

9-16-2024

Review: Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives

Blynné Olivieri Parker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Olivieri Parker, Blynné, "Review: Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives," *Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists* 40 no. 1 (2024) .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol40/iss1/4>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Active Journals at DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Kennesaw State University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@kennesaw.edu.

Review: *Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives*.
Edited by Gesa E. Kirsch, Romeo Garcia, Caitlin Burns Allen, and Walker P. Smith (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2023), 338 pp.

This volume, edited by academics in the field of rhetoric, is a strong contribution to the field of critical archival studies and accomplishes the editors' goal of positioning archives as a "unique opportunity to contemplate an-other set of choices, options, and epistemic obligations and responsibilities" (2).

Organized in three parts—concepts; theories and methodologies; and practice and pedagogy—the contributed essays offer readers an array of perspectives on how to consider the archive as place and space, how to confront the existence or absence of archival materials in the context of colonial history, race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, social class, ability, and religion, and lastly on how to reimagine and/or critically analyze archives.

Essays in the first part of the book probe the concepts that influence the arrangement and description of materials, as well as the human impulses and emotions surrounding archival practice and research. In one essay, Dr. Jean Bessette considers the concept of "archival stories" that include the archival site as a story in and of itself. An essay by Dr. Walker P. Smith in the second part succinctly describes a method for rhetoricians to approach archival research. Instead of seeing archives as merely holding evidence, understanding archives also as an epistemological opportunity to explain how the items reflect the "straightening, colonizing, and universalizing tendencies of the stories that emerge" (169).

Part three of the book is the most engaging section of the volume because it provides examples of how to re-consider archives through creative imaginings and analytical exercises. The chapter by Dr. Liz Rohan, a professor of Composition and Rhetoric at the University of Michigan, describes a scrapbook she invented based upon the papers of an early twentieth century University of Michigan student. Rohan used the scrapbook as a tool to supplement images from the original papers with other photographs, documents, and contextual details to tell a fuller story of this working-class woman's college experience. Rohan's assembled creative project, as a means to reexamine and contemporaneously engage with a historical person via proxy, "realistically introduces new methods for inquiry when considering a system under which a person *might not* [emphasis in original] produce a text—in this case, a scrapbook—and what perspective on human experience might be lost as a result, a method for bearing witness to the themes of a subject's life" (189-190).

I would recommend *Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives* to archivists for the following reasons: First because it offers insight into decolonial, anticolonial, antiracist, Indigenous, queer, and communal perspectives and approaches to archival research. Second, because this publication has useful and creative ideas for teaching students to reconsider archival sites and practices, and to reach beyond what seems settled or legitimized as evidence to imagine what history and public memory could be.

Blynne Olivieri Parker, Head of Learning and Research Services (interim)
University of West Georgia