main theme the best and the worst of the Portuguese presence in the Empire, during the colonisation<sup>18</sup>.

Within the field of history, for instance, the “decolonisation of knowledge” began to be debated clearly at least in 2020<sup>19</sup>. More attention is

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<sup>9</sup> Cristina Roldão.

<sup>10</sup> Ana Vaz Milheiro, among other architects, namely in research projects that she has led and leads to date.

<sup>11</sup> António Pinto Ribeiro.

<sup>12</sup> Ângela Ferreira, Grada Kilomba, Délio Jasse, Kiluanji Kia Henda (the two last ones from Angola, having exhibited in Portugal).

<sup>13</sup> António Lobo Antunes, Lídia Jorge, Djamilia Pereira, Isabela Figueiredo, Dulce Maria Cardoso.

<sup>14</sup> Joana Pimentel, Marta Lança, Joana Pontes, Miguel Gomes, José Barahona, Joaquim Furtado, Sofia Pinto Coelho, António Louçã, Joana Gorjão Henriques.

<sup>15</sup> The editing by the University of Lisbon of the translation into Portuguese of the *Atlas of the transatlantic slave trade*, (Eltis and Richardson) launched at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in March 2024, is one example.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, in Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Museu de Arte, Arquitetura e Tecnologia, CulturGest, EGEAC-Padrão dos Descobrimentos, Museu Nacional de História Natural e da Ciência, Museu de Lisboa – Pavilhão Branco. The Museu de Lisboa has just been reorganized and presents “new narratives” including on slavery and African presence in Lisbon (Serafim & Gaudêncio, 2024). The exhibition “Deconstructing colonialism, decolonising the imaginary” is on display at the Museu Nacional de Etnologia until 31 November 2025.

<sup>17</sup> For instance: Buala (n.d.).

<sup>18</sup> These political acts were largely debated in the media. An analysis of the exchange of arguments regarding the apologies for Wiriyamu by Cardina (2023) especially pp. 75-81.

<sup>19</sup> Ramada Curto presenting the book of Henriques in the Padrão dos Descobrimentos.

being paid to those matters and even the “decolonisation of teaching” is being advocated and discussed at present<sup>20</sup>.

The Portuguese university is not extraneous to subject of the so-called decolonisation of archives. The archivists, in general, still seem to be somewhat distant from this debate.

Decolonisation remains an unclear concept in this context, as Juergens recognizes<sup>21</sup>. I doubt its operability unless we consider it as a kind of label or tool to draw more attention to the complexity of colonial archives and to the need to acknowledge unpleasant aspects of our past.

### **3. A third note, on “the myth of impartiality and neutrality” of the archivists, as approached by Jeurgens**

Archivists’ work, like any human activity, has to be inserted into a range of cultural, social and political dynamics<sup>22</sup>.

The technical dimension of archival procedures does not exclude making choices and taking decisions. Some of these decisions are political, at several levels, some organizational, some professional, collective and/or individual. They cover several areas of archival practice: the creation of records, archival appraisal (though in this area the responsibility is or should be shared with other protagonists), mainly arrangement and description and still access and reference.

Focusing on the arrangement and description of archives, efforts have been made, in the professional domain, to reach a degree of objectivity, establishing concepts such as respect for fonds or provenance, with its developments and variants, considering, or not, the principle of original order<sup>23</sup>.

The use and adaptation of the General International Standard Archival Description – ISAD(G) and other standards, understood as a tool to facilitate

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<sup>20</sup> For instance, the training “Histórias difíceis, legados difíceis” on how to speak and teach on slavery and transatlantic slave trade in July 2024 (Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, n.d.). Or the article of João Moreira da Silva (Silva, 2022). The historian João Pedro Marques argues very differently, namely on teaching about slavery and the transatlantic slave trade (See, for instance, Marques, 2024).

<sup>21</sup> “It is necessary to formulate much more precisely from which point of view decolonization is considered and what exactly institutions that claim to decolonize mean by that. What needs to be done and what can and will be undone by whom? If you can’t answer these questions, decolonizing remains a meaningless empty shell some respondents reacted [during the Round Table initiative of the Dutch National Archives]”, p. 8. Beyond the archive, as Blouin Jr. and Rosenberg summarize (2011, p. 142).

<sup>22</sup> Beyond the archive, as Blouin Jr. and Rosenberg summarize (2011, p. 142).

<sup>23</sup> Society of American Archivists, 2005-2024c, and Society of American Archivists, 2005-2024a.

and accelerate the access to records, were also a major step in the attempt to convey an objective representation of said material.

Here, I am thinking mainly of Portugal, along the 90s of the last century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This adaptation occurred not without debate and, in parallel, with a subtle conviction, spread among several archivists, that ISAD(G) favoured or even guaranteed the impartiality of archival descriptions — surely a questionable belief.

In fact, this principle depends on various factors, one of which pertains to “the capacities and interests of the archivist, as well as the values reflected in the archive” (Blouin Jr. & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 147), and another being the scale of work vis-a-vis the extent of archives.

Strategies have been implemented to compensate for, or at least to draw users’ attention to, the characteristics and limits of archival description, namely plans of archival description, diverse according to the nature and extent of records, conservation conditions, human resources, funding, user’s needs (including citizens’ rights and duties), institutional responsibilities or political priorities. It is true that the methodology followed remains most of the times internal, but more information on it is being conveyed to the public<sup>24</sup>. Transparency about archivists’ practices involves additional work and can be quite time-consuming. There is a risk, however, that we consider it unnecessary to explain the archivist’s methodology on the basis that this information is most probably not searched by the majority of users in the online databases.

#### 4. Is the colonial archive unique?

The following note focusses on the colonial archive — “a highly contested genre of records”, as Juergens refers.

I understand this focus, taking into account the negative weight and legacies of colonialism which are felt still today in various aspects of the people’s daily lives<sup>25</sup>. These are difficulties occurring in the now-independ-

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<sup>24</sup> See examples in the ANTT database (<https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/>) such as “Arquivo Oliveira Salazar, Sistema de Organização” (Reference code: PT/TT/AOS) or “Convento do Bom Jesus de Monforte, História Custodial e Arquivística e Sistema de Organização” (Reference code: PT/TT/CBJM) ; and even in the AHU database (<https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/>), “Conselho Ultramarino, História Custodial e Arquivística” (Reference code: PT/AHU/CU) and “Obras Públicas, Âmbito e Conteúdo” (Reference code: PT/AHU/ID-OP).

<sup>25</sup> On racism and discrimination as legacies of colonialism see Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, United Nations Human Rights – Office of the High Commissioner (1996-2024).



ent countries that were once colonised and often also within the former coloniser states, namely regarding communities or individuals originally non-European.

However, I allow myself to broaden the issue of the contestation of archives beyond the colonial archives.

This contestation seems to depend largely on the level of knowledge about them, on the understanding of all the layers and silences that they comprise, on the ways they were and are used or misused and, of course, on the recipients of this usage.

No record is innocuous, and neither is its usage. Some examples:

- Blouin Jr. and Rosenberg refer the paradigmatic case of the Enola Gay controversy.

It happened during the planning and the selection of archival materials for the exhibition, in 1995, in the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum in Washington D.C., of the Enola Gay, the first aircraft to drop the atomic bomb in Japan. The organisers sought to "use a range of archival documents to describe the impact of the bombing on the end of the war, its aftermath, and the onset of the Cold War".

Reactions from veterans of the B29 airplane and from members of the American Congress erupted. The first expressed that the airplane would not be displayed "proudly", the last "that the exhibit would portray Japan 'more as an innocent victim than a ruthless aggressor'. The support lent to the museum by some American historians deepened the divide, which ended in a political controversy and with the cancellation of the exhibition. This incident was followed by the creation of a "new digital Enola Gay Archive, [*i.e.* a digital repository] sponsored (...) by the Air Force Association (...) to allow the 'true' story to be properly told". Blouin Jr. and Rosenberg concluded that this controversy "reflected deeper and more complicated questions about sources and archives" such as "To what extent (...) is the meaning and value of sources created by the engaged historian and active archivist, rather than simple interpreted?" (Blouin Jr. & Rosenberg, 2011, pp. 116-117).

- The archives pertaining to the Portuguese Inquisition constitute another example.

They demand a very cautious attitude regarding the interpretation and use of the correspondent information contents. For instance,

denunciations, indictments and convictions for Jewish practices of the so-called *New Christians* do not mean that these defendants were all Jews or that they observed Judaism. Their testimonies or voices, the “indirect testimonies” mentioned by Juergens, were intermediated by the Court of the Inquisition, which also nominated the lawyers (“procuradores”). Nor do the inquisitorial labels of Gentilism (“gentilidade”) and Gentilic ceremonies in the Inquisition Court of Goa always cover the same type of individual or community beliefs, cultural values and codes<sup>26</sup>.

Rather, their application differed according to the officers (“the hearers of the past” in the sense given by Juergens) and to the understanding that they had of people’s practices and behaviour in the way these were conveyed to them. It differed also according to the colonial territory where the Inquisition was active, namely in the former Portuguese State of India, in Brazil or in Angola. Lourenço gives us examples of accusations of gentilism in India which, analysed in detail and crossing information, in some cases refer to Crypto-Hinduism while in other cases refer probably to Buddhism (Lourenço, 2011, p. 223).

The secrecy, the mental categories and the classifications embedded in the inquisitorial procedure, as well as the gaps and deliberated destruction of archives, especially in the case of Goa’s Inquisition, are not amenable to literal or simplistic readings of the records.

A similarly rigorous approach must be had when dealing with the archives of Portugal’s political police (PIDE/DGS) during the Dictatorship and up to 1974. People denounced as communist, for instance, could simply be opponents to the Regime and/or supporters of freedom and democracy, or indeed none of the former.

If these as other archives are not duly apprehended and studied, wrong narratives uncritically stuck to records and information, or built out of their context, may be reproduced and become dominant. Blouin Jr. and Rosenberg, again, remind us of Boris V. Ananich’ discussion

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<sup>26</sup> Lourenço analyses how the term “gentilidade” referring to the cultural-religious context of “Gentiles” (non-Christian, non-Jewish, and non-Muslim populations) was differently employed by the Holy Office in Goa. “The fact that the Portuguese employed the terms “gentilismo” and “gentilidade” to refer to religions beyond Judaism and Islam also raises difficulties when trying to achieve a definition of “gentilidade” as a religious offence. If it is taken to be an equivalent to crypto-Hinduism how should charges against defendants that lived in locations far from Hindu contexts be interpreted? Is it not possible for those who converted from the Gentiles of Brazil or Angola to also have committed crimes of “gentilidade” from the point of view of an inquisitor? (Lourenço, 2021, p. 217).

of the materials concerning the 1919-31 trial of Soviet academicians, where the fabrications of information (...) was made all the more problematic by the realities of the trial's victims asserting they were true, a set of issues that could only be understood by historians fully cognizant of the historical context. (Blouin Jr. & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 231, n. 6)

## **5. Fifth and last note on “On what the archivists and archival institutions could, or maybe even should do to mitigate hermeneutical injustice” (Jeurgens, 2025, p. 153)**

I am not convinced that it is fruitful for archivists and archival institutions to consider their approach to the colonial archives as a matter of justice. Even if we are speaking precisely of hermeneutic justice or injustice, linked to the archives as a resource of knowledge and as an object of study.

My glance upon Portuguese colonial archives has until now been two-fold: on the one hand, as guardians of an archival heritage that has an added value and implies an extra responsibility for Portugal and the Portuguese in terms its of preservation and accessibility, considering that it is also relevant to other countries and communities. On the other, as archives whose arrangement and description demands, like any, a study of why they were created and for what purposes, of how they were kept, organized (or not), of their implicit or explicit classifications, absences and uses. In several cases this should be done, if possible, at different levels and moments of the archival description.

There are some conditionings.

The sphere of activities of the public archival institutions reaches, as we all know, far beyond the colonial records.

The Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, for instance, is just one of these institutions (around 18) under the aegis of a General Directorate, and it is not the only holder of this kind of records. Restricting myself to this archive, there is still lot of work to do concerning simple arrangement and description<sup>27</sup>. A lot more is still on going to make available on line more finding aids. The same regarding digital images of the records, though there is the risk of mass digitisation of (colonial) archives becoming, sometimes, a

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<sup>27</sup> Namely of three extensive main archival fonds and series (Governo Geral de Angola, Instituto de Apoio ao Retorno dos Nacionais, Conselho Ultramarino – Índia).

"panacea as "availability of materials [...] does not equate to accessibility" like Jeurgens states (Jeurgens, 2025, p. 163).

Funding is limited and specialized human resources are scarce — this, due to different reasons, and in spite of efforts of recruitment within the Public Administration sector.

On the other hand, many archivists on the job are insufficiently prepared to describe the colonial records from the critical standpoint described by Jeurgens. This requires deep historical knowledge on a great variety of communities and geographical areas, namely those covered by former Portuguese colonial administration. An example from my own experience: it is preferable to describe contents of records using their vocabulary, when there is uncertainty as to what it represented and which current terms should be applied, then to adulterate their meaning. This option should be clearly expressed for the user, something which does not always happen. Later on, it will be possible to improve and enrich the description, in projects in partnership, namely with universities and/or involving users<sup>28</sup>. Some speak about reparative description<sup>29</sup>. I would not go so far.

This said, I fully subscribe to the notion that archivists and archival institutions should be aware that they are mediators or "agents of mediations" as Jeurgens states (Jeurgens, 2025, p. 164).

I conclude with the following reflexion by Blouin Jr. and Rosenberg: "And if the authenticating practices of state archives serve to make certain kinds of historical understanding seem like the "natural" course of a society's development, should not state archivists confront this reduction and systematically work to minimize its effects? Our answer would be: not necessarily. What we think might be needed instead is for historians and other scholars themselves to come to the archive capable of "reading" it well" (Blouin Jr. & Rosenberg, 2011, p. 121).

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<sup>28</sup> Including the use of tags.

<sup>29</sup> "Remediation of practices or data that exclude, silence, harm, or mischaracterize marginalized people in the data created or used by archivists to identify or characterize archival resources" (Society of American Archivists, 2005-2024b).

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Boletim do Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra  
Arquivo da Universidade de Coimbra  
Rua de S. Pedro, 2, 3000-370 Coimbra, Portugal  
URL: <https://www.uc.pt/auc/>