

***Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives***, eds. G.E. Kirsch, R. García, C. Burns Allen, W.P. Smith, ISBN: 978-0-8093-38955 (paperback), Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale 2023, pp. 321

As an archivist at a public university in Oregon, I am actively engaged in my own institution's anti-racist archival work, with a focus on increasing the representation of under-documented communities in our collections, and I approached *Unsettling Archival Research...* with a practitioner's hope for new insights.

This book – emerging from contemporary North American scholarship that blends archival and rhetorical theory, often in direct conversation with scholars like Michelle Caswell or Howard Zinn – falls short of what I'd hoped it would be. While it succeeds as a pedagogical resource for improving archival research practices, some authors denounce the archival enterprise itself, resulting in a critique focused more on the institution than on a cohesive new vision.

## Chapter highlights

*Unsettling Archival Research...* opens by framing archives not as neutral repositories, but as sites shaped by power, access, and interpretation. The introduction situates the book in ongoing debates about archival theory and practice, urging historians and researchers to ask questions about how archival evidence is produced, described, and accessed. This is critically important work – and regular reflection on how and why we work with creators, materials, and users should be standard.

The first section, “Unsettling Key Concepts”, takes up this challenge by interrogating the stories we tell about archives and their functions. Jean Bessette critiques the tendency to narrate archives as tidy “protagonists”, while obscuring the messy realities of research, and sees transparency and vulnerability as

strengths. Wendy Hayden looks at the “rescue” narrative, exploring the complex power dynamic between the rescuer, the rescued, and the records. She challenges the idea of a lone, heroic researcher and instead advocates for linking academic theory with concrete, hands-on student work. Jackie M. James highlights how archival “gatekeeping” excludes trauma-related testimonies, raising ethical concerns about what gets preserved and when, especially in moments of crisis. Kalyn Prince looks at nostalgia as both a limiting and a useful tool, encouraging archivists to embrace these tensions to unsettle the legacy of colonialism in collections. Finally, Kathryn Manis and Patty Wilde interrogate the concepts of provenance, original order, and arrangement, showing how practical decisions about archival order carry ideological weight and choices challenge objectivity.

The second section, “Unsettling Research, Theory, and Methodology”, turns to case studies that show how marginalized voices and community-based archives confront institutional silences. Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Jessica A. Rose highlight the social justice orientation of community archives such as the AIDS Quilt and Southern Labor Archives, which reclaim and reframe community stories. María P. Carvajal Regidor emphasizes the importance of informal archives like those at student cultural centers, which complicate and expand institutional narratives. Sally F. Benson foregrounds prison newspapers and incarcerated authors, pushing for frameworks that recognize agency and resist institutional “flattening”, Pamela Takayoshi underscores the scarcity of and bias in records for institutionalized women, calling for creative, reparative, and intersectional approaches. Walker P. Smith critiques the “straightening” and colonizing impulses of archives, advocating decolonial and queer methodologies that resist erasure.

The final section, “Unsettling Praxis and Pedagogy”, explores the transformative potential of teaching with archives. Liz Rohan works with digital reconstructions of student scrapbooks to recover overlooked working-class experiences. Tarez Samra Graban examines classroom engagement with transnational collections of African women leaders, highlighting the politics of representation and dispersal. Jennifer Almjeld describes a student-built feminist digital archive that democratizes participation. Rebecca Schneider and Deborah Hollis critique institutional gatekeeping and the cultural biases of heritage collections, while Amy J. Lueck and Nadia Nasr advance feminist and discomfort-centered pedagogies as tools to unsettle dominant narratives.

Together, these chapters stress that archival encounters are never neutral: they are political, relational, and pedagogical acts. By unsettling archival stories,

methods, and teaching practices, the collection makes a case for reimagining archives as spaces of accountability, resistance, and possibility.

### **What works: provocations and practicality**

The book is at its best when it gets specific and speaks from a researcher perspective. Several essays offer powerful, deeply felt projects rooted in lived experience, from interrogating the colonial legacies in institutional collections to championing community-led archives. Essays on indigenous sovereignty, queer archives, and community-based initiatives offer powerful reminders of why it matters to critically examine our own roles, biases, and perspectives as researchers and archivists, as well as why it is important to challenge the notion of archives as neutral spaces. Chapters that showcase how to reorient power by centering informal archives, such as those documenting Latinx student culture, provide inspiring models for moving beyond extractive research toward genuine partnership. These contributions illuminate the entanglement of archival practice with power and identity, urging readers to reconsider traditional approaches.

Where the book truly shines is in its value as a practical teaching tool. Essays that model concrete classroom strategies – from creating digital Omeka exhibits to using a feminist conference to reframe archival work – are immediately useful. These chapters offer actionable methods for tying critical theory to practice, empowering educators to prepare the next generation of researchers to engage with archives thoughtfully, critically, and creatively. Several classroom activities were so compelling that I immediately shared them with History faculty and colleagues in my own department.

### **Where it falters: a view from the archivist's desk**

While the book's goals are commendable, its execution sometimes falters, particularly in its portrayal of the archival profession. Some chapters offer nuanced, collaborative visions, while others are aggressively critical. This inconsistency can be jarring for a reader trying to grasp the book's overall stance.

Much of what the book presents as “unsettling” – that records are subjective, that archivists make ethical choices, that silences exist – is foundational to modern

archival education and practice. Framing these concepts as radical revelations can feel like ignoring decades of professional discourse.

The book's theoretical ambitions often float free from the practical realities of archival labor, leading to critiques that feel paternalistic. For example, chapters might label archivists as "gatekeepers" while ignoring the complex daily constraints of budgets, staffing, and institutional politics they navigate. The book also champions community archives without fully reckoning with their long-term financial precarity in a boom-bust funding cycle. Critiques of core principles like provenance or original order can feel sweeping, occasionally conflating it with arrangement and overlooking the complex, practical reasons these principles exist to ensure records remain findable and understandable for all researchers.

This is particularly evident in the book's first section, which aims to "unsettle key concepts". The chapter critiquing provenance, for instance, fails to propose a systematic or scalable alternative framework. Instead, it offers a series of ad-hoc critiques of individual curatorial choices, implying that a more responsible practice is simply a more transparent and culturally sensitive one. While laudable, this call stops short of a true methodological intervention. Ultimately, the chapter's failure to clearly distinguish between the foundational principle of provenance and the specific practices of arrangement or *respect des fonds* prevents it from offering a coherent, functional alternative. Similarly, other chapters offer specific examples of problems with individual people or the presentation of individual collections, allowing them to represent the profession as a whole.

## Final take

*Unsettling Archival Research...* is an important and thought-provoking book, but not a perfect one. It offers both compelling inspiration and moments of exasperation. For researchers and educators ready to interrogate archival power and find creative pedagogical models, it is an essential read.

Archivists, however, may read the book with a mix of recognition, a degree of professional skepticism, and occasional frustration. It's a book that pushes us to be better, but it could have done so more effectively by engaging with our profession as a collaborator rather than an adversary. This call for professional grounding is especially critical in our current political climate where this work

faces targeted attacks, making the safety of our staff, researchers, and collections a pressing, unanswered question.

If you're committed to building more just and equitable archives, this book is worth your time – just be prepared to read it with a firm sense of your own professional grounding.

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