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Review of *Engaging with Records and Archives: Histories and Theories*

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Engaging with Records and Archives: Histories and Theories

Edited by Fiorella Foscarini, Heather MacNeil, Bonnie Mak, and Gillian Oliver.
London: Facet Publishing, 2016. 236 pp. Softcover and EPUB. \$85.00US, £64.95UK.
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This edited volume of papers from the Seventh International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA 7) draws together the work of a diverse set of scholars. Coming from different countries, different recordkeeping practices, and different historical perspectives, these authors offer a multifaceted discussion of archives and their place in our lives. The editors come from similar

backgrounds as faculty in information programs. Heather MacNeil is a professor and Fiorella Foscarini is an associate professor, both in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto. Bonnie Mak is associate professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in a joint appointment to the School of Information Sciences and the Program in Medieval Studies. Gillian Oliver is associate professor in Information Management at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. The similar backgrounds of the editors lend to the book's thematic consistency while engaging voices from both academia and from archival practice.

The theme of the I-CHORA conference is reflected in the book's title: *Engaging with Records and Archives*. The editors note that ". . . this suggests that *everyone*, not only archives specialists, would benefit from a deeper and better informed engagement with archival objects and practices as they become increasingly engrained in our daily lives . . ." (p. xii). Engagement with archival objects and practices takes many forms, expressed in everything from contextual analysis of practice (such as data modeling) to the exploration of archival silences and underrepresented voices.

Essays in part 1, "Rethinking Histories and Theories," open a broad discussion about the place of theory in the understanding of archives and seek to apply theory to the historical record. The essays are distinct and stand on their own merits, but part 2, "Engaging Records and Archives," presents studies of records in practice, with a truly informational approach that speaks to the theoretical frameworks laid out in part 1. The result is a text that hangs together as a cohesive work, in spite of the fact that it represents the perspectives of many different scholars.

The strength of the book lies in its very diversity. The scope of the scholarly basis provides professionals and scholars with an abundance of thought-provoking ideas. Jeannette Bastian's opening chapter, "Moving the Margins to the Middle: Reconciling 'the Archive' with the Archives," is one of the strongest essays in the collection and without question the most thought-provoking. Bastian's exploration of "the archive" allows us to consider whether a new theoretical framework is emerging in our profession. Bastian points out that archival theory is shifting, becoming more inclusive and multidisciplinary, where the "archival turn" has expanded the definition of the archive ". . . beyond the text to include memory, witnessing, materiality, performance, art—a broad and deep spectrum of what can be 'known and not known'" (p. 7). Bastian evokes a broad concept of "the archive," offering us an expanded concept of the archival record through both technology and a broader understanding of the concept of the historical record. Bastian addresses the fact that archivists are not always comfortable with this expanded notion of the archive—we worry that ". . . the theoretical archives obscure(s) and undervalue(s) the real work of archivist . . ." where ". . . the scholars of the archive have not only reappropriated the archives but also have relegated archivists to a subordinate position . . ." (p.

13). But Bastian makes the case that archivists have every reason to embrace the expanded idea of “the archive” and to become “actors and collaborators” in our new information society. I completely agree with this conclusion, not only because Bastian makes such a clear and convincing argument, but because of the content in the remainder of the book.

I spend so much time with Bastian’s essay because it sets the stage perfectly for all of the essays that follow. Each essay in part 1 adds layers to our understanding of how influential archival theory is, whether it is Juan Ilerbaig considering the impact of Muller, Feith, and Fruin¹ on such potentially unrelated fields as natural history, linguistics, and architecture; Jonathan Furner considering data modeling and archival description; or Marlene Manoff and Elizabeth Shepherd considering very different types of silences in the archival record (digital memory and women archivists, respectively). The underlying theme of part 1 is that archival theory itself invites creative exploration of the way in which it can be used in a broader understanding of both archival systems and related professions.

Part 2, then, shows how individuals and archivists have engaged the archival record. This section has the potential to be simply a series of case studies, but each essay deepens the discussion of use and practice to explore some of the key theoretical elements presented in part 1. So, for example, when Stefano Gardini discusses how records have been used in one specific archive in Genoa, the lens that he uses expands beyond the description of the archive and how the records in it are used, and moves to the understanding that archivists, scholars, and historians use the records differently, and that “. . . it is impossible for archives to maintain their shape perpetually unchanged” (p. 124). Melanie Delva and Melissa Adams consider questions of access to archival materials, the power implicit in the creation of archives, the ethical responsibility of archivists, and ultimately the potential for collaborative use to reframe how archives establish relationships with communities whose records we collect. Charles Jeurgens and Paul Lihoma explore the history of recordkeeping in the Dutch East Indies and Malawi, respectively, and both find that while access to archival materials is critical for government accountability to the broader citizenry, access and accountability have not always been the primary goals of those in positions of power. The final two chapters, Magdalena Wiśniewska’s discussion of examples of community archiving in Poland and Sian Vaughan’s discussion of artists interacting with the archive and creating their own archives, speak directly to the idea of archivists as collaborators and actors—where the imperative is that the archivist think differently about collecting, description, and access.

Ultimately, the theories and their implementation in practical case studies are interesting and significant. It’s worth recalling that many of these discussions have their roots in the archival literature surrounding social memory which was

published in the late 1990s, and in the discussions of archives and their power structures that took place in the early 2000s. What feels “new” about these essays and approaches is the growing understanding of the *agency* of archivists and the professional acceptance of responsibility for that agency. This realization runs through all of the essays and speaks to our current professional climate.

Because this contemporary dialogue is underscored with historical research and a firm grounding in the archival literature, this book will be welcome reading for archival professionals, educators, and students. The bibliographies that accompany the essays provide fodder for additional reading lists and research. Most important, however, is that this cohesive collection of essays, in just over 230 pages, asks us as professionals to consider how we continue to push the boundaries of archival theory into the action of archival practice.

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NOTE

¹ S. Muller, J. A. Feith, and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003), <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015057022447;view=1up;seq=1>.