

6-24-2021

**[Review of] *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation* by Mary Kandiuk**

Carli V. Lowe  
San José State University, [carli.lowe@sjsu.edu](mailto:carli.lowe@sjsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/faculty\\_rsca](https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/faculty_rsca)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Carli V. Lowe. "[Review of] *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation* by Mary Kandiuk" *The American Archivist* (2021): 203-206. <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-84.1.203>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research, Scholarly, and Creative Activity by an authorized administrator of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@sjsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@sjsu.edu).

## Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation

Edited by Mary Kandiuk. Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2020.  
520 pp. Softcover. \$35.00. ISBN 978-1-63400-062-8.

Mary Kandiuk, editor of *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation* and librarian at York University in Toronto, Ontario, here gathers chapter upon chapter of critical questions—and proposed answers—for archivists to consider in striving to conduct archival work informed by social justice principles. Her second book for Library Juice Press, Kandiuk's previous publications focus on academic librarianship. The chapters selected for this book are evidence of a keen understanding of the multifaceted issues facing contemporary archives. *Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation* is thematically linked to Kandiuk's first book, *In Solidarity: Academic Librarian Labour Activism and Union Participation in Canada* (Library Juice Press, 2014), as far as highlighting intersections between the work we do in our institutions and the urgent call for disrupting the status quo that harms and marginalizes so many, within and beyond our institutions.

*Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation* consists of seventeen chapters in which the authors discuss approaches intended to address the impacts of historical and contemporary patriarchy, racism, xenophobia, colonialism, extractive mindsets, and other abuses that have shaped the collecting, arrangement and description, preservation, access, and teaching of too many archival collections. Each chapter addresses a different facet of these contestations. Each chapter also connects to and builds upon themes from the previous chapter, establishing a logical flow that enhances opportunities for readers to build new understandings. The author of each chapter takes the reader through the relevant literature on the topic, links the literature to a concrete issue that arose in their particular institution, and offers steps they took to engage with these issues. It is a compelling book to read cover-to-cover, though some may prefer to select particular sets of chapters to study. I found that each chapter raised a point that acted as a nudge for me in my own practice, gave me new ways to think about something, and made me want to change something in my everyday procedures. The breadth of topics discussed in this book is noteworthy and does not come at the price of depth. These pages hold powerful lessons for both new and seasoned archivists.

A short discussion of cookbooks will allow me to elaborate on the strengths I see in Kandiuk's book. As someone who enjoys reading cookbooks cover-to-cover, in some I will skip the majority of the recipes and skim the text. Others

inspire me to want to attempt nearly every recipe and teach me a new skill with each dish that has broad application for my cooking as a whole. These are, of course, the cookbooks I treasure most. Kandiuk's book contains a similar mingling of inspirational and practical information familiar to me from the best kinds of cookbooks. Each chapter prompted me to think differently about my past, current, and future work as an archivist. At times, I was pleased to learn that an idea I had been contemplating has a name and research associated with it. The chapter by Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "Invisible in Plain View," introduced me to the term "paradata" as the documentation of processes that reveal the invisible choices and assumptions an archivist makes when processing a collection (pp. 238–39). At other times, I came across ideas that directly impacted my project planning. Elizabeth Call and Miranda Mims, in their chapter "Getting Out of the Archive," made me rethink my own approach to filling gaps in San José State's University Archives. Call and Mims discuss the importance of a "focus on building partnerships versus building collections" (p. 65). As they describe their approach to designing a documentation project, they emphasize the crucial factor of learning from a community about how that community wants its experiences documented (p. 72).

Other chapters propose solutions to questions that have been plaguing me. Katrina Windon and Lori Birrell's chapter, "Signed, Sealed, Delivered (with Clarity, Context, and Patience)," describes considerations for creating deeds of gifts that mitigate harmful power dynamics and includes copies of their own annotated deeds of gifts as examples (pp. 490–93). Gregory L. Williams and Maureen Burns's chapter, "The Importance of Collecting, Accessing, and Contextualizing Japanese-American Historical Materials," reveals both the broad philosophies and the everyday practicalities that went into creating a successful cross-institutional collaboration that resulted in a rich and growing digital collection. Each chapter added something meaningful to my own archival practice. I especially appreciated the candor of authors who describe missteps, failures, and barriers they could not surmount, or successful attempts that came with limitations.

When I took exception to an author's assumptions or conclusions, I found myself scribbling my disagreement in the margins or wishing to understand more about the author's statement and what led them to that idea. In the chapter "Sensitive Materials in the Special Collection," author Daniel German thoughtfully examines the layers of considerations involved in making decisions about access to materials containing potentially sensitive information. However, a discussion of the impact of new technologies on privacy issues would have enhanced the chapter. For example, how might optical character recognition serve to eliminate a privacy gray area where information is available to the

public, but requires intensive time and effort to locate? I relished moments with this book when I was prompted to discuss and learn more about an idea.

At other moments, ideas offered by authors appear to revert to a way of thinking that the majority of the book seems to be trying to leave behind. In the chapter “Controversy and Campus Legacies,” Anne S. K. Turkos and Jason G. Speck engagingly outline the complications of a University of Maryland, College Park controversy over a building named after a former university president. They acknowledge that this person “held racial views that are considered abhorrent in the twenty-first century” (p. 369) but without acknowledging that these views were equally abhorrent in the former president’s own time. This statement particularly stood out to me because in the preceding chapter, “Certain Moral Reflections,” Jessica Ruzek, Roger Gillis, and Diane Doublet explain their approach to describing the Dalhousie Libraries’ Kipling Collection, including a quote from a disclaimer that states that Kipling’s works “contain representations of racial and ethnic prejudices that were conventional during Kipling’s life, although no less harmful and inaccurate than they are today” (p. 344). The tag “no less harmful and inaccurate than they are today” is, in my opinion, vitally important and missing from Turkos and Speck’s discussion.

Turkos and Speck also offer advice that archivists embroiled in campus controversies be proactive, informed, and prepared. However, the fourth recommendation on this list of advice is to “Remain neutral on the issue at hand, and remove emotion from the discussion, regardless of one’s personal feelings” (p. 374). I was surprised to come upon this statement advocating for neutrality in the pages of a book that otherwise seems to hold to the axiom that archives, and by extension the work of archivists, never have been and cannot be neutral. Such occasional moments were jarring only because the majority of the book—and of Turkos and Speck’s chapter—are distinctly consistent with Kandiuk’s statement in the introduction that “furthering justice requires disrupting archival practices and structures” and that these strategies “are driven by questioning past practices and entrenched power structures . . .” (p. 1). These moments in the book are evidence of how much work our profession, and we the professionals, still need to do to dismantle not just these practices but the schema in our own minds that allows these structures to stay in place.

*Archives and Special Collections as Sites of Contestation* arrives at an important moment for archivists. While some continue to debate whether archivists should engage with social justice, many of us are committed to putting theory into action. This book provides concrete examples of such action, informed by philosophies from within and beyond LIS and made all the more credible by the authors’ honest acknowledgments of barriers, failures, and limitations. It provides multiple possible pathways for archivists who want to get started with social justice-informed work, as well as for those who want to take the next

step. It also reveals the potential of doing this work within an expansive community of archivists committed to disrupting the status quo—a welcome possibility to anyone who might feel as if they are standing alone in their efforts. Kandiuk’s book revisits all of the basics I learned in library school, but from a perspective firmly rooted in social justice, challenging my complacencies and calling on me to do better.

© Carli V. Lowe  
*San José State University*