

2022

## Review of The Social Movement Archive.

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### Recommended Citation

Pacheco, Sonia (2022) "Review of The Social Movement Archive.," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 9 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol9/iss1/7>

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**Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida. *The Social Movement Archives*. Sacramento, Calif.: Litwin Books, 2021.**

*The Social Movement Archive* is a text that immediately sets itself apart from other literature targeting archivists as its audience. With its vibrant images and large font, its authors want archivists to explore the “tensions the archive produces and how archivists working in spaces that collect social movement materials navigate that tension” (1). In their extensive introduction, Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida state that their aim is to demonstrate how a critical understanding of material culture should shape the thought processes at the basis of archives and archival processes. They accomplish this quite well. Their ultimate goal can be summarized as wanting the profession, and its professionals, to ask difficult questions such as, “What is the use of archiving this?” and “Who is this archive for?” Furthermore, the authors hope professionals will truly contemplate the answers as they consider whether to accept (or actively inquire about) collections and as they subsequently process these collections. Fundamentally, Hoyer and Almeida want readers to think about the question, “To what extent have institutional policies and procedures within archives historically wanted the collections, not the people?” (7).

It is by answering this last question that Hoyer and Almeida believe a possible breakthrough will happen in the way archives, archivists, and social movements (and thus their collections) interact with and respond to each other. I believe that the text as a whole successfully demonstrates that archival institutions and archivists cannot think of the collections *and* the individuals who donate/create the materials as distinct, separate entities. In the way that Marshall McLuhan argued the medium is the message, Hoyer and Almeida would argue that the creator and the collection are symbiotic—and need to be treated as such.

The authors are unapologetic about not having answers to any of the questions they pose throughout the introduction, and about the contradictions found throughout the interviews that constitute the core of the volume. In fact, Hoyer and Almeida challenge readers to be comfortable with a lack of answers, as long as they are asking the questions. Specifically, the authors want readers to be aware of the need to ask intentional and thoughtful questions of the communities they are archiving; to be aware that the materials themselves prompt questions, and to pay attention to what those questions are; and finally to be aware that archivists should consistently be questioning themselves as to why they are doing the work they are doing.

The book contains fifteen interviews with individuals or groups of individuals representing specific social movements or related social action organizations. Hoyer and Almeida, who both self-identify as trained archivists and long-term volunteers within a social movement archive, conducted the conversations. The social activism discussed in the interviews is wide-ranging but all use visual arts to convey their message to the public and/or to accomplish the changes they seek. Examples of materials coming out of such work range from graphic arts to interpretive movement to plant species documentation, yet, regardless of the nature or topic of the social movement, the common thread among all the interviews is an intentional creation of strong visual components intended for public consumption and dissemination. Examples of these components are beautifully presented throughout the book in vivid color and large scale (both in number and

size), and it is clear the images are as much a part of the narrative as the transcriptions of the interviews themselves.

Throughout these interviews, the authors ask two specific questions: how should social movement material be archived, and how should archivists think about attribution, reproduction, privacy, and access. The answers given to the first question are pretty consistent: individuals working with the collections, particularly those accepting a donation, processing it, and creating the finding aid, need to—first and foremost—have an in-depth understanding of the movement, its purpose, and the social activists who were part of the movement. And while none of the interviewees explicitly states it, it is easy enough to infer that knowledge of content trumps any archival skills, as they believe those skills can be taught to the person who has the knowledge to process and provide quality access to the materials. It is worth mentioning that the word “reference” is never used in the text by either the authors or the interviewees, which highlights the reality that archival jargon is not part of the lexicon of the general public.

The answers to the second question, however, are often contradictory and at times appear to demonstrate a lack of understanding of the nature and purpose of an archive. Nonetheless, within these contradictions, a reader can identify clear and concise themes, including wanting these materials to be part of a “living archive,” one that is continuously accessed, used, and revisited by individuals interested in being social activists (most interviewees noted that they are not interested in having academic researchers be the sole users of their materials); a concern that placing materials in an archive limits those materials’ ability to be “living documents,” keeping future social activists from accessing these documents to know the history, struggles, and interconnectedness of movements; and a concern that the individuals and community the social movement is about or advocates on behalf of need to be able to easily access the archives with absolutely no barriers to access and use.

In addition, the book manifests tensions with topics like attribution. Some interviewees, such as Susan Simensky Bietila, an activist and artist who participated in the women’s takeover of the New York City underground newspaper *RAT*, believe that collaborative work does not need individual attribution, since that was not the original intent when the item was created, even when it is known who the authors are. Interestingly, Bietila also states that it is important to give individual acknowledgments to creators, and that when the creator is not known, archivists should try to identify who the creator is and contact them, to understand what they have been doing (for the purposes of archival description) since they created the item in question. This contradiction is found in a number of the interviews, such as that of Terry Forman, an activist and artist who was part of Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, an anti-imperialist activist group: the desire to be true to the intent when the item was created, which was usually to not give individual attribution but rather credit the collaborative, yet at the same time mention that individual credits are important and sometimes even necessary for financial or reproduction purposes. As a practicing archivist, I found the various threads of this conversation interesting but not revolutionary: archival collections—already placed in archives—are rife with materials with anonymous authors, multiple authors, or even authors who are known but do not want to be publicly acknowledged.

One of the challenges that the interviewees ask of readers is to rethink what constitutes a “document” and what merits archiving. This is an important challenge as it reinforces the intent of

Hoyer and Almeida in having readers think about what kinds of collections they accept, how access is given to those collections, and why those collections were accepted. And while this is a challenge that bears thought and consideration, it is not a groundbreaking idea. The various types of documents created as part of the social movements highlighted in the book (i.e., stickers, posters, banners, zines, audiovisual media) can already be found in many “traditional” archival collections. In addition, there are a great many archival professionals who are currently engaged in discussions on frameworks (i.e., postcolonial archiving, radical empathy, community archives) that have evolved the profession beyond traditional ideas of what should be collected and why.

It is worth noting that there are no interviews with archivists who are already working with social movement collections or who are part of social movements themselves in the text, even if the authors do mention conversations they had with archivists in their introduction. And in fact, the authors do not provide any commentary to the transcripts, with each interview consisting only of the transcript of the interview and sample images. This makes it difficult to ascertain if the tension the editors originally mentioned as one of their intents for the book is merely their own, or if it is felt by the profession at large. This lack of clarity is evident in the difficulty I had in following what exactly distinguishes the various materials created as part of social movements from those—of exact type—that are known to already exist in traditional archives.

While the purpose of the book is to highlight social movement materials, it presents these collections as mutually exclusive to traditional archives and attempts to give readers the impression that the materials generated as part of social movements are unique. This is certainly not the case, and it is here that the weakness of this text is found. The book, perhaps by including a conclusion written by the editors or another practicing archivist who is familiar with both traditional archives and social movement materials, would benefit from speaking of the parallels between traditional archives and the materials found in social movements, and from highlighting that it is not the materials themselves that merit differentiated archival action but rather the approach taken in processing and providing access to the materials. In addition, while the authors stated in the introduction that “our goal with this project is not just to reveal that tension, but to provide inspiration for reimagining archives and archival work” (8), I argue that they missed the mark and that the inspiration they allude to is in fact absent from the book. The authors were remiss in not explicitly stating possible actionable policies and approaches to working with social movement archives.

A question that would have merited further exploration are the feelings of the interviewees about their materials being acquired by an archive, when there was no proactive donation by the creator or the group that is the “owner” of the concept. This is of value as almost all of the materials described by the interviewees, and whose images are part of the text, are ephemeral in nature and created with the purposeful intent of being publicly disseminated (i.e., posters, flyers, advertisements, public art installations that can be captured by a private citizen via cellphone camera).

Intriguingly, there is an underlying current in the interviews that speak of materials already located in archival institutions, which calls out these institutions for not doing enough to provide access to their materials. As a practicing archivist, my first instinct was to immediately defend the archive, even as I acknowledged that what was being said was accurate and that we, as a profession, do

indeed generally fail at providing equitable access, well-informed processing and description, and any assurance that the materials have a life beyond the initial press release which may be written after they are donated.

Overall, this is a text that will be of interest to archival professionals who may have materials in their archives about any of the documented social movements, as they may gain additional knowledge of how the individuals associated with the movements view archives and archivists. In addition, the text is beneficial to student archivists and professionals who have not had an opportunity to think about the reasons why they collect what they do, and whose institutions have remained rigidly focused on only collecting “traditional” materials and collections. As archivists, we cannot remain neutral in our collecting and processing decisions, specifically if we want to be progressive in assisting with the documentation of current history and its changes. We must be aware of whose history we are considering important, why we consider them important, and how we are communicating this importance with the public.