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URL: <https://frictions.europeamerica.de/research-note-prokopiou-exploring-far-right-shadows/>

doi number: 10.15457/frictions/0032

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Recommended citation

Thalia Prokopiou: Exploring Far-Right Shadows: Navigating disturbing archival material in California and Virginia. In: Frictions (05.02.2024), doi: 10.15457/frictions/0032

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Exploring Far-Right Shadows: Navigating Disturbing Archival Material in California and Virginia

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ScienceCampus doctoral researcher Thalia Prokopiou draws on her time spent in archives in the US researching for her project on far-right ideologies. She reflects on the intellectual, ethical and emotional demands that exploring often disturbing material places on researchers. Empirically, she traced the intersections of racist, and sometimes terrorist, ideologies with homophobia and sexism across historical and current far-right movements, groups and media. While outlining the challenges faced in Berkeley, LA and Charlottesville, her autoethnographic reflections offer practical advice and solutions for balancing academic rigour and personal well-being, ranging from broader methodological considerations through archival expertise and peer support networks to microstrategies for managing body and mind.



Figure 1: UC Berkeley's university library, flanked by the Bancroft Library and crowned by the iconic Campanile, stands as both a sanctuary of knowledge and a witness to tumultuous events. In 2017, the campus became the battleground for the 'Next Battle of Berkeley,' a far-right rally that devolved into a riot, revealing the far-right's strategic targeting of college campuses — a tactic not confined to the

post-Trump era — and to manifest its online momentum in the physical realm. © Thalia Prokopiou, July 2023.

In July 2023 I landed in San Francisco, excited about the next three months I was going to spend in the USA having been selected for the Regensburg – Berkeley doctoral exchange programme.^[1] I had spent several months developing ambitious plans for this trip. It was therefore meticulously organized: I was going to visit at least seven archival collections in Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Charlottesville to navigate the labyrinth of far-right American narratives.^[2]

My doctoral project develops a comparative analysis of 21st-century white supremacist discourses in Greece and the USA. With my archival research in Athens complete, I was ready to delve into the rich tapestry of far-right materials housed in American archives. My planned schedule was detailed yet flexible, shaped by the relevance and priority of the far-right collections I needed to visit. Catalogues were meticulously perused, meetings with archivists arranged, and appointments secured at the reading rooms. There were some things, however, that I could not have been prepared for.

Sailing through troubled waters

[H]ate speech, racism, homophobia, sexism, antisemitism, and disturbing visual elements such as extremist and violent photos as well as white supremacist regalia. Navigating this charged terrain while working alone with far-right collections for months on end became a heavy burden, demanding resilience and finding a delicate balance between scholarly inquiry and personal well-being.

In pursuing a deeper understanding of far-right ideologies, academic research inevitably involves grappling with raw and explicit expressions of hate. Recent history, marked by the rise of extremist movements, presents an emotional landscape that is challenging yet necessary to navigate. I knew that this academic journey into the dark world of far-right materials would be a pivotal phase in my Ph. D. project and I was excited to see the fruit of my research. Embarking on an immersive journey, spanning over three intense months, exposed me to challenges marked by both emotional and academic intricacies.

The archival materials promised a rich diversity of ideologies, marked by unexpected connections, with historical experience showing that far-right movements would be far from monolithic. I expected the archives to show a dynamic spectrum of ideas that I looked forward to traversing. But the sheer volume of far-right groups, individuals, and materials in the US-American archives was staggering. I thus

encountered the first, somewhat expected, hurdle in my research: the sheer heterogeneity and vast multitude of American far-right groups and organizations. The loose categorization and overlapping nature of different types of far-right discourses, groups, and events felt overwhelming, at least in my initial archival visits. I also anticipated some discontinuities: many far-right publications had been terminated and several far-right groups did not exist anymore. Such breaks added layers of complexity – and anxiety – to the scholarly pursuit, as ethical considerations while the labyrinth of copyright convolutions emerged as a further challenge.

However, the most formidable challenge emerged from the explicit expressions of hate within the materials themselves: hate speech, racism, homophobia, sexism, antisemitism, and disturbing visual elements such as extremist and violent photos as well as white supremacist regalia. Navigating this charged terrain while working alone with far-right collections for months on end became a heavy burden, demanding resilience and finding a delicate balance between scholarly inquiry and personal well-being. It became clear early on that as I sought to examine the historical background of the contemporary far-right groups while dissecting their recent surge, I had to seek out ways to deal with the intensely personal and confrontational experience of coming across all manner of hate speech and disturbing documents and objects daily.



Figure 2: UVA's iconic Rotunda stands as a silent witness to history. The juxtaposition of this serene scene with an Alt-Right night march with tiki torches that happened outside this historic structure six years ago underscores the complexities embedded in the fabric of collective memory. © Thalia Prokopiou, November 2023.

Down the far-right rabbit hole

I spent the majority of my time – more than two months – in the hallowed corridors of UC Berkeley and the Bancroft Library, delving into two essential archival collections, namely the People for the American Way (PAW) and the Diamond (Sara) Collection of the US Religious and Political Right. The latter is an impressive donation by the distinguished sociologist and practicing attorney Dr Sara Diamond. Author of four illuminating books on the political right, with a focus on the turbulent decades of the 80s and 90s, Dr Diamond donated her invaluable archive to the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley offering an abundance of different right-wing and far-right material. It thus offers a unique window into the intricacies of the USA religious and political right.

Entering into the Diamond Collection proved to be an unsettling journey, revealing a chilling historical landscape. The annals of the Ku Klux Klan unfurled a haunting account of their crimes and revealed the depth of racial animosity in the USA. The collection further exemplified the underbelly of state citizen alliances, such as the Oregon Citizen Alliance and Idaho Citizen Alliance, where homophobic and sexist texts permeated the rhetoric. Surprisingly, an atheist white supremacist religious group emerged, advocating for the ethnic cleansing of allegedly white USA territories of “coloured” people and Jews, marking a disturbing intersection of ideologies. Hate, Nazi, and neo-Nazi symbols littered the materials with the collection painting a vivid and distressing picture of violent and extremist attacks, offering photos and gruesome details of events like the Oklahoma City bombing, underscoring the gravity of far-right actions etched in the nation’s history.

The unsettling tapestry of far-right narratives extended beyond the Diamond Collection, with other archives documenting a myriad of disturbing materials. Comprehensive collections of far-right and Nazi materials, such as the neo-Nazi magazines, bulletins, and newsletters from the second half of the 20th century held at the University of Southern California in LA, for example, meticulously chronicle dozens of far-right wing organizations, unraveling their exclusionary politics, ideologies, discourses, and their *modi operandi*. Within the expansive repositories, the disconcerting scope of conspiracy theories in right-wing nationalist discourses, conservative supremacy tropes, and extremist activities become apparent. The archives also include artefacts of material culture, including chilling objects, such as white hoods and Ku Klux Klan member cards.

The Unite the Right Rally Special Collection at the University of Virginia added another layer to this disconcerting landscape that I had to navigate in pursuit of historical understanding. This special collection captured born-digital and analog materials, offering a stark portrayal of the deadly violence that unfolded during the rally in August 2017. The documentation included local and national media recordings, posters, flyers, and the counteraction by UVA students and the Charlottesville community. Objects such as tiki torches and burned flags served as visceral reminders of the volatile dynamics that erupted during this fateful event. The collection laid bare crucial evidence indicating that the local government and authorities were aware of the potential for violent escalation, though intervention,

tragically, came too late.

The ethical considerations of working with hate speech, far-right and extremist materials surfaced, with the realization that reproducing such content, even critically and professionally, could inadvertently institutionalize it. This becomes particularly salient, for example, in the fields of cultural studies or political sciences, which often focus on very recent material and events, with the lack of distance between historical events and scholarly analysis proving challenging.

Ethical considerations and emotional challenges

The ethical considerations of working with hate speech, far-right and extremist materials surfaced, with the realization that reproducing such content, even critically and professionally, could inadvertently institutionalize it. This becomes particularly salient, for example, in the fields of cultural studies or political sciences, which often focus on very recent material and events, with the lack of distance between historical events and scholarly analysis proving challenging.

The emotional challenges of engaging with racist and bigoted language in the context of recent history were also profound. The words laden with hatred had a gravity that lingered, leaving a lasting impact on me. Methodologically, confronting this emotional landscape required a delicate approach, acknowledging the weight and the importance of cataloging such far-right content while maintaining the academic demand for a focused and scholarly analysis. Working meticulously and employing solid academic methods offered a path towards tackling these emotional challenges. I planned working days at the archive in detail, trying to book my appointments there earlier in the day when my energy levels were high and I was well rested. I made a habit of skimming and taking notes and photos of all the relevant material in the archive. This minimized the need to go back and forth to the original material repeatedly while allowing me to revisit it at a certain distance via my notes and photos, at my own space and pace when I felt ready and had the mental and emotional energy. I decided to cut appointments short when I felt tired and avoided working with archival material in the evening. Microstrategies, such as shifting my viewing position and body posture, taking regular screen breaks, getting some fresh air, and moving my body by walking somewhere were proven beneficial.^[3]

I was lucky that for most part of my research, I was surrounded by the beautiful campus of the University of California. The campus at downtown Berkeley is not just a place of academic pursuits; it's a haven for researchers, especially for the researchers of the complexities of disturbing histories and objects. The beauty of the surroundings, from the stunning architecture to the inspiring environment,

provided a backdrop that was both helpful and uplifting.



Figure 3: View of the campus from the archive reading room in Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley. © Thalia Prokopiou, 2023.

An invaluable support system: Archivists, peers, and mentors

The UC campus isn't just about research; it's about fostering an atmosphere where socialization and collaboration thrive. The supportive structures in place, both in terms of academic resources and the overall atmosphere, contributed significantly to my research journey. In Berkeley, I found a community that understands the challenges and embraces the importance of collective support in delving into difficult subjects and that encourages difficult conversations.

Navigating disturbing archival collections demands acute awareness of one's emotional and physical responses. The intensity of the material cannot be understated, the profound impact it can have must not be underestimated. As I delved into hateful and racist narratives, I found it imperative to acknowledge and itemize my own reactions. Recognizing and articulating these emotions proved instrumental in maintaining a delicate equilibrium throughout the archival journey. Assigning names to these visceral responses wasn't just a formality; it became a powerful tool to maintain a sense of control. However, the most impactful strategy emerged above all in the form of reaching out to a supportive network of people in academia.

One of my first points of contact were the archivists. The role of the archivists was crucial in helping me navigate the complexities of the documents and provide priceless insights. They guided my catalog study beforehand and pointed out tags and descriptions of disturbing material so I could be prepared for it. Another successful strategy was engaging with fellow researchers in the vibrant setting of the campus. The peer connection was a source of inspiration that propelled me forward.

The UC campus isn't just about research; it's about fostering an atmosphere where socialization and collaboration thrive. The supportive structures in place, both in terms of academic resources and the overall atmosphere, contributed significantly to my research journey. In Berkeley, I found a community that understands the challenges and embraces the importance of collective support in delving into difficult subjects and that encourages difficult conversations. Having candid discussions with colleagues and sharing my experiences with fellow doctoral researchers in Berkeley and abroad proved to be an invaluable part of my support system, creating an environment where the emotional toll of engaging with such challenging material could be openly acknowledged.

Two of the highlights that punctuated my stay at Berkeley and allowed me to share my research outcomes and concerns with my peers were my participation as a guest student at the graduate seminar Major Themes in Comparative Analysis with Assistant Professor [Martha Wilfahrt](#) and my presentation at the UC Berkeley Humanities & Social Sciences Association (HSSA) Scholar's Forum. The former was a weekly theory seminar that allowed me to engage in lively discussions on key topics and methodological approaches in comparative analysis in the field of political sciences.

The other highlight, the presentation of my thesis chapter titled "White Supremacist Gendered Narratives and Spatial Divides in the USA and Greece", was another rewarding experience. The analysis I presented to an engaged audience of humanities and social sciences peers and scholars at the HSSA Scholar's Forum shed light on how Greek and US-American far-right discourses draw from both national historical and political traditions as well as from a common pool of transnational influences, such as the French New Right and the German Nazi Party, to shape their gender narratives. I shared my early findings that exemplified how these discourses aim to cultivate an emotional connection among their readers and supporters, while simultaneously perpetuating mainstream narratives that limit the roles and spaces available to women within imagined ethno-nationalist societies. The session yielded

valuable feedback, challenging questions, and thought-provoking insights that further enriched my research. Organized and hosted by the president of HSSA, Dr Daniel Kim, and the Forum's coordinator, Dr Yue Wu, this event encouraged my integration into the social and intellectual community of young scholars and visiting researchers at Berkeley while connecting me with peers facing similar emotional and practical challenges. The interaction not only affirmed the significance of my work but also fostered a sense that my research matters in the broader academic discourse.

Working collaboratively with archivists and relying on a robust support network has proven instrumental in navigating the emotional burdens associated with researching far-right and white supremacy discourses. In the exploration of disturbing histories, beyond the dusty shelves and aging documents, the paramount role of mentors, connectivity, and peer support emerges as a guiding light.

Furthermore, I was blessed to receive generous mentorship from my advisors in Germany and mentors in the USA. I want to acknowledge the invaluable guidance and support provided by my mentor at the Institute of European Studies, Dr Matthew Specter. His extensive knowledge and insights into the nuanced topic of researching the far-right, coupled with his willingness to engage in long and meaningful conversations, have been instrumental in shaping the trajectory of my project. Dr Specter's generosity in offering his time, expertise, and thoughtful advice has truly enriched my research experience and contributed to the depth and quality of my work. I also had the privilege of engaging with the president of HSSA Dr Daniel Kim and the head librarian David Eifler at UC Berkeley, and Prof. Jeffrey Olick at the University of Virginia, who graciously took the time to discuss my project with me and to help me extend my academic network. Last but not least, my collaboration with my thesis advisor and co-advisor from the University of Regensburg, Prof. Volker Depkat and Prof. Reiner Liedtke, remained essential to overcoming the emotional obstacles and ensuring a comprehensive grasp of my subject and its challenges. I am fortunate to have had such dedicated mentorship that has played a pivotal role in the study of the far-right movements and understanding the nuances of positionality in academic research. In other words, the academic community acted as a steadfast guide, navigating me through the storm. The journey through disturbing far-right and white supremacist histories was made more bearable by the shared commitment to unraveling the intricate narratives of the far-right, reminding me that the strength of the academic community lies in its ability to weather challenges together.

Conclusion: Staying afloat

Confronting difficult histories at the archives has been a poignant theme in the humanities and social sciences, as disturbing objects and language force a reckoning with the raw expressions of hatred

woven into the fabric of our past and present. The primary materials I work with, being relatively recent, serve as snapshots of a present marked by the persistence of hate. Working collaboratively with archivists and relying on a robust support network has proven instrumental in navigating the emotional burdens associated with researching far-right and white supremacy discourses. In the exploration of disturbing histories, beyond the dusty shelves and aging documents, the paramount role of mentors, connectivity, and peer support emerges as a guiding light.

Notes

[1] My three-month research endeavor in the USA was generously backed by the following: Leibniz ScienceCampus (LSC) Europe and America and the Institute for East and Southeast European Studies Regensburg (IOS), the University of Regensburg, the Representative for the Equality of Women in Academia and the Arts in the Faculty of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures (SLK), and the Bavarian-American Academy. I extend my deepest gratitude for their support.

[2] I am also grateful to the people at the following archives I visited in the USA for their guidance and valuable insights: Diamond (Sara) Collection on the USA Religious and Political Right and The People for the American Way (PAW) at UC Berkeley and the Berkeley Center for Right-Wing Studies, Right-Wing Collections at Hoover Institute at Stanford, Political Pamphlets Collection at the University of Southern California in LA, Nationalist Zines in Claremont Colleges Library, Center for the Study of Political Graphics in Culver, and the Unite the Right Rally Special Collection at the University of Virginia.

[3] Helpful information about strategies and tactics for working with traumatic or disturbing material can be found here:

Blee, Kathleen M. (2017). Understanding racist activism: Theory, methods, and research. Routledge.

Dall'Agnola Jasmin (2023). Let's talk about researchers' mental well-being, Central Asian Survey, 42:4, 641-648, DOI: [10.1080/02634937.2023.2273354](https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2023.2273354)

Rees, Gavin (2017). Handling Traumatic Imagery: Developing a Standard Operating Procedure. 4 April 2017.

<https://dartcenter.org/resources/handling-traumatic-imagery-developing-standard-operating-procedure>

by: Thalia Prokopiou|Section:Research Notes|Key Words:Bancroft Library, Berkeley-Regensburg Doctoral Exchange Programme, Doctoral Research, UC Berkeley, doctoral researcher, far-right, far-right discourses, far-right extremist, gender narratives, hate speech, research practices, white supremacy|Publishing Date:2024-02-12



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About the author:

Thalia Prokopiou

At the Leibniz ScienceCampus Regensburg, Thalia is developing her interdisciplinary research on contemporary issues of political change and continuity. Her PhD project takes a critical angle on contemporary far-right groups and parties. The central research questions revolve around populist far-right rhetoric in Europe and the Americas with a comparative focus on Greece and the USA. The goal of the project is to engage critically with tropes of homeland and to analyze the use of symbols and metaphors in far-right textual and audiovisual political narratives. Key terms for this project are: homeland, White Supremacy, transatlantic studies, hypernationalism and populism.

[Website](#)