



Conversation with Litwin authors, Lydia Tang and Gracen Brilmyer by Olivia Newsome

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This interview was conducted as part of the Author Interview Series with Library Students, published on the Litwin Books blog, where prospective information professionals meet with authors to discuss the research process and engage in a deep dive on important topics of the field from concept to publication.

[Preserving Disability: Disability and the Archival Profession](#), releasing in Summer 2024, is a collection of essays that think about Disability and the archival profession. Some of the chapters cover accessibility of archives, first-person experiences researching Disability collections for Disabled archives users, processing and stewarding Disability-related collections, and more; edited by Dr. Gracen Brilmyer and Dr. Lydia Tang.

Dr. Gracen Brilmyer is an Assistant Professor in the School of Information Studies at McGill University and the Director of the Disability Archives Lab. Their research lies at the intersection of feminist Disability studies, archival studies, and the history of science, where they investigate the erasure of Disabled people in archives primarily within the history of natural history museums and colonial histories. Their work has been featured in publications such as *The Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, *Archival Science*, and *First Monday*. Their research is shaped by their experiences as a white, Disabled, non-binary person. For more: gracenbrilmyer.com

Dr. Lydia Tang is an Outreach and Engagement Coordinator for Lyrasis. Previously, she held archivist positions at Michigan State University, the Library of Congress, and numerous graduate positions at the University of Illinois, where she received her MLIS and Doctor of Musical Arts degree. Passionate about accessibility and Disability representation in archives, she served on the Task Force to Revise the Best Practices on Accessible Archives for People with Disabilities and spearheaded founding the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) [Accessibility & Disability Section](#) (ADS). In addition to her professional service with SAA, she has contributed to accessibility initiatives within [DLF Digital Accessibility Working Group](#) and the ArchivesSpace open source software and community by leading the Staff Interface Enhancement Working Group, Development Prioritization subteam, founding the Usability subteam, and chairing the Users Advisory Council.

This interview was conducted by Olivia Newsome, a dual degree student from the Archives and Public History Program at New York University and Library & Information Science at Long Island University.

Olivia Newsome: Can you summarize the main concepts for this book project?

Lydia Tang: *Preserving Disability In the Archival Profession* is a compendium of submitted articles about Disabled authors, Disabled archives users, and all kinds of topics such as collections for Disabled archives users, disclosure and accommodations, self-advocacy, and stewarding Disability collections.

Olivia: How did you develop the idea for this book? Does it relate to any of your personal or professional experiences?

Lydia: This project was initially a project of the Accessibility and Disability section of the Society of American Archivists. Michelle Ganz and I were the founding co-chairs of this section and we realized that there was a critical mass of archivists in our steering committee and section to build a book about disability and the archival profession. Michelle ended up stepping away from the project and Gracen came on board. It has been fantastic to collaborate with Gracen and I know that we both have learned so much through this project together.

Gracen Brilmyer: I was brought on around the point of finishing up the book proposal to start to talk to publishers. Just to speak to the second part of that question, it absolutely resonates with personal and professional experiences. I would say for both of us, but I speak for myself, being a Disabled person who works as an archivist, as an archival researcher in the field of archival studies, and on Disability as it intersects with archives, which feels really important to do this kind of work because I'm also feeling the impacts of it at the same time.

Lydia: I think a lot about my past experience on the task force to revise the best practices for accessible archives for people with disabilities - this project is the flip side of that coin. So, not focusing so much on accessibility *solutions*, but to focus on the voices of Disabled people.

Olivia: What are the theoretical underpinnings of this book project? Specifically, what archival, Disability, and/or critical theories ground this work?

Gracen: Each of the chapters takes its own subset of Disability and archival theories. As a whole, we were inspired by work in critical archival studies and the people who are addressing power in archives including documenting, erasing, and intervening with the ways that people in histories and cultures get represented. There's a lot of folks who have really been foundational to my work, specifically those who are working on archives as they intersect with issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and colonialism. What that field does is think about the granular ways that archives embed different types of power and impact different people in different ways and through different archival processes.

Disability theories are coming into play in the book as a whole, and in individual chapters around representation, erasure, community, work, labor, and accessibility. Each one of those has its own pot of literature. And each chapter also thinks about different and importantly, specific Disability histories. So, in editing the book, we attempt to make sure that the nuances of time, place, and space are given the attention that they deserve. And there's the specific social, cultural, political ways that disabilities have been understood and are understood today, and chapters address different facets of those models as well.

Olivia: Since the book is not yet out, I would like to talk about the process. How have you selected submissions? Talking about the intersection of Disability, accessibility, ableism, and the archival profession is huge. Also, how have the submissions either added to the existing literature in the field or related fields and how it differs, or it's departure? So essentially, what is this book contributing to the existing body of literature?

Lydia: To answer the first question, we had a tremendous interest in the book. We were just so fortunate to get so many submissions of articles and chapters that had such a broad range of topics and approaches to it.

Gracen: We had a call for abstracts and then we invited folks to write their proposed chapter. We prioritized Disabled perspectives as well as thought about the archival profession as a whole to make sure we had a wide range of archival concepts touched upon as well as a wide range of disabilities and Disabled perspectives represented: as Lydia was saying earlier, chapters range from Disabled archival workers and thinking about first-person narratives which cover job market expectations, applying for jobs, employment, as well as working with materials on Disability or building tools for access. We also have an amazing forward to the book by Alice Wong, who critically approaches what it means to consider oneself an archivist!

Olivia: What is it that you intend for the audiences to learn? What are your hopes for the future of the profession?

Gracen: One of the main contributions is that the book marks a moment in the archival profession. At this moment in time in the United States, the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) is over 30 years old. And we're also at a certain point in the archival scholarship where Disability as a subject is a growing topic as both a subject and an identity in archives.

We're at a certain place in archival practice where, for example, redescription projects are growing in popularity, and are making really important interventions into representation. So I think that this book, if nothing else, just marks a moment in this particular English-language knowledge at the intersection of Disability, the archival profession, what work has been done, what work we desire to be done, and, for me, lays a foundation for hopefully much more work at this intersection.

And I think, Lydia, you mentioned this earlier, but to me, it always comes back to Disabled community. Hopefully, this book shapes the profession by making Disability more legible and taking Disabled people's perspectives seriously as users, workers, collaborators, and donors, so that more Disabled people are involved in the profession in the future.

Lydia: There wasn't an Accessibility and Disability section at SAA until 2019. And for a lot of people that were filling out the petition to have it be formed, they were saying, "I can't believe it's taken this long for this section to happen!" So, similarly to this book, it's showing that we're within the profession and so many angles of the profession, and that Disability is such an important aspect of our work in the profession. I hope that the profession continues to keep Disability as a central aspect of the profession, in terms of the people that we serve, and the people within our profession as archival workers, and that accessibility continues to be prioritized and innovated on.

Gracen: Yeah, as well as the unique perspectives that Disabled people bring to archives. For example, Disabled people perceive Disability and records in ways others might not. Having more Disabled people doing this work will, I hope, shift the archival field too which is exciting.

Olivia: Oftentimes, I feel like in some academic spaces we do a lot of theory and not a lot of practice. How are you all applying these critical methodologies to your daily work?

Lydia: I currently work in an archives-adjacent field. My day-to-day job is actually quotes and contracts for hosted software. But, I think that that accessibility is something that everybody can lean into, in any

job within an organization. Whether it's encouraging our communications team to adopt a more accessible website theme, to sharing accessibility best practices during all-staff meetings, and things like that. That's how I apply it on my day-to-day.

When I was an archivist at Michigan State University, then it was more of a hands-on, practical "let's try to make everything as accessible as possible." I served on the library's accessibility committee and was very active with accessibility advocacy during our reading room renovation. I was trying to advocate for accessible seating, adjustable lights, and accessible workplaces. Not only physically accessible workspaces but also policies and structures that enable Disabled people to either thrive or suffer.

Gracen: My primary job is as a professor, so I think about this question a lot within an educational setting. I think about anti-ableist approaches and building in access from the start when teaching. I try to set up spaces that are flexible, that are more accessible, where students feel valued and comfortable asking for their access needs to be met.

In regards to archives, specifically, I'm currently working on building a new digital archive. I think this is where Theory and Practice intersect for me: I am moving incredibly slowly with and for Disabled communities. I'm starting this work by running focus groups over the next few months with Disabled people about how they want to be represented in archives. Those focus groups will eventually lead to some design guidelines. In doing this work, I find myself asking: if I'm building a supposed community-based resource, how am I really centering the community? I'm taking my time to build something that has those community values, which is a very slow process and one that is not aligned with academic deadlines and goals, but one that is important when thinking about how to counter academic ableism.

Olivia: What advice would you give to library students, early career professionals, or really anyone interested in the work that y'all are doing?

Lydia: There's plenty of work to go around. There's always more things that can be done. And there's always opportunities for work to be done in many different places.

Gracen: I definitely agree with that. I also would say there's such huge importance and coalition building. I owe a lot to the conversations that I've had with other archival workers and thinkers who are working not necessarily on Disability but also asking really important questions about representation and labor and intervention and privacy and access. I think there's something incredibly important in solidarity and collaboration with other folks doing important work and building these collective goals together that impact multiple people.

Lydia: Students and new professionals should feel free to reach out to people that are already in this space. A lot of people really do want to uplift and they want to connect people with new ideas. The SAA Accessibility and Disability section has a mentoring program and also a mentoring cohort program. Those are just some ways to get involved in and get connected with people that are already doing the work.

Gracen: Just to build off of that, engaging with and finding our communities is incredibly important. I tend to suggest students and emerging professionals find the people who can support and can hold space for them. Mentoring programs are one way to do that, but, I think more widely finding the people who can hold space for what it's like to do this kind of work and to be in this profession is important too.

INTERVIEWS FROM THE FIELD