Archival Memory, Cultural Heritage, and Justice

Archives play a particularly important role in the preservation of cultural heritage and the legitimization of cultural identity. Because an archives serves as the collective memory of a culture, those who control archives are invariably invested with a great degree of power and influence. As history has shown, this power can be abused by oppressive regimes, or it can be used to proactively correct distorted historical narratives. The following sources explore this archival power dynamic as it relates to memory, cultural heritage, and social justice. Drawing from specific historical examples, these articles investigate the evolving role archives have played around the world in providing cultural and ethnic groups with a documented sense of identity and history. Each of the ten entries in this bibliography consists of the following: first, the article’s full citation; second, the publication abstract; and third, an annotation.


Abstract: Over the past several decades, scholars concerned with post-colonial and indigenous populations have focused on archives as one method of excavating the cultures and lives of marginalized peoples. The limitations of textual and bureaucratic records, combined with the recognition that an archive can consist of interrelated knowledge constructs composed of many different kinds of documentation, have led these scholars to seek archives beyond the walls of official buildings. For archivists likewise engaged in documenting post-colonial and other communities, expanding the definitions
of what an archive could be, and suggesting new ways of seeing records, offers the potential of creatively representing and preserving the cultural expressions of these communities. This paper examines carnival as a cultural archive. Carnival, an annual tradition in many Caribbean islands, was initially created by both enslaved and freed Africans as a counter-narrative to the festivals of the colonizers. In the US Virgin Islands, carnival began in the eighteenth century when the islands were Danish colonies. It was briefly revived at the beginning of the twentieth century and again in 1952 as an annual public celebration, which it remains today. While carnival produces traditional records, the week-long event also embodies the continuum of a local culture through a variety of non-traditional records that transmit genealogies, folkways, food customs, and history.

Annotation: The author, an Associate Professor and director of archival studies at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College, compares the history and significance of Carnival and similar festivals to the role of archives as complex, dynamic collections of cultural memory. Through the article, Bastian traces ways in which festivals may be viewed as archival evidence in and of themselves and further, how such festivals can be seen as meaningful sources of archival information. Her argument is deeply rooted in theories of performance and oral history that view performed acts as social communication tools, and moreover, how such performed communication is a vital aspect of the cultural heritage of marginalized communities. While acceptance of the author’s argument requires some suspension of the conventional view of archives as primarily textual, she offers compelling evidence to support viewing performance as a record. This article would be very appealing, though perhaps unsurprising, to scholars of performance studies, in addition to the article’s primary audience of professional archivists.


Abstract: This paper seeks to address, from the critical perspectives of cultural heritage discourse, the issues at stake in critically apprehending the archive as both a technology of disinheritance and one of potential inclusion and re-inheritance. The first section
draws on the work of Jacques Derrida, Edward Said and other critics whose work has sought to address the marginalizing capacity of dominant European/North American archival and cultural-museological institutions. The remainder of the paper grounds these conceptual-ethical issues in the context of Palestinian cultural politics and memory-work. This critical framework is used not only to draw out the absences and silences in archives and cultural institutions, and the epistemological and real violences at play in what Derrida characterises as 'archive trauma', but responds to Said's call to re-read the colonial archive 'contrapuntally' in order to create an othering of dominant archival discourse. What is needed to provoke such an othering is a commitment to rethink the archive in terms of alternative understandings of hospitality, memory-work and what Derrida has referred to as heritage dignity. This strategy is capable of apprehending in greater depth the moral-ethical debts and duties and the operational responses and responsibilities towards inclusion and towards full recognition of those constituencies which have been disenfranchised or exiled outside the realms of dominant cultural-institutional discourse.

Annotation: The author, a Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Archaeology at UCL, argues for a reconstruction of archival memory related to the history of Palestine, as an attempt to undo the ways in which archives have been put to popular use in delegitimizing the cultural history and identity of the Palestinian people. She roots this argument in Derrida’s post-modern theory of archives as a powerful tool of marginalization and “trauma” and particularly how archives can be used to restore the “heritage dignity” of marginalized communities. She also relies on Said’s exploration of the archival impulse as a colonialist, Orientalist motivation. While the author’s arguments in favor of Palestinian cultural heritage may be controversial, her highly intellectual grounding in post-modern theory should make this article interesting to all scholars of post-colonialism and the role of archives in colonial power structures, despite the article’s somewhat high reliance on difficult post-modern jargon.

Abstract: This paper argues that archives play a significant role in fostering three elements essential to Cambodia's recovery: accountability, truth, and memory. First, archives have an enduring power to hold the regime accountable because they were the catalyst for an international human rights tribunal, as shown by the relentless activism of the archives' director, international efforts to preserve Khmer Rouge records, and the correlation between indictments and documentary evidence. Secondly, this paper posits that archives make a significant contribution to the establishment of truth because they have epistemological validity over the testimony of survivors, as seen repeatedly throughout the tribunal. Finally, this paper argues that the archives are succeeding in constructing memory of the Khmer Rouge era because it is forcing Cambodia to deal with its uncomfortable past by giving voice to survivors, creating textbooks, and conducting outreach. This paper is rooted in the field of archival studies within the discipline of library and information science, but draws on history, Cambodian studies, and legal studies. Employing transcripts of the ongoing tribunal, NGO reports, and newsletters as primary sources, the paper argues that while archives have been successful in holding the Khmer Rouge accountable, establishing truth, and creating memory, only a tribunal can administer justice.

Annotation: The author examines how the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) is playing a key role in a joint Cambodian-UN tribunal tasked with indicting former Khmer Rouge officials for violations of both Cambodian and international law. First, the author presents DC-Cam’s preservation of Khmer Rouge documents as an indispensible tool in maintaining accountability. Importantly, she calls attention to how DC-Cam has taken a proactive stance in holding the Khmer Rouge to account in the international community, a shift from what she understands as the historically neutral, apolitical aspirations of most archives and manuscript repositories. Caswell also explores the role of archival documents in establishing “truth,” insofar as the truth is the partial, but particular, lived experiences of the survivors of the Khmer Rouge and their descendents. While the article leans heavily on accounts of the trial of one Khmer Rouge official, the author deftly explores the larger implications of the trial and how archives have been
used by both oppressive regimes to affect “truth” and by victims of these same regimes to seek justice and legal accountability.


Abstract: Far from being a simple reflection of reality, archives are constructed windows into personal and collective processes. They at once express and are instruments of prevailing relations of power. Verne Harris makes these arguments through an account of archives and archivists in the context of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. The account is deliberately shaped around three themes - race, power, and public records. While he concedes that the constructedness of memory and the dimension of power are most obvious in the extreme circumstances of oppression and rapid transition to democracy, he argues that these are realities informing archives in all circumstances. He makes an appeal to archivists to enchant their work by engaging these realities and by turning always towards the call of and for justice.

Annotation: The author uses the particular circumstances of the destruction of records documenting South Africa’s apartheid regime to demonstrate the role that archives have in constructing cultural memory and attributing power to different social groups. Harris presents a metaphor for archives as a “sliver of a window” through which history is seen, but also through which light is distorted, and he likens the archival process of remembering to the struggle of anti-apartheid groups to transition South Africa to democracy. The article offers a fascinating exploration of the role various archival organizations played in this transition, from the apartheid-complicit State Archives Service to post-1990 non-public historical institutions. With the founding of the new National Archives of South Africa, Harris investigates how conscious choices are made to shape archival collections and therefore construct a new national social memory. This article would be appropriate for all students of history and archives, particularly those with interest in the history of apartheid and racial oppression.

Abstract: UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme is one response to the challenges of preserving cultural heritage. This paper describes its activities, indicates its relationship to other large-scale programs to promote understanding of the importance of preserving heritage, introduces the Australian Memory of the World Program as a case study, and examines some of the issues surrounding the program.

Annotation: This article, introduced as part of a special issue of *Library Trends* dedicated to cultural heritage preservation, provides an overview of UNESCO’s Memory of the World Programme. The author, a member of the Australian Memory of the World Committee, presents a fairly balanced view of the UNESCO program, praising its successes while not failing to point out its imperfections. After taking some time to explain the bureaucratic functions of both the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme and the national Australian Memory of the World Committee, the author examines the significance of such programs as well as the challenges facing their usefulness, including their lack of interest in oral history materials, individual (as opposed to institutional) contributions, and born-digital records. The author also helpfully points out the flaws in the UNESCO program’s Eurocentricity and the potential politicization of its criteria for what makes an archival collection “significant.” While perhaps only of interest to those archivists wanting to better understand the existing international frameworks for cultural heritage preservation, this article presents a helpful overview of the UNESCO initiative.


Abstract: Around 1800 the "paradigm of patrimony" recognized archives as cultural and national patrimony. That paradigm was, however, not a new revolutionary invention. It had been fostered by a "patrimony consciousness" which had developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The value of archives as a patrimony to future
generations was acknowledged first in the private sphere by families and then by cities--communities of memory becoming communities of archives.

Annotation: The author, a Professor of Archivistics at the University of Amsterdam, examines how archives came to be considered cultural patrimony and how records are monumentalized through the process of becoming archives. Ketelaar reexamines the assumption that archives became cultural patrimony during the French Revolution, instead tracing this trend of monumentalization back to 16th and 17th century Dutch antiquarians. Though the majority of these early archival collections were primarily formed for the sake of documenting and perpetuating administrative or municipal value, private motivations such as preservation of family honor and memorialization slowly began to imbue archives with greater cultural and historical significance. Finally, by 1800, archives became firmly recognized as cultural and national patrimony. This article traces this slow development well, presenting an interesting new perspective for archivists looking to learn more about the cultural origins of archives.


Abstract: Through the Treaty of Paris in 1898, Spain ceded to the United States all its colonial authority over the Philippines, including its other colonies. The Treaty also placed in American possession the Spanish records kept in the various agencies of the former colonial administration of the islands. Upon assumption of its role as the new de facto colonial regime, the American insular government initiated the process of collecting the Spanish colonial records to be housed in a central repository that became the nucleus of the National Archives of the Philippines. An important aspect of understanding the context of archives in post-colonial Philippines is to trace its early beginnings and to examine the archives' association with former colonial powers. Established against the backdrop of the shift in the continuum of colonial regimes, the archive is undeniably a colonial creation and a manifestation of colonial domination.
For the contemporary imagination, however, its very presence represents a common and collective past that consequently contributes to the formation of a "national consciousness" and ironically reinforces the idea of nationhood of the formerly colonized territory.

Annotation: The author, an Assistant Professor at the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of the Philippines, examines the Philippines’ complicated colonial history in relation to the country’s recordkeeping traditions. Because archives have long been associated with colonial power in the Philippines, they remain testaments to the country’s colonially imposed sense of nationhood, even as they contribute to the Philippines’ cultural memory. The author exposes the inherently complex, multilayered nature of archives by examining the intersection of the Philippines’ Spanish, American, and indigenous records. The particular case of the Philippines offers a compelling argument for critical reevaluation of archives everywhere as evidence of continuously shifting power structures. In addition, the author’s historical account of the development of the Philippines’ national archives demonstrates that records can exhibit multiple meanings when in different contexts and when utilized by different groups. This article proves a fascinating example of the complexities of archival work in post-colonial settings, though its lessons on the multilayered meanings of records can be useful to archivists everywhere.


Abstract: The liquidation of Jewish libraries and archives in Cracow was carried out through the organized looting and confiscation of selected collections as well as the plunder and destruction of school, private, and synagogue libraries. It was also done through the appropriation of some Jewish collections by the Staatsbibliothek Krakau and the removal and destruction of books in Polish by banned Jewish authors from any operating bookstores and libraries in Cracow and in the General Government. The essay examines the loss of various collections, especially school libraries and the Ezra Library, and efforts to save selected collections during the war.
Annotation: The author, the head of cataloging at the Slavic and East European Library at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, first traces the history of Jews in Cracow, with particular emphasis on their robust cultural activities centered on libraries and archives. After recounting the German invasion of Cracow, the author explores how Jewish library and archival collections were looted, confiscated, or systematically destroyed by Nazi officials. Sroka’s account of this painful historical episode serves as testament to the destructive effect the displacement of archival collections can have on the community the archives serve. While Sroka offers little analysis outside of this historical account, the staggering extent of such cultural devastation points out how closely tied community identity is to the cultural memory housed in the physical holdings of archives. This article sheds important light on the loss of cultural heritage during the Holocaust. In addition to archivists, librarians should find this article interesting for its equal coverage of the significant loss of library collections in Cracow during this time.


Abstract: After WWII, there were approximately 10,000 children with Norwegian mothers and German fathers in Norway. In the late 1980s, these war children's fate became a topic of public debate, when accusations of maltreatment and harassment were made public. A research project organised by the Norwegian Research Council in 1998 concluded that the children had been subject to harassment and illegally deprived of some of their basic civilian rights between 1945 and 1955. Then, in 2006, Norwegian parliament approved a special reparation system for war children, in which the size of the compensation was made dependent on the documentation that each individual might bring forth. After 2 years of this system's functioning, it is evident that only a small percentage of the war children have been able to produce the necessary evidence. In this article, I will explore the roles that social memory and archival records may have played in constructing the war children as a social group, why the individual war child's life tends to be poorly documented in public records, and why the reparation system privileges public records as evidence. Finally, I will discuss the archivist's position as the
intermediary between the records and the individuals seeking justice, how archivists should respond to such calls for justice and what they might do to create a more inclusive memory of the past.

Annotation: The author, an associate professor at Oslo University College, presents a full picture of archives’ role in the protection of cultural memory and social justice through the specific example of the mistreatment of war children in post-WWII Norway. Valderhaug first investigates the widespread public discrimination against so-called “war children,” or children born to Norwegian mothers and German fathers during and immediately following WWII. The parentage of such children was documented in German Lebensborn records, which existed to track the children of German soldiers in occupied territories. These records were later used by the Norwegian government to sanction public discrimination and finally by the war children themselves to demand reparations. The author then argues that archivists hold key positions as mediators in the use of records towards obtaining justice, suggesting that archivists might need to play an even greater role in advocating for increased access to records and including the viewpoints of oppressed groups in their collections. The particular case of war children in Norway serves to support this later argument quite well, though the author’s actual recommendations for how archivists can better serve social justice remain quite non-specific.


Abstract: The twentieth century witnessed some of the worst destruction of libraries and archives during armed conflicts. Ad hoc tribunals created to try war crimes have made some progress in establishing individual criminal responsibility for crimes against cultural property. However, crimes that involve the destruction of libraries and archives are not prosecuted as separate incidents due to the courts' failure to specifically list such crimes as separate counts of indictment. The lack of the prosecution of the individuals responsible for crimes of library and archive destruction is one of the reasons why the assault on the documentary heritage of the world continues.
Annotation: The author presents a valid argument for greater international legal protections for libraries and archives as distinct cultural entities. First, she recounts the place of libraries and archives within existing legal frameworks, concluding that most legal definitions of cultural property under which libraries and archives fall continue to be deficient. Next, the author reviews three specific historical examples of the destruction of library and archival collections, examining how such destruction was prosecuted and what legal repercussions followed. Finally, the author investigates the recent destruction of a significant portion of the collection of Iraq’s National Library and Archives in Baghdad. These examples, while heavily reliant on legal terminology, do well to underscore the author’s position that existing international law has not sufficiently deterred ongoing threats to the collections of libraries and archives around the world. Those interested in international law and the prosecution of war crimes will find much meaningful information in this article. To a general audience of information professionals, this article’s detailed legal accounts might detract from an otherwise intriguing exploration of the risk libraries and archives face during times of war.