

Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada

Edited by Dominique Daniel and Amalia Levi. (Sacramento,
CA: Litwin Books, 2013). ISBN 978-1-936117-85-7

Reviewed by Lincoln Cushing

Nothing about us, without us, is for us. - Slogan popularized in
New Orleans during relief efforts for hurricane Katrina, 2005.

Archiving is but one step in the life cycle of a cultural document. A book or a flyer gets produced for an event or to analyze a subject; it gets distributed, later on it gets collected, and eventually works its way into some sort of a repository for care and processing. Once cataloged and made accessible, others can see it, use it, draw inspiration from it, and repeat the process.

This book addresses the archival role in this process where the subject material has been marginalized in mainstream institutions and values. There are many ways that happens – through discrimination in gender, or politics, or sexual identification – but the “wrong to be righted” here is ethnicity.

There are two major reasons why this subject, and this book, exists.

The first is the broad Civil Rights movement that swept this country in the early 1960s, a groundswell of activism that demanded that American “democracy” live up to its promise. Archivists were not immune to this call, one politically suppressed for 20 years and not significantly raised in the U.S. since the golden age of the Works Progress Administration and the Federal Arts Project of the 1930s.

The 34th annual meeting (1970) of the Society of American Archivists was held at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C. 300 people – about 60% of

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■ KEYWORDS: Archives; Archival practice; Marginalization; Cultural exclusion; Neutrality; Activism; Activist archivists; Historiography; Ethnicity.

those attending the conference - crowded into a momentous session called “The Archivist and the New Left.” David J. Delgado wrote this report in the January, 1971, issue of *The American Archivist*:

Howard Zinn, professor of government at Boston University, delivered a paper entitled “The Activist Archivist.” Professor Zinn stressed the need for archivists, like other professional groups, to abandon the screen of professionalism and neutrality in order to humanize their ordinary work and not to limit their concern with political issues to their spare time. He denounced those scholars who by their silence and professed neutrality “buttress the existing social order and values” of society and called for archivists to collect and preserve papers and to tape record experiences documenting ordinary lives in addition to those of the exceptional—the “lower” classes as well as the prominent, for example, women as well as men.

The movement that began with disenfranchised black people had opened the gates for a broad swath of others – women, gays and lesbians, Native Americans, and more. The genie had been let out of the bottle and could never be stuffed back in. A new generation of archivists began to rethink their profession.

The second reason has to do with new technologies and practices. In the past 20 or so years libraries and archives have struggled with declining financial support, affecting everything from acquisitions to processing to staffing. But at the same time, new tools have emerged that in some ways compensate for that loss. Among other things, the acts of documenting, cataloging, and sharing have all been made dramatically cheaper and more powerful by such technologies as digital recording and the World Wide Web.

Identity Palimpsests shares contemporary examples where committed American and Canadian archivists are using their skills in the service of living ethnic archives. “Ethnic” covers a lot of ground. One expects to read about engagement with First Nations or Puerto Ricans, but one also learns of the challenges of collections serving Finnish-American and German Jews.

All of these practitioners are aware of the difficulty in using archives – institutions that have traditionally largely served the elite – as dynamic springboards for supporting and empowering disenfranchised communities.

Ben Alexander (Queens College) describes the challenge thusly:

...Contemporary history is being equally shaped by new archival practices that allow for a reinterpretation (re-remembering) of familiar historical records and by technological advances in the migration of material evidences into complex digital matrices, which are reshaping the foundations of established historiographical practices in the archival tradition... (p. 187)

As with any good resource, this book examines both effective practices as well as problems.

Greg Bak and Tina Mai Chen (University of Manitoba) point out the double-edged sword of technology and its application, as well as the challenge of drawing in citizen-archivists:

Familiarity with Flickr, YouTube, Wikipedia, and other social media technologies provide the illusion that organizing information is a simple process, a mere matter of tags and Google.” (p. 218) and warn “It is dangerous to uncritically promote and celebrate digital archives as community engagement”. (p. 219)

And M. Mark Stolarik (University of Ottawa) declaims business decisions (or political decisions masked as business decisions) that undercut socially valuable collections:

I am distressed by the continuing rejection of material artifacts by libraries and archival institutions. A case in point is the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies. Even though I left the Institute on a solid foundation in 1991, my successor...tired of the incessant fundraising necessary... and with the approval of the Trustees negotiated a merger with the larger Historical Society of Pennsylvania. [As a consequence of the merger] the HSP decided to de-accession the material artifacts...and the 4,395 artifacts that the Balch Institute had collected and exhibited for about 30 years were dispersed to other museums or auctioned off. (p. 65)

Despite this sad tale (a version of which can be drawn from almost all repositories) Stolarik still defends the huge value of such collections and their caretakers:

...All scholars in the USA and Canada should be grateful for the work of the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota and the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies...They contain thousands of linear feet of materials that document most of America’s ethnic groups. These archives have been processed and preserved by professional librarians and archivists and are readily accessible for research purposes.

The title and recurring motif of this book is a palimpsest, an early form of information media recycling. It’s similar to the visual art phenomenon of pentimento. When parchment was the medium upon documents were prepared, it was not uncommon to scrape off old content in order to add new text and illustration – but traces of the original inscription would often remain, elusive

reminders of what had been before. This book offers hope that those traces can be restored and elevated to their legitimate place in history and social practice.