

A Time to Gather: Archives and the Control of Jewish Culture

By Jason Lustig. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 280 pp.
Hardcover, EPUB. \$74.00. Hardcover ISBN 9780197563526.

Jason Lustig's *A Time to Gather: Archives and the Control of Jewish Culture* discusses the fate of Jewish archives in tumultuous historical moments: in the European territorial conflicts and border shifting before World War I; in the aftermath of the sweeping violence of the Holocaust and the fervor of Israeli state-building; and in the confusion of forming American Jewish identity—and institutions—for a changing twentieth-century populace. Many scholars have previously interrogated the relationship between power, identity, and the creation and collection of records, and this text attempts to frame those interrogations within the context of Jewish history. Bridging past and present, archives become contested sites where records are brought together, take on new meaning, and ground elusive claims of cultural authenticity in material proof. Lustig is particularly interested in what he calls “total archives”: archives in significant population centers that strive to hold comprehensive collections on Jewish life (p. 1).

Over the course of five chapters, Lustig, currently a lecturer and Israel Institute Teaching Fellow at the University of Texas at Austin's Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies, explores case studies of institutions he deems total archives: Berlin's Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden, Jerusalem's Jewish Historical General Archive (JHGA), and Cincinnati's American Jewish Archives (AJA). The final chapter deals with a handful of large-scale digitization projects. (Full disclosure: one of the projects Lustig discusses is based at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, where both of us are employed.) If “what is placed in the archival vaults stands for claims about which communities are a part of history, and which are part of the present,” then the aspirations of these “total” archives are in fact referenda on which communities have been wholly obliterated by genocide, migration, or assimilation (p. 12).

Educators, scholars, and historians, as well as more casual readers, may find this book useful. Detailed discussions of restitution and the return of looted records offer an important contribution to an already robust scholarship on violence and archival memory, helmed by such authors as Patricia Kennedy Grimstead and Kirsten Weld. Lustig extensively engages with his primary sources, weaving correspondence, legal documents, and institutional records into a tapestry that tells the story of emerging institutions and global change. His text is relevant to many contemporary debates over memory and ownership that still divide scholars today. From an archivist's standpoint, however, the book's contributions are a bit murkier. Drawing upon archival theorist Michelle Caswell's body of work, *A Time*

to Gather claims to offer a study in “the active role of actually existing archive repositories and institutions, as opposed to ‘the Archive’ as a construct of theory” (p. 2). Despite his assertions, Lustig seems far more comfortable in the realm of the theoretical archive than in “actually existing” archives. What his text fails to grasp—and more so, to prove—is that one is inseparable from the other.

Despite his ambitions, Lustig insufficiently historicizes the archive as a living, working site—subject to a complex tangle of social, political, and economic considerations—and invites overly neat conclusions with unsatisfying answers. One issue is that much of his argument rests upon only three sites as case studies. He contends that total archives are indicative of an overarching trend in the history of Jewish archives in the twentieth century. However, in many ways, *A Time to Gather* is about how those mass collecting impulses were impossible to carry out, due in no small part to resistance from other Jewish stakeholders. Why are these three institutions representative of Jewish archives while those who interfered with total archives are not? By centering the Gesamtarchiv, the JHGA, and the AJA, Lustig replicates the very power dynamics he critiques.

The question of representativity haunts *A Time to Gather*, particularly in how the book does not fully historicize the developments of the archival field. Thus, readers cannot discern what is specific to Jewish archives and what reflects more general trends in archival practice. By not probing into the complicated relationship between state power, identity construction, and record production—seen clearly in such instances as state-mandated ethnic classification documents or conscription records—Lustig misses an important opportunity to problematize relationships between archival subjects and archival sites and to define the text’s stakes as definitively Jewish. For instance, the text takes up the question of shifting borders and place-based identity as they relate to questions of an archive’s physical location, target constituencies, and holdings. This is a fascinating discussion, particularly in the context of twentieth-century Europe’s frequent redrawing of territorial lines, but it is by no means a uniquely Jewish one. Jewish and non-Jewish archives alike are always reassessing their constituencies by examining how identities in flux may invite inclusion or exclusion, how patrons may use records in a particular historical moment, and how records and artifacts may ground a vanishing past for new use in the present. Similarly, when Lustig notes that “[The Gesamtarchiv] ‘archived’ its environment, not just historic documents” (p. 51), he frames it as exceptional. In reality, other fledgling institutions in the early twentieth century were also defining the parameters of their institutions and, in the process of creating and collecting institutional records, documenting the conditions of their own existence.

A Time to Gather is about the ways that archives wield cultural power, but this is never quite borne out. Lustig cites theorists such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida on the relationship between information, knowledge production, and power, and the book does explore the political goals of the leaders of the case

study institutions. We do not dispute Lustig's characterizations of those individuals' motivations, but intentions alone are not examples of ways institutions exerted power, cultural or otherwise. A more precise discussion of archival power might have come from more consideration of real-world archival practice. Discussion about funding, scope, and users of the archives in question is relatively limited. Archival accessioning has very real limits beyond the political disputes that make up much of *A Time to Gather*, and how archives negotiate those practical constraints—regardless of an institution's publicly stated, and very likely ambitious, scope—is rich terrain for exploring which forces exert power over archives and, in turn, power over a group's shared heritage.

One of Lustig's primary concerns regarding power is the tension around local control of archival materials. The theme of provenance ties the book together with varying degrees of success. Instead of defining provenance as is typically accepted in the archival field—referencing the original creator of records, whether individual or organizational—Lustig is more concerned with the physical removal of records from their location of origin. This may well constitute a theory about use and accessibility, but, in practice, it has little to do with provenance or *respect des fonds* as concepts already used by archivists. In a very literal sense, many of Lustig's key questions—about gathering or returning “looted and scattered Jewish cultural goods” (p. 56), describing materials, and navigating restitution—are actually about provenance. Yet, due to his location-based interpretation of the term, Lustig draws the somewhat-baffling conclusion that part of the totalizing methodology of archives is “removing context” from materials (p. 43). He frames archival accessioning as a hegemonizing action because the materials are removed from their original contexts. However, here, Lustig is not making a novel argument about how archives function but simply describing what archives do. Materials are not records until they are recorded. (It is worth noting that this argument betrays a false dichotomy between local archives and centralized archives present throughout *A Time to Gather*. Local archives also remove context from records, by virtue of being archives.)

Similarly, Lustig argues that attempts to centralize archival materials reflect a desire to erase context, thus exerting power over Jewish cultural heritage. More focus on the practical considerations of archiving may have revealed some of the benefits of centralization. An economy of scale is at work with centralized archives: properly caring for special collections requires a staggering amount of money, and centralization makes the entire endeavor more sustainable. Beyond that, centralized repositories are an attempt to democratize access. Economies of scale also apply to the labor and expertise required to provide reference and, in modern archives, to digitize collections. Archives in Jewish population centers are more geographically accessible to a larger number of users. Finally, materials benefit from being part of a larger collection; having related materials in conversation with each

other, even if they originate from different physical locations, allows historians and other archives users to make connections across space and time. This complicates Lustig's key premise, which is that "where archives were deposited demarcated a center of Jewish life and the hegemony of the center over its periphery" (p. 44). If intentions matter, and in *A Time to Gather* they certainly do, Lustig is remiss in disregarding the intended benefits of centralized repositories.

Overall, while *A Time to Gather* is a useful monograph for many audiences, archivists who are interested in power and cultural heritage—potentially as they relate to archivists' own positionality—may be left wondering about a key question: what is the power that archives exert, and over whom?

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