

2023

Review of Disputed Archival Heritage

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Recommended Citation

Stoykovich, Eric C. (2023) "Review of Disputed Archival Heritage," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 10, Article 15.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol10/iss1/15>

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James Lowry, ed. *Disputed Archival Heritage*. New York: Routledge, 2023.

Within the Anglophone archival community, awareness of international or global archival matters seems limited. How could it not be? Many archivists, especially in the United States and Canada, are focused on their own institutions, local communities, or affinity groups. They often seem not conversant with nor do they read much of the archival literature produced in languages other than English. Moreover, the opportunities to engage with professional archivists working outside of these areas is limited. For example, a mere 1 percent of the individuals who listed an address upon registering for the 2023 Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists identified themselves as from countries outside of the United States or Canada.¹ Few American-based archivists have the opportunity to attend the International Council on Archives (ICA).

The causes for the provinciality of the Anglophone archivist in North America are multiple, but the opportunity to become informed about one of the trickiest political challenges facing archives across the globe is afforded by the eighteen contributors to James Lowry's edited volume *Disputed Archival Heritage*. Readers should find these largely non-North American case studies of archival displacement valuable on their own terms as corrective histories of mainly governmental or national archives. However, the readership among North American archivists could have been higher if the editor had positioned the examples as generally indicative of the idea that archives of all shapes, sizes, and institutional authority have items or collections in their care subject to *external* claims of cultural patrimony, if not ownership.² The problem of archival collections that have become physically separated from the communities in which they were created is more common than we might think.

Winner of the 2023 Waldo Gifford Leland Award for outstanding writing by the Society of the American Archivists, *Disputed Archival Heritage* is actually the second edited volume compiled by James Lowry.³ The first was *Displaced Archives*, released in 2017, also by Routledge. That book built upon the work of Robert-Henri Bautier, Charles Kecskeméti, and Leopold Auer (including chapters by the latter two), as well as the advocacy of the Displaced Archives Working Group of ICA (2009–2016), a forerunner of the currently active Expert Group on Shared Archival Heritage of ICA. Yet the lack of diversity of the authors was clear. In the preface to the 2017 book, Lowry acknowledged that the contributors were “overwhelmingly white, western European or Anglophone, and writing from countries whose governments are in possession of archives claimed by other countries” (9). Thus, it could be said that Lowry's second editorial effort attempts, with a degree of success, to rectify this representational imbalance by including authors born in non-Anglophone countries, about half of whom originate in the global South (e.g. Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Suriname). Still, with just twelve articles in this volume, geographical comprehensiveness or even representation from each continent (or former European empire) remains a bit schematic, as

¹ Email, Carlos Salgado (Manager, Society of American Archivists' Service Center) to Eric Stoykovich (SAA member since 2013), August 15, 2023.

² The chapter by María Montenegro (“Re-placing Evidence: Locating Archival Displacements in the US Federal Acknowledgment Process”) is the only one that speaks in any extended way to the politics of traditional archives in the United States.

³ James Lowry is now assistant professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies and Director of the Archival Technologies Lab at Queens College (City University of New York), and has worked previously as a practicing archivist in Australia, Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean, including for multinational organizations such as the African Union and the International Criminal Court.

Lowry admits by saying “there are large regions of the world that are not discussed in essays in this book” (6).⁴ Including only one repeat author from the first edited volume (Anne J. Gilliland), Lowry has assembled a good mix of archival practitioners and archival theorists, such as national government archivists, university researchers at international centers, and lecturers in Information Science or Studies programs. The inclusion here of a researcher who works mainly with family histories and community archives, Marianna Hovhannisyan, points to an underappreciated concern for those worried about international displacement of peoples, namely personal or family archives.

Whereas *Displaced Archives* avoided an internal grouping of its twelve chapters in preference to textual and paratextual references, *Disputed Archival Heritage* imposes three internal divisions: Part I (Places and Sovereignties), Part II (Borders and Diasporas), and Part III (Towards Home). These categories seem too blurry or imprecise to make much sense, even with Lowry’s explanation of his editorial rationales in the introduction to the volume. Though it is difficult to generalize the points of view of the individual chapters, most of the authors in *Disputed Archival Heritage*, along with James Lowry in his introduction, contend that disputed archives hold power and meaning for displaced or dispossessed peoples. Few seem to agree with Jeannette Bastian’s parting speculation in the foreword that “as former colonial entities increasingly look towards decolonization,” it may be “time to discard those colonial records in favour of building a dynamic archives of the now, one that values both the culture and the cultural heritage of the formerly colonized rather than continuing to value records produced by the oppressor” (xiii).⁵ Most of the authors assembled in *Disputed Archival Heritage* agree that while the portability and global character of many state or national archives of the colonial era pull them away from their point of creation or origin, the influence of settled communities asserts claims of sovereignty and cultural rootedness. Recognizing the existence and the history of “disputed archives” is the necessary first step to a process of sharing the burdens of preserving and accessing records of the colonial era. A number of the authors pursue a framework that stands outside of strictly legal definitions arising out of the failed United Nations’ Vienna Convention on Succession of States in respect of State Property, Archives and Debts. For the critics of that framework, “displacement” happens through official or semi-official removal, while “dispossession” occurs without legal justification. Some contributors deal more with “diasporic archives,” defined as those which are moved or scattered through technically legal means such as purchase or donation.⁶

Headlined by an essay by Riley Linebaugh, Part I is the most tightly wound group of chapters. They meditate on the concept of shared or “joint heritage” that has been promoted by UNESCO and the International Council on Archives (ICA) over the last fifty years. Linebaugh considers the arguments of Charles Kecskeméti (1933–2021), whose prolific work focused on how diplomatic actions and international cooperation between national archivists could depoliticize the ownership of contested materials. While a bit narrowly focused on the international advocacy work of the

⁴ In *Disputed Archival Heritage*, the Caribbean is the region best represented, with three articles (by John A. Aarons and Helena Leonce; Frans van Dijk and Rita Tjien Foo; and Stanley Griffin). The “Contributors” section omits a list of the biographies of all of the individual or joint authors, leaving out biographies of María Montenegro, Rebecca Abby Whiting, Anne J. Gilliland, Marianna Hovhannisyan, and Rita Tjien Foo.

⁵ Bastian, formerly the territorial librarian and archivist of the U.S. Virgin Islands between 1987 and 1998, now serves as associate professor and director of the archives program at Simmons University in Boston.

⁶ The Diasporic Literary Archives Network (2012–present) led to the publication of David C. Sutton and Ann Livingstone, eds. *The Future of Literary Archives: Diasporic and Dispersed Collections at Risk* (Arc Humanities Press, 2018).

ICA's Expert Group on Shared Archival Heritage (begun in 2016), Linebaugh usefully criticizes the idea that former colonial hegemony would share the same impetus as their "successor states" in any attempt to make accessible the records of colonial actions. Following the international legal and economic order conceptualized by Mohammed Bedjaoui and Jeannette Bastian's theory of "community of records," J.J. Ghaddar articulates an anticolonial approach to provenance that flows from the 1983 Vienna Convention. Ghaddar claims that while the Convention failed to be ratified forty years ago, it carefully stipulated that "archives by or about a territory belong to that territory even when not created in it, are not in the custody of its government, and are located elsewhere" (69). In other words, archives have pertinence (connections to places) as well as provenance (connections to record creators and custodians). María Montenegro and Forget Chaterera-Zambuko round out the section with two excellent, thought-provoking articles that demonstrate ways of undoing the colonial history of dispossession and "discursive displacement" (104) through acceptance of non-Western and non-statist concepts of the "land-as-an-archive," or of conflict resolution as a result of group mediation, known in Zimbabwe as "dare/inkundla" (123). In closing out Part I, Chaterera-Zambuko summarizes the anonymous opinions of several Zimbabwe archivists, who argue that the Rhodesian Army Archive must be returned from Great Britain, which obtained the records in 1998 from an unidentified South African institution. It might be appropriate in a further volume to explore more systematically the differences in how Euro-American empires' legal regimes approached the movement of archives created in their own colonies versus those dispossessions of archives across national or imperial boundaries.

The chapters in Parts II and III are far more independent, such that they could be read in any order (and thus will be reviewed here based on topic, not numerical order). Colonialism and war have been major catalysts for the movement of people and the destruction of records throughout history. Addressing Dutch colonialism directly, Frans van Dijk and Rita Tjien Foooh present opposing sides of a notable if drawn-out success story, namely the restitution of the Surinamese colonial archives from the Netherlands. Though some disagreements still exist between Suriname and its former imperial overlord, the process that began in 2006 was completed in 2018, through a combination of digitization and physical repatriation. Rebecca Whiting's chapter on the Islamic State (IS) files appropriated by the *New York Times* during the Iraq-American war picks up this theme of harm to regional communities and specific individuals. Whiting discusses the capture by the *Times* of "over 15,000 pages (1,600 documents) of internal IS records," including "IS tax and arrest records, land deeds and birth certificates, military strategies and internal regulations," as only one example of the intervening power of the United States in Iraq between 1992 and 2017 (173). Whiting criticizes the publication of the captured records by the *Times* for its "lasting and deeply negative impact on the political future of Mosul's residents" (184). Taking the power of records about specific individuals seriously, Anne J. Gilliland and Marianna Hovhannisyan analyze the near obliteration of the "Western Armenian homeland" during the Armenian genocide and diaspora. They argue that "continuing structural denial of prior violent events promotes disappearances of material traces of *those* events and obfuscates possible future readings of their meanings" (236). As they make evident, the case of the personal archives of Armenia is not one of traditional displacement because "the place where those records could be articulated as dis-placed and to where they should be re-placed is itself no longer in existence" (249). Only through painstaking and serendipitous efforts can any semblance of the pre-1915 world of Western Armenia be reconstituted and that occurs only in vague memories of second- or third-generation descendants of the Armenians who

fled the genocide. The cities of Los Angeles, Fresno, and greater Boston are more powerful sites of Western Armenia than the areas of modern-day Turkey where their ancestors lived.

Somewhat of an outlier among the archivists, archival theorists, and information science professors who predominate in *Disputed Archival Heritage*, Jos van Beurden has produced pioneering works on heritage restitution of colonial objects. His chapter “Claims for Colonial Objects and for Colonial Archives” unpacks the critical differences and unexpected connections between colonial objects and colonial archives. Van Beurden can point to only four instances—between Ethiopia and Italy (1947, 1956), Australia and Papua New Guinea (1963, 1972), Indonesia and the Netherlands (1968), and Rwanda and Belgium (2018)—in which international agreements mentioned archives in the same breath as physical objects. Article 37 of the 1947 Treaty of Peace with Italy stated that Italy should return to Ethiopia “all works of art, religious objects, archives and objects of historical value...removed from Ethiopia to Italy since October 3, 1935” (266). These agreements have successfully led to some repatriation (either physical or digital) of colonial-era records and archives to the colonized countries—the return by the Dutch of the Yogya archives to Indonesia is a key example. On the other hand, the restoration of cultural heritage artifacts (including human remains) has been noticeably slower and generally inspires more contention. Van Beurden attributes this difference to the greater visibility, emotional impact, and uniqueness of objects. A number of the other authors in this book seem to argue otherwise, by showing that archives can have symbolic or totemic importance to nations and communities equal to physical objects.

Moving beyond bilateral relationships between nations, *Disputed Archival Heritage* deals with disputes or displacements of records of subnational entities such as local or regional government authorities, private actors, church missionary societies, and literary figures. According to James Lowry in the introduction, the chapter by Ascensão de Macedo, Guardado de Silva, and Vieira de Freitas on the removal of the island of Madeira’s records to Lisbon is the “first in-depth study in English of subnational archival displacement” (9). This fine essay on Madeiran records breaks new ground with the rest of the book by showing that archival ruptures occurred in the 19th century as well as the 20th. In this particular case, the 1862 decree (which deemed “the records of all churches and religious orders” as candidates for inclusion into the national archive) and the 1886 Royal Ordinance of the Ministry of the Realm resulted in the transfer of records held at the Treasury Office of Funchal (Madeira) to the Torre do Tombo (National Archives of Portugal, or ANTT). The centralizing mission of Portugal’s national archives was actually carried out by a native of Madeira, Roberto Augusto da Costa, who served with the ANTT, which sent him to Funchal three times to “identify, collect and make up the inventories of the seized fonds,” notably “extinct ecclesiastical archives” (147, 155). While the authors could have given more of the backstory to da Costa’s life and of the historical context which might have led quite reasonably to this movement of records to the mainland, it is undeniable that the effect of these moves was potentially destructive to Madeiran intellectuals’ efforts to maintain a sense of history within the local communities on the islands. In coming decades, the effect of rising sea levels on island geography may challenge the continuing existence of island communities and could make the removal of records to higher ground on a mainland necessary for the sake of basic preservation.

John A. Aarons and Helena Leonce are more hopeful about the prospect of abating or remedying the scattering of Caribbean authors’ literary papers. Situating Caribbean literary archives within

the diasporic framework and in the post-World War II context of increasing monetary value placed on literary archives of all origins, Aarons and Leonce admit that the acquisition of literary archives often occurs legally through sale or donation to wealthy archival institutions outside the Caribbean. Examples include the V.S. Naipaul Archive (at University of Tulsa), the CLR James papers (dispersed among several institutions, including Columbia University, Schomburg Center, New York Public Library, and University of London), the Louise B. Coverley papers (half of which is at McMasters University in Canada), and the Samuel Selvon papers (some of which is at the University of Texas-Austin). Instead what is at stake in the geographic placement of archives is fourfold: (1) the maintenance of the affective bonds between the materials and their sites of creation, (2) the ability/inability of researchers to piece together the entire corpus of literary work of these major authors, (3) the ability of Caribbean archival institutions to acquire the papers of local authors which become a commodity in the world market, and (4) varying legal regimes in different countries that might create copyright or intellectual property conflicts. Confronting dispersion rather than dispossession, Aarons and Leonce have some useful suggestions for the strengthening of Caribbean institutions and the growth of the Caribbean Literature Heritage Network.

Obliteration of cultures and heritage by a dominant or oppressive group can produce records and archives that seem to serve little to no purpose to the people who are left once a political regime collapses or a colonial empire relinquishes power. As Stanley Griffin elucidates in the last chapter, the majority of the paper and artefactual records produced in the Caribbean islands since the colonial era were economic reports, colonial government reports, parish vestry records, court records, and personal account books. As a result, “Caribbean archivists, curators and librarians have the difficult task of proving relevance of documentary and artefact heritage materials to societies that would rather not remember the specifics of the horrors of the past,” especially given that history (313, 323). In some ways, the concept of physical, legal, or discursive displacement of records appears not to apply to places where colonies powers exerted such total control and erased entire populations, particularly those of indigenous descent. While Griffin applauds the sharing of colonial-era written records, as in the case of Suriname and the Netherlands, he expresses a skepticism that such “shared heritage” of colonial records will really help communities seeking to recover oral and musical traditions that pre-date both colonial slavery and white settlement.

The general high quality of the majority of the individual chapters overrides some of the minor editorial and copyediting mistakes (e.g. “Third Wordlism” and “Third Wordism”) that distract from the reading experience (59, 61). Though it is difficult to reduce all of the authors’ arguments to a single viewpoint, *Disputed Archival Heritage* makes the case that archives are deeply and inextricably tied to not only the cultures and peoples which created them, but also to the places where or about which they were created. Even if colonial archives have migrated from place to place or have been broken up and stored in separate locations, their links to specific places remain. And, in some cases, those ties to place encourage community members, sometimes situated outside the archival profession, to acknowledge the damage of displacement and to demand the return of archives that professional archivists or governmental authorities have moved from their places of origin.