

## INTRODUCTION

Good morning, all! Today, I will be discussing how digital archives and exhibits are valuable tools for finding representation and community, but also how this relies on archives being accessible and critically engaging with the material they present.

To begin, we must first understand not only what archives and exhibits are, but the implications behind their curations. For the purposes of this presentation, an archive will be understood as a collection of materials, such as essays, photos, videos, or historical documents. Exhibits are further curated collections within archives that seek to represent a more exhaustive representation of the topic chosen.

Archives and exhibits are a valuable place to turn to for representation, but if they fall short of accessibility standards such as compatibility with screen readers, this representation is thus unavailable for many people. Additionally, there needs to be intention when curating an archive, and the point at which the curator decides there is enough material needs to be considered when looking at the representation an archive provides.

[NEXT SLIDE] Since I recently began identifying as disabled, I craved to learn more about my new community's history. I started this journey by reading Alice Wong's anthology *Disability Visibility* which set me off expecting many of the archives I encountered to be written by and for disabled people. Wong's anthology is the perfect example of what an accessible archive would be, written by various people ranging from academics to activists, and all written in the first person.

My subsequent encounter was with *Crip Camp*, a documentary directed by James LeBrecht and Nicole Newnham that publicized videos from Camp Jened during one summer in the early 1970s. Not only was this archive comprised of first-person experiences, but it followed the campers out of Camp Jened and into their lives as activists, academics, parents, and just people. Both *Crip Camp* and *Disability*

*Visibility* did not shy away from triggering and painful topics, but they were treated with respect and dignity.

I went into these archives with high expectations. I wanted to see positive representation of disabled people in history. I wanted to see myself represented. I wanted accessible material too. These archives are not just about my experience, but also about the disabled people who are left in the margins of education. According to the Postsecondary Policy Institute, in 2019 only 18% of disabled people over the age of 25 held a bachelor's degree<sup>1</sup>. Accessibility must not only include digital accessibility for those with vision impairments, but it must include resources to aid those who have not been welcomed in the world of academia. [NEXT SLIDE]

## METHODS

For the purposes of my research, I selected the Society of American Archivists' collection *Documenting Disability* as my object because of user likelihood to rely on a compilation of institutional sources rather than independent archives. In my exploration of these archives and exhibits, I used the google chrome extension "WAVE Evaluation Tool." WAVE scans compatibility with accessibility aids (like screen readers) and color contrast within text boxes. For my assessment of each archive, I focused on three main features of WAVE: "generic errors" like missing alternative (alt) text, background and text color "contrast errors", and "alerts" like very small text and broken links.

To give a baseline analysis of the accessibility of the archives and exhibits the SAA linked, I ran WAVE on the page for "Documenting Disability in the Historical Record". As you can see here, this page has six errors, 252 contrast errors, and 160 alerts. Beyond using WAVE, I also pulled from my experience as a queer disabled autistic college student to help explore what disabled representation looks like in

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<sup>1</sup> cite

archives. Using this lens, I will highlight the symbolic annihilation that disabled people face in digital archival spaces. While our physical bodies may be included, our lives, our accomplishments, our love, and our voices frequently are not. Positive representation cannot just come from whether or not diversity is physically represented, it must also come from how archives engage with it. [NEXT SLIDE] The 10 archives I examined have been divided into three sections: Archives and Exhibits Without Critical Engagement, Archives and Exhibits that are Difficult to Navigate, and Archives and Exhibits that Offer Community Hope. [NEXT SLIDE]

#### ARCHIVES AND EXHIBITS WITHOUT CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT

One of the most harmful elements of an exhibit focusing on disabled history are exhibits that fail to critically engage with the material. Two archives struggled the most, the Central State Hospital Digital Library and Archive and the P.T. Barnum Museum. These archives struggle to include alt text, as both of them have 15 or more errors and alerts related to missing alt text. Thus, any images that are included in these archives, are rarely, if at all, accessible to people who use screen readers. Furthermore, both of them have contrast errors, with Central State Hospital having more than 60, so that anyone not using a screen reader but has a vision impairment, may not be able to read large swaths of text. By failing to consider these accessibility needs, these archives have already demonstrated that critically engaging with the material is not their highest priority, and they both continue this trend within their actual content. [NEXT SLIDE]

The Central State Hospital archive struggles with adequately engaging with a disabled perspective in the digital exhibit “The Founding and Early Years of the Central Lunatic Asylum for the Colored Insane.” To start off, nowhere in this exhibit is the cultural context and impact of the language used in the name of the asylum discussed, or even the ethical implications of asylums for people with mental illnesses. Only one image directly relates to the patients of this asylum, and it is poor enough

quality that we must rely on the title and caption. We can see that this image depicts a person sewing, but there is no alt text and the caption provides very little information. While the caption addresses the fact that patients had to work in the asylum, it does not clarify if they were compensated in any way, as if the idea of paying disabled people for their labor is not even something that users of the exhibit would wonder. By failing to address the real lived experience of people in this asylum by reducing their legacy to a single image (without any alt text), the Central State Hospital has marked disabled bodies as objects that are permissible to exploit and ignore. [NEXT SLIDE]

Unlike the other sources the SAA linked, the P. T. Barnum Museum does not have a linked digital archive and its physical location is currently under construction. However, I chose to keep it in my sample because it clearly demonstrates how harmful a lack of critical engagement can be. This lack of critical engagement begins on the SAA website, where it is not clarified whether this museum is linked because P.T. Barnum was disabled or because he worked with disabled people. This clear power dynamic is completely overlooked on the part of the SAA and is followed in the “About the Museum” section on the Barnum Museum’s website. This section does not explicitly mention disability but does provide us with this lovely image.

Depicted is an ableist image of little people, portrayed in a subservient position to the man looming over him. Since the Barnum Museum decided captions or alt-text is not necessary, there is no way to know exactly what this image is. Fortunately, this concludes the trend of failing to critically engage with content and moves us to the archives that are difficult to navigate. [NEXT SLIDE]

#### ARCHIVES THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO NAVIAGTE

Many of the links provided by the SAA do not actually lead directly to the digital archive or exhibit but rather stores, home pages with no direct link to an archive or exhibit. Furthermore, many of the archives had complex search features that were difficult to use. Out of the ten archives I looked at,

six archives were difficult to navigate. Even if there is positive representation buried in these archives, finding them might prove to be nearly impossible.

These tedious cites include the following digital archives: the ADA Archive, the College of Physicians of Philadelphia: Historical Medical Library, the Cornell University: Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation, and the Disability History Museum. For time, I will be focusing on the Disability History Museum and the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. [NEXT SLIDE]

The Disability History Museum currently does not have a working link for any exhibits, so I ran a wave on its search feature. This was to gain a sense of the accessibility features prioritized, but also to learn how much material was deemed “enough” when curating the archive. While not terribly egregious with just three errors, eight contrast errors, and 21 alerts, the search function itself is definitely dated. When I searched the word “autism”, instead of directly searching within the site, you are taken to an external google page. To add insult to injury, this returned only 6 results. Of these 6 results, three link to the same document of a speech in 1979 and one of them leads to their educational glossary which contains a mildly offensive definition of autism from the CDC in 2001. [NEXT SLIDE]

On the other hand, the College of Physicians of Philadelphia has 56 errors, zero contrast errors, and 58 alerts on the introduction page to their Further into Imperfecta digital exhibit. While it is a creative idea to have the exhibit be non-linear and rely on branching paths, this creates accessibility concerns, as soon as you click on the “Introduction” button, you are taken to a page with 295 errors, 1 contrast error, and 88 alerts that are largely related to empty and redundant links. So while this format may be more engaging to some, it has been done in a way that makes it nearly impossible to navigate with a screen reader.

COMMUNITY HOPE

Just three archives linked by the SAA provided positive representation, and two of them did not even have the exhibit directly linked. The American Foundation for the Blind, the American Printing House for the Blind, and the American School for the Deaf provided archives that featured exhibits that center disabled people and their lives. [NEXT SLIDE]

The American Foundation for the Blind digital archive had no errors, two contrast errors and, 12 alerts that mostly related to long alt text. Additionally, while knowing what you are looking for and how to navigate digital archives are helpful in getting the most out of this website, the AFB provides “browse by subject” and “introduction to browsing” features to aid those without previous experience working with digital archives. Furthermore, the AFB has an exhibit on Helen Keller that centers and celebrates her life and experiences without putting her disability up for scrutiny.

The SAA did not directly link the archive for both the American School for the Deaf and The American Printing House for the Blind. Yet, both of them are interesting and easy to navigate digital archives with the APH sitting at zero errors and contrast errors, and just five alerts related to long alt text and the ASD with 4 errors and 48 alerts, mostly related to very small text. [NEXT SLIDE]

However, what is most crucial to our understanding of accessible and representative archives is community archives. The Disability Archives Lab stands in contrast to the SAA with just one error, zero contrast errors, and six alerts. Created by and for disabled people, the DAL centers the user, the labor of belonging, and crip futures. Additionally, the DAL takes into account people with light sensitivity by offering a dark-mode feature, something that none of the other archives had.

The Disability Archives Lab shows that it is possible to make a physically accessible digital archive, but also one that *feels* positive and representative to browse. [NEXT SLIDE] Community archives are a place where people can turn to and see themselves throughout history, and as archivists Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario Ramirez write, “A community archive asserts that *we were here*”.

## CONCLUSION

While the SAA linked archives struggled overall to provide accessible and positive representation, independent and community archives offer us hope for the future. As Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez found in their study on archival representation, *representational belonging* serves as a “counterweight to symbolic annihilation”. We must prioritize representation and accessibility within archives, especially within archives about disability, because meaningful archives serve as a tool to create, affirm, and celebrate expansive community, not confined by physical places.