

IJIDI: Book Review

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Our words are only as good as our actions, and the performances we deliver in the name of social justice, are useless unless our practices align. Archives and special collections, destinations of memory and materiality, often exist in stasis both through the spaces they contain and the methods they employ. The reasons for this are almost too practical. It is expensive to change. It is hard to change. We have always done it like this and changing would be disrespectful to our archivist and special collections librarian ancestors. Being critical of practices so deeply rooted takes work. Actively dismantling these practices through practical actions, even more so.

Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation is a large volume of essays (17 in total) brought together under themes of social justice, community archives, hegemonic structures, systemic racism, critical archival theories, critical practices, and more. The essays unfold varying approaches to challenging the structures of special collections and archives, often in reproducible and enlightening ways. The book concerns, in varying degrees, the colonial roots of archives and special collections, and how those roots branch into acquisition, curation, description, access, discovery, physical space, and exhibitions. Some essays are more radical than others, in that they suggest fundamentally restructuring existing paradigms and fully removing foundations of special collections and archives theory. Others on the contrary suggest sets of measured approaches, often within the familiar workflows, toolkits, and standards that are already in existence. As an example, one essay may discuss a new way of utilizing a tried-and-true metadata schema in service of inclusivity or discovery, whereas another essay confronts the roots of metadata terminology and finding existing schema to be too limiting to support real efforts in equity, diversity, and inclusion.

What is at times jarring about the book is not the progression or shift in topics, but in the shift of approaches each author takes to deliver their work. Some essays, such as “The Gentlemen’s Ghost: Patriarchal Eurocentric Legacies in Special Collections Design” by Jesse Ryan Erickson reads from a very academic lens while others, such as “Sensitive Materials in the Special Collection: Some Considerations” by Daniel German, reads more informally and as a simplified call to action. The former essay deems special collections and archives as exclusive, gentlemanly spaces or as spaces intended to assimilate the “other” rather than as the author states, “imagine the alternative” (p. 146). Erickson carefully dissects the obsession with tradition that plagues these spaces, drawing lucid connections to individualism, capitalism, and the over-rarification of research. On the contrary, the latter

essay is a more general guide to making decisions about sensitive materials that enter archives and special collections or are being considered for acquisition. The definition of sensitivity is applied to matters related to privacy, personal information, of high-market value, legally problematic (e.g., copyright, subpoenas) or considered delicate. Erickson defines “delicate” as items that are obscene, or gross, however, the author also chooses to connect the term to traditional knowledge that is acquired in a problematic or disrespectful manner. These two essays contrast so deeply, with one author carefully dismantling the modern issues with space and the other pushing the reader to “...be ready to act in a manner that will not embarrass your institution.” (p. 167).

The stories and use cases in this book are rarely reductive, and as a result, this book as a whole is practical and offers much depth of information for any special collections and archives practitioner. Francois Dansereau’s “Men, Masculinities, and the Archives” discusses the theme of archival pluralism and the possibility of deconstructing hegemonic masculinity to thus enact newly founded archival theories (e.g., discarding the rigidity of provenance). Like many of the other authors, Dansereau cites Verne Harris, Marika Cifor, Stacy Wood, Michelle Caswell and a wealth of scholars who are known for their criticality of traditional archival theories. There is an overarching sense that this book is aimed to question current practices and to acknowledge that archives and special collections are not neutral. Grappling with one’s biases of course takes effort and constant revision, which is discussed in depth both in Dansereau’s article and in “Ethical Cataloging and Racism in Special Collection” by Elizabeth Hobart. Hobart takes themselves to task about their own past approaches to cataloging and the racially motivated fragility they exhibited as a budding cataloger. The author then determines how, in practice, those records could be described using an approach that is not colorblind or feigning neutrality. Hobart’s vulnerability in this essay is refreshing, and genuine. Additionally, Hobart talks about the practical applications behind improving discovery of collections so they may be accessed by more than just the lifelong academic, altogether offering a practical example of opposing historically exclusive practices ingrained in past cataloging practices.

Margarita Vargas-Betancourt, Jessica L. English, Melissa Jerome and Angelibel Soto also write of inclusive discovery methods in “Contesting Colonial Library Practices of Accessibility and Representation”. The authors address bilingual access points and metadata creation as it relates to Caribbean and circum-Caribbean (described by the authors as “mainland regions that contain Caribbean culture” (p. 389)) collections and the institutional counterparts which maintain, host, and/or own them. To demonstrate a departure from the “conception of libraries as factories” (p. 406) view, the authors provide context surrounding a set of projects that are open access, based in shared governance, and have taken the next steps in developing a process for adding bilingual metadata. Some challenges the authors deconstruct include finding well-developed Spanish language subject headings and finding inconsistencies in existing Spanish metadata projects. In doing so they uncover the gaps in existing tools and practices, as well as a lack of inclusivity in the creation of metadata for collections (i.e., many of the sources they found were created by European and North American institutions, some institutions were described as not having the language skills available in-house to construct bilingual metadata, and so forth).

The volume contains an excellent index as well as a complete list of author bios. What seems to be missing is an acknowledgement of positionality from each author, and how the interplay of their race, background, status may affect their perspective and biases. Some authors seem

to speak from the perspective of the institution, while others in protest of it, which makes for an intriguing juxtaposition, but also reveals an at times timid movement toward reinvention. Though, on a more progressive note, many of the authors touch on post-custodial practices and the importance of supporting community archives, as well as the role archivists play in accountability of an institution, to recognize past discretions and not whitewash histories. Overall, this volume is insightful in terms of how special collections and archives have been sites of contestation or should be, and it offers a strong stepping-stone towards the practical restructuring of specific areas in the field. This title is recommended to practitioners working in the library information science field, with an emphasis on special collections and archives. Early professionals would benefit from the progressive outlooks put forth by each author, whereas mid to longtime professionals would surely be able to apply some of the practical solutions. Because the book ends up touching on so many aspects of cultural heritage (acquisition, descriptions, outreach, metadata, exhibition, preservation, and space) it may best be suited for the individual that is looking for a holistic review of the state of special collections and archives, as related to social justice, critical librarianship, and ethics.

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