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Review of Defining a Discipline: Archival Research and Practice in the Twenty-First Century - Essays in Honor of Richard J. Cox

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Cover Page Footnote

All views expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Archives and Records Administration or any other agency of the United States Government.

Jeannette A. Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel, eds. *Defining a Discipline: Archival Research and Practice in the Twenty-First Century—Essays in Honor of Richard J. Cox*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2020.

When I first sat down to read *Defining a Discipline: Archival Research and Practice in the Twenty-First Century* on July 4, 2020, I was immediately struck by the irony of the situation. Here I was reading a book about the future of my chosen profession when the future of the world around me seemed so uncertain. Over the previous four months, thousands had sickened and died from a global pandemic, many of them from communities of color. Thousands more had risen up to protest this and other longstanding racial injustices. Millions were out of work, with no way to meet their basic needs. On the one day a year that Americans celebrate the declaration that “all men are created equal” and that each has the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” it seemed to me we still had a long way to go to achieve these ideals.

Although they could not have imagined what 2020 would bring, the authors and editors of *Defining a Discipline* aptly situate the archival field at a similar point of reckoning. They build on decades of archival scholarship and activism to unequivocally lay to rest the idea of archives as “laboratories of history” where “the most impartial sources” can be found, and show instead that archives embody the limitations and prejudices of their creators *and* their caretakers (88). Archives have been, and continue to be, complicit in systems of power by shaping what is considered to be authentic, trustworthy evidence and thus determining whose voices deserve to be heard and remembered. But the eighteen essays in this collection, written by a diverse cadre of archivists and information professionals, do not stop at acknowledging archives’ positionality. Rather, they explore the repositioning of archives as community-led sites of justice and healing and chart paths forward for a more engaged and empathetic profession in a new century.

Defining a Discipline begins by stating very clearly what it is not: a volume solely about distinguished archivist, educator, and author Richard J. Cox. As editors Jeannette A. Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel explain in the introduction, Cox was committed throughout his forty-year career to developing the archives profession as “a discipline in its own right” rather than as “an accessory to history” (ix). He established a premier archives program at the University of Pittsburgh in which he mentored a new generation of archives scholars and practitioners, including several contributors to this volume. He also researched and wrote extensively on such topics as archival appraisal, ethics, and education, as well as archives’ relationship to contemporary social justice movements.

Yet, while Cox’s work inspires each essay in the collection, authors push his vision of “an archival discipline and the transformational power of scholarship” into “new, related directions” (ix). Essays are organized into four thematic sections—Accountability and Evidence, Ethics and Education, Archival History, and Memory—that aptly reflect the major through-lines of Cox’s work as well as the focal points of current conversations in archival theory and practice. Each section consists of three or four essays and ends with a brief commentary that synthesizes the authors’ arguments within the context of the section theme and points to future implications for the field. A final essay by James O’Toole uses Cox’s career as a window into an exploration of the evolving nature of the archival profession between 1950, when Cox was born, and today.

Rather than summarizing how essays reflect the major section themes—which the four commentators (Heather Soyka, Alison Langmead, Robert B. Riter, and Joel Blanco-Rivera) do so superbly—I instead am focusing this review on four different themes that are as equally present in and critical to many of the authors’ arguments: (1) the need to expand the archival canon to include oral testimony, oral tradition, and other nontextual forms of evidence; (2) the democratization of the archivist role as the number and visibility of community archives increase; (3) the importance of archives as sites of making and remaking; and (4) the need to diversify the archives profession as much as the archival record. While these themes undoubtedly reflect current trends in archival research and practice, they also serve as ongoing calls to action.

Whether they are exploring government accountability or the construction of societal memory, multiple authors discuss archivists’ traditional bias toward textual records—and how this bias perpetuates injustices against marginalized communities. Wendy Duff and Jefferson Sporn frame this bias as an outgrowth of Western society’s privileging of the written word over oral testimony. While oral testimonies “are not passive statements of facts or proof,” the authors write, testimonies’ positionality does not lessen their evidentiary value. Rather, “evidence is found not just in what is said but in ways in which the testimony emanates from the historical, cultural, institutional, and mediating milieus that surround and contextualize it” (30–31).

Tonia Sutherland and David A. Wallace offer powerful examples of the ways in which oral testimonies fill gaps in the historical record and counter state-sponsored narratives that have actively marginalized entire communities and excluded dissenting voices. Sutherland demonstrates how African American land stories provide evidence of heir property in the absence of written documentation of land ownership, and thus how these stories offer an African American past that is not “inextricably tied to chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of racialized violence” (240). Wallace explores how atrocities committed against civilians by U.S. forces during the Vietnam War were purposefully under-documented, which led military leaders, the media, and the general public to discount and discredit veterans whose testimonies differed from the official record. Both Sutherland and Wallace recognize the power of archives to offer legitimacy to the materials they collect and the perspectives those materials represent, a legitimacy that is denied to oral testimonies and traditions that fall outside of typical collecting areas. They thus urge archivists to develop systematic strategies for collecting and preserving oral traditions in their institutions—or risk perpetuating human rights abuses and white supremacist attitudes toward marginalized communities.

Other authors explore the rise in community archives that are already doing this type of decolonizing work. Michelle Caswell, Joyce Gabiola, Gracen Brilmyer, and Jimmy Zavala define community archives as “grassroot efforts by marginalized communities to document their own histories,” with a key feature being that “community members themselves maintain some degree of autonomy over the collections” (50–51). Blurring the lines among collection donors, caretakers, and users, community archives workers stand in direct contrast to the traditional idea of the objective, neutral archivist. Instead, as Caswell and colleagues found in focus groups with five different community archives in southern California, these workers explicitly seek to “connect past injustice with contemporary activism” through their collecting and outreach activities (50). Likewise, as Jeannette A. Bastian describes, the “crowd-sourced, citizen-inspired, technology-driven” archive of the 2011 Tahrir Square protests in Egypt, which features firsthand video footage

captured by protestors on their smartphones, was actively created to document the brutality of the regime's security forces (261). Community members and contributors to the "resistance archive" were aware, from the moment of capture, that their efforts were as much about "preventing forgetting" as they were about "supporting remembering" (257, 268).

Yet community archives, as Bastian and Donghee Sinn remind us, cannot be reduced to a single purpose or function; like the communities and narratives they represent, these archives are diverse, and their relationships to centers of power are not always clear-cut. Some contributors to the Tahrir Square protest archive, for example, chose to remain anonymous, fearing that the documentation they created to challenge a repressive regime would enable the regime's retaliation against them. Similarly, community members who contributed to the No Gun Ri Digital Archives, which preserves oral history interviews with survivors of a U.S.-led massacre during the Korean War, typically avoided politically charged, anti-American rhetoric and instead situated their experiences within "mainstream historical discourses" emphasizing universal values such as peace and human rights—which, Sinn speculates, they may have felt would be more palatable to the general public given Korea's political climate (162). Bastian and Sinn caution archivists that "memory stakes are high," and some community members may want to "follow a safer route to publicize their stories" (269, 167). Both authors urge archivists to respect community members' decisions in these circumstances and be willing to cede some of their traditional power in collecting and shaping the historical record. After all, "memory and forgetting are ultimately about people and their survival" (269).

As Lindsay Kistler Mattock asserts, the shift away from traditional archival power, concentrated in the hands of an elite few, must also extend to the ways in which archivists think about arranging and describing collections of community-based organizations. Traditional praxis too often remakes archives into static objects most accessible to scholarly users and fails to represent the dynamic and complex activities and purposes of the original creators. Archivists must recognize and account for the fact that most creators do not follow a "linear process" of creation or make distinctions that archivists take for granted, like selecting a "master" among multiple copies (186). Artificially imposing linear structures on archival collections and the finding aids used to access them risks obscuring collections' ties to the "larger meshwork of the documentary universe" (187). As Mattock's example of the Paper Tiger Archive makes clear, the "material conditions of the archive" shape the way that it is "made, used, and reused" (187).

Anne J. Gilliland and Kathy Carbone take this notion a step further by calling on archivists to fully embrace the "fourth dimension" of the records continuum and the ways in which "movement and transformation are intrinsic to archives . . . as a result of handling, interpretation, and 'making'" (125). Archives are powerful sites of personal and collective memory and critical to ensuring accountability, but they also offer content that can be repurposed in creative ways to connect users with the past and evoke awareness and empathy in the present. Gilliland and Carbone describe how students at the University of California at Los Angeles and CalArts interwove archival materials into their artwork to reflect on student life on campus in the 1950s and today. In the process, these students engaged with archives "at a level that is much more granular and personally meaningful than archival practices currently take into account" (140). Janet Ceja Alcalá explores how videographers use footage of Mexican fiestas to create deeply personal and often nostalgic narratives of home for Mexican diaspora communities. Curated and crafted, personal and

communal, these projects demonstrate the power of storytelling in connecting communities across time and space, and the power of archives to support dynamic, creative, identity-affirming work.

The subtext underpinning nearly all of these essays is the need for greater diversity—not just of the archival record but of the archives profession as well. Sutherland most explicitly addresses this when she calls out white American archivists specifically for lacking “the political will to conceptualize and enact more inclusive and representative archival practices . . . on behalf of African American traditions and thereby also on behalf of authentic African American histories”—despite the existence of other models of practice, such as those enacted by the Senegalese Cultural Archives. White American archivists’ failure to act in support of marginalized communities thus leads to an “archival amnesty” extending white supremacist attitudes by perpetuating archival practices that serve the “dominant historical, social, and cultural needs of a white, Western society” (250).

Sutherland’s arguments lead directly to the conclusion that the archives profession needs more archivists from underrepresented communities to ensure accountability to community needs and equal representation in the historical record. Yet none of the authors outright state this; even Sutherland focuses primarily on the inclusivity of archival practice, not on the inclusivity of practitioners themselves. The community archives movement begins to address disparities in representation among archives professionals by enlisting a diverse cadre of community members and activists in preservation of their own histories, which many authors (including Sutherland) rightly celebrate. However, as the authors also describe, this movement has largely arisen in parallel to, rather than in tandem with, mainstream institutional archives, and sometimes even in active opposition to these institutions. What will it take for institutional archives to follow community archives’ lead, given decades of entrenched practices and the need for wholesale internal change? If change is, at least in part, “a matter of will,” as Sutherland contends, can we assume that change will come without greater representation within institutional archives’ ranks—especially when we have seen that “archival amnesty” is more common (253)?

While the authors in this collection stop just short of explicitly calling out mainstream institutional archives for their lack of diversity, other scholars and practitioners have explored this topic at length; *Through the Archival Looking Glass: A Reader on Diversity and Inclusion*, an essay collection published by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in 2014, is just one example. Another example came in the form of the SAA’s annual meeting in August 2020. This month-long virtual event focused on the theme “Creating Our Future” and featured such sessions as “A Profession for Us: Creating and Sustaining an Equitable, Inclusive, and Diverse Archives Field” (session S02); “Hiring for the Future: Reflections on the ARL/SAA Mosaic Program” (session S21); and “Beyond Diversity Initiatives: Nontraditional and Student-Centered Approaches to Recruiting BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] into Archives and Special Collections Librarianship” (session 1B). Speakers challenged mainstream archives to reconsider their recruitment and retention policies and to develop more inclusive practices that better support members of underrepresented communities. They called on archival education programs to address the numerous barriers (financial and otherwise) that members of underrepresented communities face in enrollment and persistence to graduation, and they appealed to the archives profession as a whole to reexamine its continued reliance on unpaid internships and temporary contracts, which are unsustainable for new and veteran professionals of all backgrounds, many of whom are also

saddled with tens of thousands of dollars of student debt. Although this was certainly not the first time the SAA has examined issues of diversity and inclusion at its annual meeting, the combined effect of speakers' calls to action in this moment, in this year, was powerful. The diversity that conference speakers envisioned for the future was not confined to the archival record or interwoven as a subtext to their other arguments, as it often is in *Defining a Discipline*. Rather, these speakers boldly proclaimed, embraced, and charted a path forward for an archives profession that is inclusive of all.

Despite focusing more on practice and less on the practitioner, the contributors to *Defining a Discipline* more than answered Richard Cox's call for "new ideas, original scholarship, and creative tension" that will raise the profile of the archives profession moving forward, even as the authors reflect on the many ways in which the field has developed over the past few decades (xiv). This collection will be a useful teaching tool for archival educators, as it touches on major themes of archival theory and provides multiple case studies in archival practice. But the collection is also relevant for practicing archivists, librarians, and other information professionals who seek to expand collecting practices to better reflect underrepresented groups, engage in authentic collaborations with community members, and enact more equitable and just policies at their institutions. Especially when situated alongside other scholarship, like that presented at the SAA's 2020 annual meeting, *Defining a Discipline* represents a condemnation of archival injustices begun in the past and perpetuated into the present, and an embrace of a profession-wide movement toward reconciliation and redress.