Review of Displaced Archives

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*Displaced Archives*, edited by James Lowry, explores the concept of displaced archives, provides a broad overview of the ways in which displacement can occur, and presents methods archivists can employ in order reunify collections and their provenance. Lowry defines the term “displaced archives” as “removals that are arguably not illicit thefts but somehow legitimized or defensible by virtue of the fact of their being removed by states, regimes or exiled groups rather than individuals” (4). Displaced archives can be found in countries around the world and this concept is sometimes also referred to as migrated archives in the context of Commonwealth archives.

*Displaced Archives* presents chapters authored by fourteen contributors, primarily representing European and American institutions, who outline case studies and explorations of the concept of displaced archives. The authors are archivists and academics as well as experts in international law. While many of the authors are academics, they also speak to their individual experience working as archivists in national archives settings. The book is international and broad in scope, presenting case studies of displaced archives in or from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas as well as chapters on international law and postnationalism. Its editor, James Lowry, is a lecturer in the Liverpool University Centre for Archive Studies and has served in international roles for the International Council on Archives (ICA) and the Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers. Lowry has led projects supporting public sector archives as the deputy director of the International Records Management Trust. Lowry’s public records expertise and experience with international archives has allowed him to craft a volume that highlights a breadth of key topics in the area of displaced archives. Displaced archives are in danger of being destroyed, concealed from the public, obscured from use, and being misinterpreted. Lowry has selected authors to represent how these issues arise for displaced archives around the world.

A number of the chapters in *Displaced Archives* present case studies related to the ways in which archives can become displaced as well as the approaches that archivists have taken when working with displaced archives or archival claims. The case studies presented in *Displaced Archives* focus heavily on collections displaced due to war, colonialism, state succession, and other international conflicts. Because of the number of European archivists and academics represented in this book, it is not surprising that many of the case studies focus on state succession during the dissolution of European empires. The many perspectives presented provide a breadth of information on the topic of displaced archives and highlight the differences between the colonial and military powers that displaced the archives. Mandy Banton, principle records specialist (diplomatic and colonial) at the National Archives (UK), provides a case study of displaced archives within the collections of the National Archives (UK), and Michael Karabinos from the Institute of History of Leiden University outlines a case study of the National Archives of the Netherlands. Vincent Hiribarren, lecturer in modern African history at King’s College London, provides a comparison of archival practices in European national archives. Banton, Karabinos, and Hiribarren each note that the displaced archives that they have
chosen to highlight continue to be held by European national archives despite claims by the countries from which the records originate. James Lowry and Nathan Mnjama, senior lecturer in the Department of Library and Information Studies of the University of Botswana, present another perspective with their proposals for action on African archives in Europe. While there are many unresolved archival claims, chapters by Bruce Montgomery, director of archives at the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Douglas Cox, associate professor and international law librarian at the City University of New York School of Law, highlight how records continue to be displaced in current conflicts. The case studies are helpful for their breadth and scope, with other chapters of the book providing additional legal context and possible new approaches.

Two chapters focus on the legal contexts in which archivists work on the problems of archival claims and displaced archives. In the first chapter of this volume, Charles Kecskmeti, former executive secretary of the International Council on Archives, outlines the history of international laws that have been passed that effect the work of archivists and other cultural heritage professionals working with or laying claim to displaced cultural objects. This short chapter at the beginning of the book provides useful and necessary background for readers in a concise manner. This background is necessary context for the many case studies that make up the bulk of the book and is appropriately succinct for a volume that does not exclusively focus on legal issues. Douglas Cox addresses legal challenges for displaced archives in the context of compromise. Cox is quoted in other chapters for his discussions of legal cases of displacement or destruction of archival records. Cox’s chapter is the final in the book and provides a call to invigorate the role of archivists in archival claims. Cox reviews the legal contexts in which archivists currently deal with archival claims in order to highlight the limitations of legal approaches to these disputes. In order to provide other options, Cox highlights examples of compromise. These include options such as joint heritage or accepting copies instead of originals. These options are presented in a way that encourages avoiding stalemate when negotiating an archival claim. To continue the conversations between authors in this book, further discussion between Cox and Anne Gilliland, professor and director of the Archival Studies Program at the University of California Los Angeles Department of Information Studies, in additional chapters or articles on the opportunities for compromise with archival claims could elucidate additional options for archivists seeking to avoid stalemate.

Anne Gilliland’s chapter on displaced archives in a postnational context provides a theoretical approach to navigating archival claims. Gilliland’s chapter outlines ways in which new technological approaches can provide opportunities for connecting displaced archives with individuals as well as how technology has changed the context in which displaced archives now exist. Postnationalism asserts that people have multiple “belongings” beyond that of citizenship to a single country. Gilliland employs the concept of the records continuum to describe how records can “transcend their national identities or material manifestations and be considered postnational because of their universal characteristics” (182). Gilliland asserts that outside of nationalism a primary use of archival records is administrative continuity, which is necessary in the context of state succession or conflict. Given current technological opportunities, displaced archives
can be duplicated, networked, and used in many contexts. These records can contain multiple provenances given the nature of their creation. This conceptual framework for archives in the diaspora invites participatory approaches to working with archival collections but also requires that one avoid perpetuating a new hegemony by encouraging a nationalist/postnationalist dichotomy. Gilliland’s chapter was the most theoretical but also presented the most opportunities and solutions to the challenges presented by displaced archives and archival claims.

_Displaced Archives_ is a useful reader for those interested in international law related to cultural heritage and topics in colonial and postcolonial archives. Most archivists working outside of a national archives setting may not work with displaced archives, but the case studies and theoretical background of _Displaced Archives_ can provide all archivists with perspective on working with collections that have a complex provenance. While the book is short, the twelve chapters present case studies from around the world. Each chapter is thoroughly researched and has extensive references for readers who wish to read more into any of the topics presented. The book’s only limitation is its underrepresentation of authors from countries outside the West, but the inclusion of additional chapters from authors from the global South and East would be a valuable addition to a second edition of this reader.

While the topic of the book necessitates a focus on colonialism, war, and other conflicts, the list of authors only includes one representative from an institution that is not in Europe or the United States. Lowry recognizes this limitation and notes that many of the countries represented by the authors in this book hold archives removed from other countries. While the book was developed from an open call for contributions as well as personal invitations to experts in the global South and East to contribute chapters, ultimately there were few contributors from these areas. Lowry notes that archivists working in national archives settings in countries that have unresolved archival claims may be hesitant to publish on subjects related to relationships with other countries. The overwhelmingly Western perspective of the book may limit its scope but Lowry notes that he has attempted to ensure African representation in the book through citations and the use of an anonymized survey of national archivists of African countries. Additional contributions from archivists and academics outside of the West would be an excellent reason to publish a second edition of this book.