

It sets new standards for scholarship and brings to the fore the importance of examining indigenous culture in their native contexts. —*Julie K. Tanaka, Arizona State University*

Mary Kandiuk, ed. *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation*. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2020. Softcover, 520p. \$35.00 (ISBN 9781634000628).

In the LIS and Archival Studies disciplines, attempts to operationalize theoretical frameworks that bring to center critical interpretations of social justice, intersectionality, and EDI (equity, diversity, and inclusion) are frequently covered in professional literature focusing on institutional policies and programmatic enhancements in real world settings. Much of this discourse incorporates critical theory as both frame and justification, attempting to link ideas that often originate in other disciplines to relevant areas of institutional and professional practice. The chapters in *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation* demonstrate the limits of this theory-laden approach as both rhetorical device and impactful process, while still providing a raft of instructive cases that might serve as models to make our institutions and profession more diverse, equitable, and justice-focused.

Adding to its growing list of titles emphasizing critical theory, social justice, and marginalized voices in the LIS field, Library Juice Press (<http://libraryjuicepress.com>) offers this new volume that “explores the reinterpretation and resituating of archives and special collections,” seemingly in response to these intellectual frameworks, and with the acknowledgement that archives and special collections are often a product of the phenomena these frameworks critique (colonialism, white supremacy, masculinity, Eurocentrism, heteronormativity, neoliberal capitalism, and so on). The collection weighs in at a hefty 520 pages and appears to be the only one of the publisher’s long-form titles focusing on archives and special collections. The chapters most closely adhere to a case study format and run the gamut of operational topics in archives and special collections (mostly in academic settings) including appraisal and acquisitions, cataloging and metadata, public programs and services, and professional standards and ethics. However, these are not how-to guides based on empirical investigation, and any practical takeaways seem secondary to the conceptual critiques underpinning every chapter. In *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation*, we find out a lot about what is wrong with our institutions and why it is wrong from certain theoretical and experiential perspectives, but we do not discover a lot of solutions that might be applicable outside of the contexts discussed, much less to address the larger structural issues at play.

Several of the chapters attempt to work through various technical and administrative matters using a critical lens, including: creating more inclusive intellectual

and physical spaces for archives and special collections (chapters 4 and 5); deciding how and when to impose access restrictions on controversial or sensitive materials (chapter 6); applying justice-based ethical criteria to cataloging (chapter 8); building context and encouraging open discussion around the digitization of problematic collections or materials that exemplify (and thus risk contributing to) social and institutional power imbalances (chapters 11, 13); and ensuring ethical partnerships with donors from vulnerable or marginalized communities (chapter 17). Although all deal in some way with archives and libraries as expressions or embodiments of society's overarching power dynamics, some accounts approach this with a more explicit emphasis on positionality. For example, chapters 1 and 12 discuss ongoing issues of representation, repatriation, and participation in Indigenous and First Nations archival projects in the United States and Canada. Similarly, several chapters examine the Black experience in White majority archives and special collections environments, which reveal a dual tendency toward the commodification of Black voices and historical erasure (chapters 9 and 11), both of which hold serious implications for institutional reputation and trust (chapter 14). Others recount archival projects that seek to redress state authority and imperial malpractice in shaping the historical record, including Canadian nativist attacks on Indian migration (chapter 7), the brutal legacy of American colonial efforts in the Caribbean (chapter 15), and the World War II-era incarceration of Japanese Americans (chapter 16). The remaining chapters concern areas typically associated with the educational mission of academic archives and special collections, including critical information and archival literacy instruction (chapter 10) and outreach and collection development around specific community problems or subaltern groups (chapters 2 and 3).

The most compelling and persuasive portions of *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation* are when the authors successfully connect the multitude of theoretical perspectives without repeating straw man arguments against an unidentified cohort touting archival "neutrality"—a concept that has not been taken seriously in disciplinary discussions for decades—or offering breathless platitudes about "interrogation" and "disruption" simply by virtue of filtering prosaic matters through an ideological lens. This is not an attack on theory *per se*, nor is it a rejection that archives and special collections are, in fact, contested spaces. It is perfectly reasonable and even necessary to incorporate theoretical frameworks and intellectual strands from within and outside of LIS and Archival Studies. But it is not necessary to stuff as many of these into the narrative just to inflate the scale of accomplishment or nobility of purpose. There are several instances where the accounts seem more concerned with the charms of the author's wokeness and their command of semi-relevant discourse than with providing useful or clear insights. The result is often a jumble of oblique terminology, clumsy metaphors, and name dropping that seems more of a rote strategy to demonstrate intellectual rigor than

a genuine attempt to provide something of substance. In some instances, this stops the discussion in its tracks, especially when employed in the service of unfalsifiable claims or undocumented speculation. The effect is jarring and does not really add to a deeper understanding of the cases under discussion or their wider implications. It also detracts from the good work being reported.

Furthermore, even with all of the talk of the power bound up in archives and special collections, several of the chapters reveal how relatively powerless these entities are in the grand scheme of social or organizational activity. For instance, chapter 3 describes the efforts of a university special collections department to gather collections, participate in community discussions, and promote awareness around issues relevant to the local homeless population, which are all legitimately wonderful pursuits. However, the authors also assert that the professional role as archivists must remain compartmentalized from any personal or civic role as activists, seemingly to ensure larger institutional buy-in for their nascent efforts to reimagine special collections. This is not exactly the radical stance that much of the critical literature cited in this chapter advocates, but it does reflect the reality of institutional control and accountability with which most traditional archives and special collections must contend. In another instance (chapter 14), a university archives unit was ignored in campus-wide discussions on the memorialization of a complicated historical figure—a segregationist football coach and administrator—even though they could have provided essential historical context and might have contributed significantly to the decision-making process. The authors note the frustration among the campus archives and library cohort with not being invited to the table, and the missed opportunity to help facilitate a sense of rapprochement between current students of color and this problematic legacy. In these instances, and several others in this book, it does not become clear how any degree of critically-informed praxis within the relevant archives or special collections unit might produce more favorable outcomes for them or for those they seek to empower.

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Even if the theoretical exhortations of archival power far outstrip its actual reach and impact in the cases discussed, it does not mean that archivists and librarians should cease making such exhortations. Big ideas and big plans based around social justice concepts should inform the long view of archives and special collections. The recent proliferation of cases and analysis around the community archives movement, critical librarianship, and alternative epistemologies (often cited within these chapters) demonstrates a solid commitment to principles that seek to make the profession and the institutions they manage more equitable, inclusive, and justice-oriented. This scholarly communication has often been characterized by the inability or unwillingness to break totally free from the intellectual quagmire of postmodernism, but the maturation of this process (theory-informed practice) will hopefully serve as a proving ground for the best ideas and methods to flourish as the institutional landscape continues to evolve. In this regard, *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation* is a worthy addition to the conversation, even if at times it does not seem clear on the stakes involved. — Bradley J. Wiles, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee