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Review of Defining a Discipline: Archival Research and Practice in the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Richard J. Cox

Edited by Jeannette A. Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2020. 304 pp. Softcover. \$55.00. ISBN: 978-1-9452-4627-2

Since the 1970s, Richard J. Cox has challenged archivists to think, act, and work as an academic discipline capable of standing on its own, independent of our allied library and history colleagues. Throughout his prodigious career as public servant, educator, and archival advocate, Cox routinely issued calls-to-action in hopes of maturing the field and reimagining its core philosophies. Anyone wishing to educate themselves about the profession, indeed anyone pursuing graduate training in hopes of a career with records, must grapple with the ideas put forward by this most prolific and influential of archival writers. For his pioneering service to the discipline, including his numerous published reviews, essays, articles, books, and blog posts, and his training of the next generation of archival thinkers and educators, the Society of American Archivists (SAA) made him a distinguished fellow in 1989. It would be difficult to overstate the impact of Cox's career on the 21st-century archival enterprise.

To acknowledge Cox's insight into the discipline and to build on four themes he championed during his career, twenty-three archival practitioners have contributed fourteen essays and four commentaries published in *Defining a Discipline*. The authors, drawn from the ranks of his doctoral students and fellow archival educator colleagues, wanted to honor Cox by further developing his concepts of accountability and evidence, ethics and education, archival history, and memory. While the essays are not directly about Cox, save for two which place him in context of actual events (Galloway 192-208 and O'Toole 277-287), the authors address his work on archival theory and practice and take those concepts in new directions. Jeannette A. Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel, who, like Cox, are both well-known archival authors and SAA fellows, ably edit the publication and provide an introductory essay. They state the volume's overall goal is to "answer Cox's call for new ideas, original scholarship, and creative tension as the archival discipline continues to develop and define itself" (xiv).

Those familiar with works published by SAA—spartan, easily navigable, annotated, and sufficiently indexed—will find *Defining a Discipline's* layout likely reminds them of textbooks purchased for graduate school. Very few tables and figures grace its text-heavy pages, although the work does admirably include five oil on canvas paintings by Cox, including the cover image, a hobby he took up in the mid-

2008. The four thematic sections of the book include three or four essays followed by a commentary that summarizes the previous work. Truthfully, it is a textbook that will likely see its heaviest use in library graduate schools in the United States and Canada. However, its format should not discourage archivists from reading it, especially those who may believe they have moved beyond schooling. The themes and resultant essays are varied enough to catch the attention of anyone working in the field, with case studies, historical reviews, and innovative thoughts on core archival concepts. If one is still unsure, I suggest reading the short commentaries of each section to gain the intellectual inspiration to dive into the longer chapters.

A review of the four themes discussed in the book is necessary, although space considerations preclude me from individually addressing every essay; thankfully, the four commentaries accomplish that task more than adequately. A few highlights from the text follow. The first theme broached in the book is accountability and evidence, where David A. Wallace focuses on the uncovering of atrocities and war crimes committed by United States military forces and their allies during the Vietnam War. In a climate of “contemporaneous non-recording, misrecording, and falsification of documents,” Wallace reminds archivists that military records alone are insufficient to render national accountability (20). Additionally, the power-laden dynamics built into the official narrative of U.S. military operations in Southeast Asia make reliance on that record exceedingly tentative, leaving archivists obligated to develop further affinity with “unofficial and unwelcome” evidentiary material (22). For accountability to happen, archivists themselves must be accountable to the acquisition of a robust archival record. To be sure, a “just memory” of what occurred in Vietnam must include the oral, unrecorded, experiential, and hidden, not just the records of the War Crimes Working Group at the U.S. National Archives (11). Wallace’s essay successfully walks readers through, as Heather Soyka notes (77-79), the intersection of institutional authority, the concept of trust, and the need for past and future accountability.

In “NARA and the Private Email Account,” Eleanor Mattern probes the agency’s response to the Hillary Clinton email scandal. Focused solely on the issue of records management, Mattern lays out the relevant federal laws, regulations, and guidelines at the heart of the matter and the tightrope NARA walked in its response to the situation, concluding that the official commentary was “measured, infrequent, and high-level” (113). While the author argues that NARA has since taken a more proactive response to improve understanding of record retention requirements by federal employees as a result of this highly publicized incident, clearly a heightened ethical approach, I am not sure the evidence supports her conclusion that it is doubtful a “public official of Clinton’s stature will make the same missteps in the future” (118). Unless there is a stronger response from NARA when a breach is discovered or reported, similar blunders seem inevitable.

Essays on the oral histories of No Gun Ri by Donghee Sinn and on the multi-media heavy Paper Tiger Archive at New York University by Lindsay Kistler Mattock both challenge archivists to examine how we have historically framed the content of

collections. Sinn, in describing the collecting of oral histories concerning the long unacknowledged massacre of civilians at No Gun Ri during the Korean War, asks archivists to ponder more studiously the internal and external dynamics of community documenting and remembering. She contextualizes the memory project and the struggle surrounding its creation, concluding with a complex question, “Do archivists have a place in collecting and preserving inclusively even when documentation may not serve (or perhaps may be opposed to) the community’s (or the active community members’) intents?” (169). In her essay, Kistler Mattock reminds us that archives are places of making, “a continual engagement with the materials of record creation,” even if that has not been the focus of our archival theory (176). Greater material literacy is critical as the archival praxis of processing, preserving, and providing access too often bifurcates collections, stripping out context because we slavishly focus on grouping by record and format types (185). This section on archival history forces us to investigate our theoretical and practical infrastructure in the hopes of improving the quality of our production.

The concluding section powerfully discusses memory, specifically with Tonia Sutherland’s essay. She invites practitioners to contemplate the consequences of state-sponsored archival institutions failing to develop strategies to collect and preserve oral records, testimonies, and traditions. The trauma wrought on African Americans due to a traditional unwillingness to develop alternative epistemologies concerning records, notably the validity of oral traditions, has seen a massive loss of their inherited property and wealth. Using the problems around heir property as an example, Sutherland builds the case that archivists must reject the idea of archival neutrality, consider the whiteness of our archival practice and theory in privileging the written text, and expand archival praxis to account for oral records. The era of our archival amnesty must close. I agree.

Two suggestions on what is otherwise a wonderful addition to the expanding archival literature. While the editors clearly state the publication is not about Cox (ix), for a book to honor him and leave out a bibliography of his scholarship seems odd. While one can likely recreate much of it using the citations in the notes that follow all the essays, having it codified in this publication would have been appropriate and a useful resource. Second, Mattern’s essay delves into NARA’s response to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s use of a nongovernmental email account while in office, a story that received immense public attention and ultimately had arguably an outsized impact during the 2016 presidential election. Rarely do stories of national interest center on issues at the core of our work. While Mattern effectively focused on the ethics of NARA’s actions, the story is sufficiently complex and consequential enough to invite another archival thinker to weigh-in with an additional essay. Mattern herself concluded that there is more to probe in this case, one ideal for study and still hotly debated (119). I might suggest the following issues, 1) the efficacy of an agency or public official at the highest levels of a bureaucracy self-reporting their compliance with record retention schedules, 2) the security of sensitive digital records, and 3) whether Secretary Clinton would have turned over the

emails to NARA had a *New York Times*-breaking story not forced the issue. The case deserves further elucidation and falls within the themes discussed in the book.

Defining a Discipline is a welcome call-to-action that appropriately squares with the scholastic legacy of Cox. The concepts explored and ideas advocated for, previously by Cox, and presented here by the essayists, are still worthy of discussion and debate. To validate its own distinctiveness, the archival field must stake out the logical development of archival issues in engaged and focused ways. The authors have presented in their work how we might accomplish this, and thus mature our profession. I believe Cox will be inspired by what he reads in *Defining a Discipline*, and others will as well. The book therefore is a recommended read.

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