

Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada. Edited by Dominique Daniel and Amalia Levi. Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014. 326 pp. Index. Softcover. \$45.00.

Identity Palimpsests is a rich collection of essays exploring the histories and contemporary practices of ethnic community archiving in the United States and Canada. Contributors to the volume include a broad range of practicing community archivists, as well as scholars and archival educators from both countries. Most of the authors of the 19 essays and the introduction reflect on their personal experiences establishing or working at community or ethnic archives, including grass-roots initiatives as well as mainstream institutions, and many of the essays are jointly authored.

The authors define *ethnicity* broadly as “a conditioned perception of oneself or of others as different,” which can be the result of individual choice, group affiliations, compulsion, and regulatory framework (pp. 2–3). The editors explicitly challenge the perception that ethnic archives are static “containers” of a community’s past and instead highlight “ethnic archiving” as an ongoing, active process of interpreting the past and shaping the future of diverse communities. The multilayered process of “remembering, forgetting, and re-remembering” is reminiscent of a palimpsest, the image that inspired the volume’s title. A palimpsest, like the Archimedes Palimpsest, is a manuscript dating to antiquity or the medieval period, usually made out of parchment, from which, to conserve valuable writing material, the original writing has been scraped or washed off yet remains faintly legible through the new layer of text.

The volume contributes to the ongoing discussion on the development and mission of community archives and their relationship to mainstream institutions. One recurring theme of the volume, which is arranged in five sections, is the challenge for ethnic community archives, which are often financially unstable, to develop and implement their missions while following professional best practices and ethical principles.

The essays in the first two sections provide historical and theoretical perspectives on ethnic community archiving. Jeannette Bastian analyzes community archives through a collective memory lens and highlights how concepts such as memory studies and practices of community archival work complement one another. Memory tools, which can include celebrations, rituals, oral traditions, and other nontextual memory productions, can support archival initiatives to document underrepresented communities and peoples. These “communities of records” also serve as “a memory frame that contextualizes the records it creates,” she writes (p. 24).

Michelle Caswell, drawing on her experiences with establishing the South Asian American Digital Archive, explores how concepts from postcolonial theory can inform the work of independent “identity-based community archives,” where archival collecting is used as a form of empowerment. These archives not only highlight marginalized histories, but they also serve as “liberatory archival imaginaries,” which can be critical resources and inspirations to build more equitable and just futures (pp. 48–52).

The essays by Mark Stolarik and Joel Wurl provide unique perspectives on the development of ethnic archiving in the United States since the 1960s, based on the

authors' personal research experiences—and developing the collections—at the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota and at the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia. Mark Stolarik emphasizes, in particular, the need for collaboration between archives and museums in the documentation of ethnic cultures and the critical importance of collecting artifacts as part of the cultural record. Joel Wurl discusses the impact of researchers abroad on the acquisition and development of collections documenting international migrations, while highlighting the need to study and document complex international migration patterns, including the migration of Americans overseas.

Essays in the following sections address important aspects of culturally sensitive community archiving from a variety of vantage points. Rabia Gibbs, for example, discusses the provenance of the University of Tennessee's Civil Rights Collections and the lasting impact that the absence of ethical codes and coordinated strategies in the past have left on the collections. Several essays deal with the ethical problems of removing collections from their communities of origin and discuss possible collaborative archiving models that allow communities to retain ownership of the materials, while enabling broader public access to them.

Jennifer O'Neal reflects on the original impetus for and the process of developing the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials and on the discussions at the three Native American Protocols Forum Task Forces (2009–2011) that were part of the process. Authors also discuss a variety of models for ensuring continued and ongoing collaborations with communities, such as the Collaborative Archive from the African Diaspora in Florida, a broad, community-based program initiated by the University of Miami Special Collections Department, in partnership with seven area agencies and institutions.

In their article on Canada's Community Historical Recognition Program, Greg Bak and Tina Mai Chen provide an insightful and critical discussion of the government program's impact on the long-term sustainability of digital community archives. The authors write that the government's one-time funding of the Chinese Canadian head tax digital archives was based on political pressures, but was not directed to support the establishment and maintenance of an inclusive, community-based archives dedicated to documenting the complex Chinese Canadian experience, including the history of discrimination by the government. The funding structure supported a "symbolic" compensation, while not providing any resources to maintain and expand the digital archives, threatening its long-term survival. The authors also caution against the "allure of new technologies" in establishing community archives and the danger of assuming that digital archives provide an automatic vehicle for community engagement. While not part of the volume's final section on "Archiving Ethnicity on the Web," Bak and Chen's article provides a welcome, cautionary note on the conceptual problems of a significant government-funded digital archives project and addresses issues with its long-term sustainability that are relevant for the majority of digital archives projects.

The essays in the final section reflect on the impact of the World Wide Web on developing community archives that extend geographical and political boundaries, such as the digital archives of the Leo Baeck Institute, based in New York City and

Berlin, and Sheeko: The Somali Youth Oral History collection, based at the Immigration History Research Center at the University of Minnesota. Digital technologies can “facilitate collaborative, community-engaged research and scholarship,” write the authors of the article on the Somali Youth project (p. 277). At the same time, they acknowledge that working with video required having access to resources and ongoing training. More implicit than explicit is the question of the extent to which digital archives may contribute to the marginalization of communities that do not have equal access to technology.

While the editors challenge static definitions of ethnicity and highlight ethnic archiving as a process, one is left wondering how useful *ethnicity* and *identity* may be as overarching categories that provide the framework for the rich and multifaceted analyses of community archiving in this volume. Virginia Yans has criticized the use of the concepts of *ethnicity* and *race* in the field of ethnic studies.¹ This critique also applies to the study of ethnic archiving, as does the critique of the prevalence of *identity* as a category of analysis in the social sciences.² The problem with these terms and underlying concepts is that they tend to be too vaguely defined, and they have—historically—reflected essentialist definitions of ethnicity. The concepts also facilitate circular arguments in which *ethnicity* and *identity* constitute the starting point, as well as the result, of social, political, and cultural developments. The editors are well aware of these issues and the potential problems of framing the essays using these concepts. “Ethnicity is only one of the parameters that a community or group employs in order to define and circumscribe its boundaries,” they emphasize (p. 2). Nonetheless, Daniel and Levi justify using ethnicity as one of the “most persistent” aspects of identity. But how useful is the umbrella of “archiving ethnicity” for analyzing the community archiving initiatives featured in *Identity Palimpsests*? Is the creation of *identity* really the main purpose of these archives, or do these various selected initiatives have broader goals that can be defined more specifically?

Considering the potential conceptual issues with *identity* and *ethnicity*, one of the strengths of this volume is that the essays define their own terms and set their own priorities. Several authors question whether their institutions or initiatives can be primarily defined as “ethnic” archives. Michele Caswell speaks of “identity based community archives” rather than ethnic archives, and the five authors of the essay on the development of the Portuguese Canadian History Project caution against overemphasizing ethnicity as the basis for archival representation. The experience of immigration constitutes “a more solid basis for categorization,” they write (p. 94), highlighting that the Portuguese Canadian experience has been shaped by a diversity of experiences, identities, and solidarities, especially labor struggles and gender.

Identity Palimpsests provides a kaleidoscopic overview of the development of contemporary practices of ethnic community archiving in the United States and in Canada. It is best read in conjunction with Dominique Daniel’s recent article, which surveys the development of ethnic and immigration archives in the two countries since the 1950s.³ The thought-provoking essays in the volume address a wide range of relevant issues about the importance of archives for marginalized communities (whether defined by ethnicity, migration, or race) and the challenges they grapple with. The volume almost calls for the creation of a companion discussion forum,

whether online or at a conference, where the important questions raised by these essays could be discussed among the authors and with a broader audience.

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NOTES

1. Virginia Yans, "On Groupness," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 24, no. 4 (2006): 119–29.
2. See, for example, Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29 (2000): 1–47.
3. Dominique Daniel, "Archival Representation of Immigration and Ethnicity in North American History: From the Ethnicization of Archives to the Archiving of Ethnicity," *Archival Science* 14, no. 2 (2014): 169–203.