

silencing voices of dissent. It is about censorship and coercion; the imposition of conformity and misery; the denial of freedom.

Unalterably opposed to all forms of bigotry, we say:
Hands Off Amiri Baraka!
Long live the unfettered imagination!
An injury to One is an injury to All!

For the Surrealist Movement in the United States:

Gale Ahrens, Jennifer Bean, Jen Besemer, Ronnie Burk, Richard Burke, Susan Burke, Dennis Cooper, Laura Corsiglia, Jayne Cortez, Guy Ducornet, Schlechter Duvall, Mel Edwards, Joseph Allen Fees, Sarah Frances, Brandon Freels, Beth Garon, Paul Garon, Robert Green, Jan Hathaway, Joseph Jablonski, Ted Joans, Robin D. G. Kelley, Don LaCoss, Mary Low, Tristan Meinecke, Casandra Stark Mele, Morgan Miller, Anne Olson, Ruth Oppenheim-Rothschild, Irene Plazewska, David R. Roediger, Larry Romano, Franklin Rosemont, Penelope Rosemont, M. K. Shibek, Louise Simons, Tamara L. Smith, Debra Taub, Jordan West, Joel Williams.

The following individuals — poets, writers, artists, musicians, teachers, editors, and activists — have expressed their solidarity with the foregoing statement, and asked to have their signatures added to it: Ernest Allen, Ron Allen, Miekal And, Derrick Bell, Max Blechman, Stephanie Booher, Doreen C. Bowens, Daan Boyer, John Bracey, Lisa Brock (School of the Art Institute, Chicago), Dennis Brutus, Paul Buhle, Ed Bullins, Vinie Burrows (Permanent UN rep for Women's Int'l Democratic Federation), Carolyn A. Butts (*African Voices Magazine*), Alexander Cockburn, Carlos Cortéz Koyokuikatl, Polly A. Connelly (organizer, United Auto Workers, ret.), Maria Damon (University of Minnesota), Susan G. Davis, Dave Dellinger, Diane di Prima, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, Howard Dyckoff, Patricia Eakins (ed., *Frigate: The Transverse Review of Books*), Katie Eppich, Martin Espada, Torvald Faegre, DuEwa M. Frazier (CEO, Lit Noire Publishing), Chris Funkhouser, Nicole Henares Garland, John Higginson, Steve Garabedian, Regie Gibson, Stephanie Gilman, Maurice Greenia, Jr., Michael Gregory, Tyree Guyton, Mary Ann Hansen, Elaine Harger (*Progressive Librarian*), James V. Hatch, Patrick Herron, Herbert Hill, Amy Hufnagel, Noel Ignatiev, Michael James (*Heartland Journal*), Joseph Jarman, Carolyn Karcher, Marie Kazalia, Joel Kovel, Kari Lydersen, Harry Magdoff (co-editor, *Monthly Review*), Clive Matson, Deborah Meadows (Calif. Polytechnic State U., Pomona), David Meltzer, Naeema Muhammad (Black Workers for Justice, NC), Saladin Muhammad (Black Workers for Justice, NC), Sheila Nopper, Mark Nowak (ed., *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*), Rob O'Brien (ed., *ache magazine*), Alix Olson, Jim O'Neal (founding ed., *Living Blues*), Simon J. Ortiz, Martin Paddio, Robert Penny (founder, Kuntu Writers' Workshop, Pittsburgh), Eric Perkins, Elizabeth Peterson, Utah Phillips, Peter Rachleff, Margaret Randall, Adrienne Rich, Henry Rosemont, Jr., JoAnn Rosemont, Mark Rosenzweig (Councilor at Large, American Library Association), John Ross, Ron Sakolsky, Sonia Sanchez, David Sands, Archie Shepp, John J. Simon, John Sinclair, James Smethurst, Gary Snyder, John Starrs, Dan Stern, Nelson Stevens, John Stevenson, William Strickland, Rodrigo Toscano, Askia Touré, Tony Menelik Van Der Meer, Joseph Verilli, Lise Vogel (Rider University, Lawrenceville, NJ), Darryl Lorenzo Wellington, Christopher Winks.

BOOK REVIEWS

***Vandals in the Stacks? A Response to Nicholson Baker's Assault on Libraries*, by Richard J. Cox, Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002.**

Review & commentary by Lincoln Cushing

Poking a Hornet's Nest

Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold*, published in 2001, was a provocative analysis of how certain library policies and practices had profoundly negative consequences on public access to the content of historical documents in print. The book unleashed a firestorm within the library and archive community. Although a few librarians defended Baker's premises and criticisms, the majority were angry at what was perceived as an unwarranted and ill-informed attack on the profession. Numerous articles, letters, and book reviews were devoted to critiquing the book and denouncing the author. *Vandals* is the first book devoted entirely to extending this defense of librarianship.

The nature of the library community's response to *Double Fold* has been remarkable, and I would suggest that much could be learned about the profession by analyzing these reviews. Before Richard Cox's book came along, I noticed that virtually all other articles and reviews boiled down to the following commonalities:

- Hostility towards anyone making criticisms of the profession.
- Hostility towards Mr. Baker as an outsider.
- A begrudging acknowledgement that many of the points Mr. Baker makes are true, or at least worth consideration.
- The viewpoint that Mr. Baker's suggestions, though well-intentioned, are simply impractical.

Unfortunately, despite its length, *Vandals* proves to be no different. Like other critics within the profession, the argumentative escalation begins with the title. Barbara Quint's scathing review in June 2001 *Searcher* was "Don't Burn Books! Burn Librarians!" and Cox's provocative title comes from a review of *Double Fold*, not from anything actually written or said by Baker.

Cox's Main Criticisms

A professional archivist, Mr. Cox first goes to certain lengths to explain how *Double Fold* impacts his particular profession. Although he correctly castigates Baker for sloppiness in conflating the two fields in *Double Fold* (p. 21), the unfortunate awkward stylistic consequence in *Vandals* is that throughout the book almost every instance of title or institution is described as "librarians and archivists" and "libraries and archives."

Mr. Cox's main thesis is that Nicholson Baker is an arrogant, ill-informed high-profile outsider who got enormous public attention by taking cheap shots at the library profession for self-serving reasons. Time after time he challenges Baker's motives and integrity. "That Baker, a non-librarian and non-archivist displaying a remarkable lack of understanding about what these institutions and their professionals do, should get so much credibility..." (p. 6); "Nicholson Baker might think of himself as a Greek hero, calling others to join him in his epic quest to save America's past." (p. 103). "This chapter considers how Baker considers the misguided intentions of libraries and archives, perhaps because he is worried about the future of his own publications." (p. 7)

Consistent with previous defenses from the profession, Mr. Cox resorts to hyperbole, unsubstantiated charges, and putting words in Baker's mouth. Two of the most persistent criticisms have to do with the definition of what to save and the description of whom to blame. The first characterizes Baker's position as being "*all originals ought...to be saved.*" (p. 16, italics mine); this is stated over and over again in various ways: "Third, a major theme of *Double Fold* is that *everything* should be saved..." (p. 2); "...his arguments suggest that all newspapers have to be kept in original format and that libraries and archives are really little more than warehousing operations." (p. 7); "Baker believes that all originals must be saved..." (p. 104); "Baker wants *every* book to continue to exist somewhere..." (p. 149). The fact is, Baker consistently denies taking this extreme position.

The second point, that Baker's targets are "librarians and archivists" (pp. 2, 18). At every opportunity, Cox makes it clear that *Double Fold* disparages librarians at all levels. "Librarians and archivists are being attacked in the very area they thought they had gained substantial public support, the preservation of our documentary heritage." (p. 15). "...Baker believes that librarians and archivists were involved in a great effort to deceive the American public." (p. 104). "...Baker does not present a true vision or try to

engage anyone in debate; instead, he simply indicts librarians and archivists in a manner that does not elevate discussion..." (p. 123). "...America's librarians (and archivists) need to realize that they are under siege from many quarters because the public does not understand what they or their institutions really do. It is an attack started by Baker in the early 1990's when he noticed the destruction of the old library card catalogs." (p. 125). Oddly enough, this characterization is inconsistent with the facts as well as some of Cox's own observations. As anyone can tell from a careful reading of *Double Fold*, this is not what Baker really says. *Double Fold* is not an attack on the entire profession, or even of line-staff librarians. It is a serious, impassioned, and yes, occasionally overstated critique of high-level institutional policies and policy makers. It is only when quoting *Double Fold* that Cox finds himself forced to use Baker's true phrasing – "Here we see, of course, the same formula that he uses in *Double Fold*, the misguided work of library administrators against the common sense of maintaining what anybody can see is valuable." (p. 130); again in quoting *Double Fold* "...the removal of the concrete word 'books' from the library's statement of purpose is exactly the act that allows misguided administrators to work out their hostility toward printed history..." (p. 133) – this, just after a line that states that "Baker also depicted librarians as deceitful." Again, "... but he places far more emphasis on misguided decisions by library administrators..." (p. 144).

Finally, there are several issues raised in *Double Fold* that one expects to see soundly rebutted, and are not. These include the main premise of the book (brittle books and the weak science behind their definition), the undue penetration of commercial interests in library policies, and the case for improper "conspiracy" between the Library of Congress and post-Cold War defense research agencies. The first Cox dismisses with the statement that "In asserting that newsprint will last indefinitely, Mr. Baker is overlooking several decades of scientific research that contradicts the linchpin of his argument." (p. 67), yet he does not provide any reference to documentation that supports this. The second issue is ignored entirely, and the notion that Library of Congress policies might have been driven by anti-communism and CIA-bred secrecy is tossed away with the statement that "(even if he does not use the [conspiracy] word)" (p. 150) "*Double Fold* is not a mere critique of the preservation methods of librarians; instead, it looks for a conspiracy (and looks and looks)" including "...constant references to the CIA, federal funding, and other like features of the preservation movement..." (p. 40).

Once one reads beyond the knee-jerk defensiveness, however, Cox does offer some observations that should be valuable to the archival and library professions.

- He faults the profession for not doing a better job at educating the public, and suggests that lack of public relations about our challenges and limitations restricts our effect on public opinion. This may not be an easy task, since "...they lack the profile and literary agents if not the time and the motivation." (p. 13).
- He notes that more technical research and policy should be devoted to substantive issues. "...What is the evidence to suggest that microfilming complete runs of newspapers did in fact enhance scholarship and research more broadly defined? ...In responding to Baker, archivists and librarians have to be more serious about studying what they do and communicating the nature of their work to researchers, funders, and policymakers." (p. 63).
- New technical solutions may have negative consequences. Baker's criticisms were not that microfilming was "bad", but that: 1) it was based on poor science, 2) commercial interests played too strong a role, and 3) policymakers were not accountable. Cox quotes Baker, "'There is nothing intrinsically wrong with microfilming...'"(p. 74), then goes on to say "One point on which I agree with Nicholson Baker regards his criticism of the zeal by which librarians and archivists may have embraced microfilming as *the* solution to the to the preservation problems they face with printed sources." (p. 102). "Noting that digitally reproducing newspapers would be very expensive today, Baker also adds that when the technology improves and costs go down that the major problem may be the lack of originals to digitize. It is a compelling point..." (p. 182).
- There are unresolved or partially-resolved public policy issues within the profession that must be addressed. One major one is the balance of how to select, and by whom? "The problem with the question of newspaper microfilming is that neither the library nor preservation communities have been as open about developing criteria for selection, until very recently." (p. 96).

Cox even acknowledges the potentially positive value that *Double Fold* debate can have on the profession. "Despite whatever one's personal reactions may be to the book, archivists and librarians need to take it very seriously." (p. 105). Cox continues, "We should be thankful, however, for such writings that jolt the library profession out of its complacency about its own past and its own records and artifacts." (p. 144); "But for this book to serve such a purpose [breathe some new life into tired old debates] it requires that librarians and archivists to speak up and round out the debate. Librarians and archivists need to admit their mistakes, while trying to make the public and policymakers understand *why* these mistakes may have been made as well as their overall mission regarding the documentary heritage." (p. 174). Cox's conclusion is perhaps the most backhandedly gracious point made in the whole book – "Perhaps it will take such a rant from outside of our community to wake us up about what and how we need to communicate." (p. 194).

The Task Ahead

Cox is refreshingly self-deprecating when he states at the outset "I expect my critics will come from *within* the library and archives community since I have little name recognition outside of it." (p. 6). The issue of librarian culture, and our own sense of fit to the broader world, is one of the issues raised by both *Double Fold* and *Vandals*. I would suggest that the deep responses evoked by *Double Fold* reflect a character feature of the profession – that we, as a group, are not used to criticism, and don't handle it very well. I think that is a fair characterization that most librarians have a self-perception as helpful public servants, much like firefighters, park rangers, or nurses. Nobody goes into this profession to make money or become famous. So when anyone, especially and outsider, raises criticisms of the work we do our response is to circle the wagons. Cox, despite his intentions of taking the moral high ground, unfortunately fails by resorting to character assassination and reflexive defensiveness.

I find this response to be troubling and ultimately counterproductive. Baker raised many substantive issues, from public accountability to sloppy science. It is our task to rise to the challenge of continuing the debate – not by trivializing it or dismissing it, but by carefully analyzing the issues and asking for better answers. Our profession would be all the more vital if we did a little more listening and a lot less complaining.