

The Social Movement Archive

By Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida. Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2021. 244 pp.

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The Social Movement Archive disrupts traditional archival practices surrounding the production and curation of social movement ephemera. Authors Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida are “interested in how a critical understanding of material culture in relation to movement activism might introduce new ways to think about archives and archival processes” (p. 1). They address this by placing material and movements at the center of their conversation and asking: “what is the use of archiving this? who is this archive for?” (p. 5). The authors address these and other questions that shape archival practice, including what materials should be archived, what skills and knowledge archivists require, and how archivists should approach attribution, reproduction, privacy, and access. In writing this book, Hoyer and Almeida hope that re-examining these questions (and their subsequent answers) will bring forth new and valuable perspectives that are unencumbered by institutional bureaucracy and archival professional traditions that limit current archival frameworks. Although the authors advocate for changing archival practices related to social movements, the changes they suggest could be applied to other areas, such as Indigenous archives, community and grassroots archives, and LGBTQ+ archives.

Hoyer and Almeida do not explicitly define social movements or movement activism; rather, the understanding of the terms comes from the book’s context and those who are interviewed in the book. As a result, social movements and movement activism become ambiguous concepts connected to “projects about socio-political disruption, upheaval, and transformation” and “direct action and performance, or with political projects that are nonlinear,” respectively (p. 1). In this regard, the authors allow for a more flexible approach to archiving cultural ephemera and situate the activist and the social movement into a more participatory, central role throughout the archival process, especially with description, access, and attribution of the fonds and materials. Although Hoyer and Almeida do not reflect on past or traditional archival practices, they encourage archivists to expand their professional roles and create a more collaborative environment for both the archivist and the activist. In other words, the authors chose to

explor[e] what archives mean to and for activists who are involved in producing cultural ephemera, . . . [including the] tensions the archive produces and how archivists working in spaces that collect social movement materials navigate that tension . . . [to] introduce new ways to think about archives and archival processes. (p. 1)

Hoyer and Almeida accomplish this through a series of interviews or conversations that they organize into individual chapters. Due to the COVID-19

pandemic, Hoyer and Almeida limited their scope of social movements to those located in New York City; however, the themes could be applied to movements elsewhere. Members of fifteen different social movements—including Bev Grant, Sikowis, Sky Cubacub, Terry Forman, Laura Whitehorn, Decolonize This Place, and the Environmental Performance Agency—discuss their perspectives on the structure, history, ownership, and archiving of ephemera such as zines, banners, stickers, posters, and memes.

The work's conversational approach guides the reader to think about the diversity of social movements and how these different movements approach the archival process. Pulling together varied and provocative threads, Hoyer and Almeida weave each conversation into a series of themes that focus on 1) reconciling archival priorities with the needs of social movements and their communities; 2) increasing transparency about archival roles and practices; 3) placing social movements at the center of the archival conversation to shift approaches to description, attribution, use, and access to materials; and 4) facilitating communication and collaborative learning between archivists and activists. These themes also appear as headings in the introduction. Ultimately, Hoyer and Almeida demonstrate new ways in which archives support social movements through the transformation of archival spaces and new perspectives on archiving ephemera.

The authors stress the importance of open-ended conversations between archivists and social movement activists. Such conversations help both archivists and activists to understand each other's perspectives and to better contextualize cultural ephemera appropriately. The questions that Hoyer and Almeida pose to activists in the various chapters may be used to structure these critical conversations. Hoyer and Almeida use open-ended questions to draw out additional information that is not readily apparent in the archiving of cultural ephemera but may be core to the social movement. For example, in speaking with Sikowis, who works to find missing Indigenous women, the authors ask about the ideal person to care for collections. Sikowis suggests someone with cultural sensitivity training who understands the vulnerability of marginalized communities. This response shifts the archivist's traditional perspective of care and management of cultural ephemera to one that focuses more on the role of the social movement. Only by shifting archival practices can archivists connect with social movements and provide a critical understanding of cultural ephemera.

Hoyer and Almeida's backgrounds as trained archivists and educators in libraries, as well as long-term volunteers at the Interference Archive in New York City, provide them with a strong foundational knowledge of archives and archival practices within social movements. Both also have years of experience in organizing archival exhibitions, developing educational programs, and promoting local history through archives and libraries.¹ Their practical knowledge and experience allows them to critically examine the relationships between ephemera and social

movements as well as the “problematic gaps in cultural records that have excluded, minimized or mis-characterized the history of social movement activism and voice concerns about archival practices that might make [the social movements’] materials difficult to access or reuse” (p. 5). Moving beyond the traditional role of archival materials as objects to be “put away as a memory” (p. 36), banners, posters, stickers, and similar materials are intended to be shared and circulated to raise awareness of activist issues. The Next Epoch Seed Library is a good example of materials that are kept in circulation; seeds may be checked out from the library and then planted. The library also views the seeds as “living” things and not as objects of memory to store away (p. 179). By placing each social movement at the center of the archival paradigm, the focus of the archivists’ work moves from traditional archival practices around collection, preservation, and access toward practices that reflect the goals and actions of each social movement.

Within a critical theory framework,² *The Social Movement Archive* challenges not just archival concepts and practices, but also other frameworks such as feminism (represented by Grant), decolonization (Sikowis), queer theory (Cubacub), racism (Forman), Black studies (Whitehorn), Indigenous studies (Decolonize This Place), and environmentalism (Environmental Performance Agency). Although the authors’ conversations with activists and artists include questions about how archivists and researchers interpret, access, and share archival materials, the authors also ask about how these frameworks impact the way in which members of the public interpret materials. In one chapter, Cubacub discusses spearheading the QueerCrip dress reform movement that uses clothing as a “way of politicizing aesthetics, circumventing social constraints, and asserting power” (p. 121). Clothing design offers new and different interactions for the wearer within their societal environment. In turn, the clothes challenge queer theory through “radical visibility” (p. 22). In viewing clothing as part of the social movement and as a form of rejecting social conformity, clothes become part of the social record, an approach not traditionally considered in archival practices.

I found *The Social Movement Archive* to be poignant and applicable to my experience as an archivist at McGill University; the campus has student organizations and social movements similar to those described in various chapters. McGill’s campus is often the center of protests, demonstrations, and student-led projects and activism. These activities form part of the student experience, and social movement ephemera, such as the cloth red squares worn by students protesting tuition increases, “Demilitarize McGill” stickers, and protest banners, become evidence of the social movements themselves. Consequently, these movements are very much part of the university’s history, yet the ephemera may be passively collected until the social movements become legitimized as part of official university history.³ In reading Hoyer and Almeida’s interview with the War Resisters League (WRL), which discussed the mass distribution of ephemera and the inclusion of

the broader public in social movements, I saw parallels with the 2012 Quebec student protests about tuition. Students and supporters wore red squares as a symbol during these demonstrations. Much like the “practice non-violence” tags of the WRL, the squares on the McGill campus were adopted by several student organizations and used as a means of communicating issues around the increase of fees as well as the greater democratic administration of universities. As an archivist, *The Social Movement Archive* is a valuable tool for me to use in encouraging conversations between student-led social movements and the archives and in approaching the inclusion of social movements and political ephemera within the university archives and history.

Overall, *The Social Movement Archive* highlights an often underappreciated part of the sociocultural history of activism and presents new perspectives to archivists about the importance of preserving social movement ephemera. The authors provide excellent examples of how social movements and organizations understand, interact with, and interpret archives and the roles of archivists. The interview with Decolonize This Place is one such example. The discussion delves into the importance of banners in creating and holding space: because banners can act as barriers or as a means of “getting people plugged into the actions,” they are not just something to be displayed or stored in an archives (p. 33). Understanding the importance and use of cultural materials becomes a key element when archivists approach community organizations to acquire and appraise social movement ephemera. Even more importantly, each conversation (or chapter) in the book illustrates the relationship of archives to the disruption, upheaval, and transformation of activism without minimizing or negating how the materials are used by others or reducing the role of activists to that of simple donors. Activists provide perspectives and shared concerns about the skills and knowledge archivists need when acquiring social movement ephemera. The activists’ responses present a different understanding of or approach to acquisition, access, and ownership. For example, Forman sees ownership and attribution as collective—materials belong to the social movement rather than to an individual. In the case of posters, attribution would not necessarily be assigned to the main artist but to the social movement. It was not until archivists requested the artist’s name as posters were being deposited into the archives that names of the posters’ main artists were added to the material. When read through the perspective of the activist rather than the archivist, this book therefore exposes interesting and thoughtful questions for archivists to consider in terms of their roles and responsibilities, such as how social movements envision their materials being accessed, who social movements engage in their protests and projects (e.g., who is the audience), and how archivists should ascribe authorship to ephemera. I would highly recommend this book.

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NOTES

- ¹ This work is reflected in other articles written by Hoyer about primary sources and archives as pedagogical tools for civic engagement; see, for example, Jen Hoyer, “Out of the Archives and into the Streets: Teaching with Primary Sources to Cultivate Civic Engagement,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* 7, article 9 (2020), <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol7/iss1/9>. The strength of Hoyer’s knowledge on social movement ephemera is also demonstrated through her work at the Interference Archive and its exhibitions, such as “Finally Got the News”; see Interference Archive, “Finally Got the News,” last modified 2017, <https://interferencearchive.org/exhibition/finallygotthenews-2/>. Almeida is an associate professor at the New York City College of Technology, where she teaches library education and courses such as the place-based interdisciplinary Learning Places. Almeida is also the author of several articles, including “Interrogating the Collective: #Critlib and the Problem of Community,” in *The Politics of Theory and the Practice of Critical Librarianship*, ed. Karen P. Nicholson and Maura Seale (New York: Library Juice Press, 2018), 237–257, [www.https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs/233/](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ny_pubs/233/).
- ² Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, “Critical Feminism in the Archives,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no.2 (2017), <http://dx.doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.27>.
- ³ Hayley Wilson, “March for Archives: An Examination of Five Different Institutions and Their Collecting Efforts of Material from the March for Our Lives Protests” (master’s paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2019), https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/masters_papers/ks65hh60m.