

Book Review: *Archival Anxiety and the Vocational Calling* by Richard Cox. Duluth: Litwin Press, 2010. 356 pp. ISBN 978-1-936117-49-9.

Archival Anxiety and the Vocational Calling stands on the edge of the paradigmatic shifts occurring in the archival field. Author Richard Cox exposes issues of secrecy in government information, and the complicity of the archival profession in being part of the process. He advocates for stronger leadership in the archival field to keep governments accountable, and to maintain their role as protectors of society's democratic values. Cox suggests that emerging archivists develop the resolve, drive, and commitment necessary to face issues confronting the field. He argues that archival professionals, educators, and students should learn to analyze organizational politics and engage in controversial archival debates.

Cox outlines issues of secrecy in the United States Government, particularly after 9/11, and the passivity of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) in light of this phenomenon. However, Cox implies that the problem is not just centered within the archival field, but distributed across narrow public imaginations on what archiving is due to a greater professional focus on archival practice over archival advocacy. Cox discusses his personal relationship to Colonial Williamsburg as a site of his family's leisure, and later, of his education. He hints to this site as a location where slave economies were managed and the fact that those issues are still understudied and under-represented in its museum. Selective narration also leads to secrecy on the part of the U.S. government to its own people. Although the Freedom of Information Act was passed in 1966, archivists and government officials in the National Archives have been blacking out text on declassified records to the point of diminishing their intelligibility. In addition, Cox explains the reclassification scandal, an agreement between NARA and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to take previously declassified records off of the National Archives' shelves. Whistleblowing among some archival academics and researchers was diminished by professional archival organizations. Leaders in SAA justified their non-confrontational stance by defaulting to the judgment of the U.S. Government's security concerns.

Cox touches upon how pliant government archivists have been in relation to their employers. This passivity can be attributed to the idea that archivists should be neutral in their work—their preservation systems should not question, but be based on empirical analysis of the activities of their parent organization. To respond to this view, Cox often dispels students' ideas of archival work as not just managing a set of collections in a climate-controlled room. He argues that the governments they might work for are not always bastions of truth and justice, but have deployed their bureaucracies to facilitate human rights violations,

implicating archival work and archivists in the process. Thus, he believes that future archivists will need to learn how to analyze organizational dynamics, and to develop lobbying skills if organizational change is needed.

Archivists do not have to feel debilitated by this responsibility; Cox articulates a hopeful vision of innovation that archivists can tap into to drive them forward in making positive changes in the field and beyond. Cox discusses how SAA decided to remove the *Archives and Archivists* listserv from its website, even though it held a wealth of information about the history and diversity of ideas in the profession. The listserv facilitated communication across strata of archival practitioners and educators. However, SAA perceived the debates that ensued were causing tension and disharmony, and thus chose to not preserve it. Cox disagrees with the decision of the SAA because the *Archives and Archivists* listserv facilitated communication across professionals who rarely interact, and allowed them to learn about different professional opinions. Cox believes that digital technology is a new landscape for the archival field to explore. He quotes Manuel Castells who says that the “Information Age is where to invent new programs for [people's] lives with materials of their suffering, fears, dreams and hopes” (Castells, 2009, as cited in Cox, 2010, p. 236-237). The key word here is inventiveness: archivists can define their own information agenda, and not just take orders from above. Mentorship and exchange programs among archival professionals, educators and students are already underway, fostering more dynamic exchange of information in the field, and exposing emerging archivists to the diversity of work beyond academia. For example, Cox suggests that if archivists take ethics and digital communication seriously, the field could have a role in thinking about what “Open Government” ought to mean.

I admire Cox's courage to raise accountability in the archival field, rather than acquiescing to the powers that be. His work explains why there is a need for new frameworks in the study and management of archives. Cox sees strategic communication across archival professions as a way to help practitioners, educators, and students find their own agencies as information professionals. He points to the role that archival educators play in modeling leadership skills to their students. Cox narrates how he raised unpopular issues, and how he stands behind his actions even as some colleagues disagree and want him quiet.

However, the problems that Cox describes are not necessarily foreign to ethnic, indigenous, racial and gender minorities who have written about their experiences being silenced under bureaucratic governments, and who have begun to create bodies of knowledge on issues of archival representation and political agency. Thus, archivists also need to develop subjectivities that accept the limits of their theoretical and technical truths, even if they have valid, personal convictions of how morally right they are, or how practically feasible they may be. It is another kind of strength to step aside to let others step forward to propose

and construct new ideas, according to other paradigms. This book explores a time of perceived crisis in the field where those entrenched in established ways of archiving feel anxiety that the foundation of archival narratives they depend on are being challenged. This book also creates a pathway for emergent archival ideas to have a place in rethinking this crisis as an opportunity: this is not the end of the narrative, but the recognition that there have always been many narratives, which need to be recognized, advocated for, and built upon as well.

Reference

Castells, M. (2009). *Communication Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Reviewer

Ellen-Rae Cachola is a 3rd year PhD student in UCLA's Department of Information Studies. She explores the phenomenon of imperialism with archival frameworks, and how communities appropriate New Media to construct their own notions of "archives" to transform collective memories. Currently, Ellen-Rae is the Project Manager for the Archival Education Research Institute, a series of annual week-long institutes committed to diversifying and pluralizing the archival field.