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## Review: Defining a Discipline: Archival Research and Practice in the Twenty-First Century

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*Defining a Discipline: Archival Research and Practice in the Twenty-First Century*. Edited by Jeanette A. Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2020. 322 pp.)

*Defining a Discipline* is an essay collection that, according to editors Jeannette A Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel, “focuses on the themes that [Richard J.] Cox fostered throughout his career, thereby both recognizing and contributing to his vision.”(xi) The 18 essays, contributed by Cox’s colleagues and formal doctoral students, are grouped under four themes: (One) Accountability and Evidence; (Two) Ethics and Education; (Three) Archival History; and (Four) Memory. The essays are largely case studies which either illustrate, contextualize, or apply Cox’s ideas. In each section, there is also a “commentary” essay, which reviews the main points of the other essays in the section and provides structure to the volume by noting explicitly how they all fit together. Both the pragmatic nature of the case studies as well as the commentary essays contribute to making this volume an excellent choice for graduate level archival studies courses: a feature which was likely a deliberate decision that, in and of itself, honors Cox’s deep commitment to professionalizing the archives profession through higher education.

Most of the essays collected under theme one, “ignited by Richard Cox’s insistence that we interpret accountability beyond a legal purview” (Caswell et al, 59) warn of how “social stratification about whose knowledge counts” can lead to a silenced voices through various “promotion[s] of ‘facts’ over meaning, (Wallace, 11),” and emphasize the need to analyze “contingencies that make the record trustworthy or evidentiary” (Duff and Sporn, 29). However, Duranti, who opens her discussion with a nod to Jenkinson, focuses on the problem of how the value of information is “no longer...determined by the authoritativeness or reliability of the source or the aggregation in which the information resides, but rather by the breadth of its circulation.”(Duranti, 65) She argues that, in this post-truth era of rampant misinformation and disinformation, there is a great need to reinstate trust in the archive as an institution by coming up with ways to better document the provenance of electronic records. Though she acknowledges early on that official documentation can be falsified, doctored, or shaped to suit a particular narrative (as Wallace’s case study of US war crimes in Vietnam illustrates), the current of her thought seems to run counter to that of the other essayists: where they seek to problematize the authority of those who traditionally create the documentary record, Duranti seeks to reinforce that authority. The contrast of ideas in this theme appear to illuminate a Janus-faced conception of both evidence and accountability that looms over postmodern archival practice. This is a contradiction that Macneil, in Theme Two, articulates directly when she observes that archivists have an “ethical obligation... [to help patrons navigate] the disjunction between the different understandings of records as reliable evidence of the past and as a partial—that is, incomplete and biased—construction of the future.” (86)

Other essayists in Theme Two also grapple with this contradictory conception of evidence in many respects. Mattern’s case study could be usefully discussed alongside Duranti’s work, since it arguably details the transparency problems that can happen when there is too much trust in American institutions. To be more specific, Mattern performs a kind of postmortem on NARA’s actions during the controversy surrounding Hilary Clinton’s use of a private email server, revealing that NARA determines if a particular agency needs a formal records inspection by examining self-reports and self-assessments from the agencies under its purview. This essentially

means that NARA monitors legal compliance by asking agencies if they believe they are compliant: a revelation that highlights the importance of examining government records with a critical eye. The other two essays in Theme Two build on the work accomplished by this case study by providing concrete examples of how to critically engage with archival holdings and meaningfully recognize how various the potential meanings constructed from any given individual encounter with records can really be. MacNeil suggests that the concept of records as evidence is most useful when recognized as a metaphor, and understood alongside two other metaphors: archival fonds as texts constructed by a variety of authors, and records as narratives that are “closely linked to the formation of individual and social identity” (86). Gilliland and Carbone, in many ways, elaborate upon MacNeil’s essay as they discuss the “fourth dimension of the records continuum: Pluralize” (126). They are interested in the way that “the archive and its individual contents change physically and intellectually as a result of handling, interpretation, and ‘making,’ and encounters with the archive,” and how they themselves achieved this pluralization by designing UCLA graduate courses that engaged students with archival holdings in unique ways: including literally utilizing them in the creation of art installments.

Theme Three continues in this vein with Mattock’s application of Mark Hatch’s Makerspaces to a case study centered on the Paper Tiger Television archives. This essay is a weaker entry in comparison to others in the collection. She criticizes the way in which the Paper Tiger Television archives were processed. However, her critique appears to rest on an impractical conception of original order that is too literal.

More notable inclusions in Theme Three are works by Sinn and Galloway. Galloway gives a detailed case study of how the institution that she works at gradually embraced technology in order to more effectively manage records, even giving the names and brands of particular pieces of technology and discussing how her institution used them, and whether she found them effective tools or not. In contrast, Sinn’s essay is very much a snapshot of the present, relating how the No Gun Ri has formed its own community archive—interestingly, in defiance of current recommendations for how archivists should be enabling communities to create their records.

Additional, thought-provoking encounters with communities are explored in Theme Four. Alcalá relates how videographers documenting fiesta’s in el rancho act as primary sources of the city’s documentary history, shaping it by accepting requests from their subjects that are meant to ensure the communications are optimized for sharing with diasporic members. Sutherland details how the inability of slaves to own property prior to the civil war has continued reverberations today, often resulting in African American families losing land that they have lived on for over a century. Bastian’s contribution to Theme Four in some ways explains the significance of Alcalá and Sutherland’s case studies in more detail. Bastian discusses on the relationship between memory and archives and the way that memory is collectively, not individually determined, in the archive since “one of the tasks of archivists is to turn cultural memory into national narrative.” She concludes, much in the same vein as MacNeil and Gilliland and Carbone, that memory is both “process and product” of processing activities.

The final essay in the collection—written by O’Toole, who co-authored *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* with Richard J. Cox—ties together all the essays that came before it by tracing

out a short biography of Cox's professional life, punctuated emphatically by the very ideas that the authors of this essay have been nodding to and sometimes quoting directly from.

If you are already an archivist, you are likely already familiar with the core concepts of this volume. There is nothing markedly innovative in these essays. But that is kind of the point. The authors wanted engagement with and elaboration of ideas that Cox had already put out into the ether, and this collection does an excellent job of accomplishing just that in an accessible way. It grapples with rather advanced critical ideology sometimes, but the authors do a good job of explaining concepts that might not be common knowledge to archival professionals, while also recognizing what concepts do not need in depth explanation for graduate level readers. If you are introducing graduate level students to the archive, or if you want to deepen your knowledge and thoughtfully ruminate on the application of Cox's ideas by other archivists, this collection is for you.

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