

## Archiving Cultures: Heritage, Community, and the Making of Records and Memory

By Jeannette A. Bastian. New York: Routledge, 2023. 126 pp. Hardcover \$51.96, eBook \$19.96. Hardcover ISBN 9780367548261, eBook ISBN 9781003091813.

Jeannette Allis Bastian's book *Archiving Cultures: Heritage, Community, and the Making of Records and Memory* is the latest in a long, prolific, and accomplished line of scholarly articles and books, all demonstrating her expertise in archives. Recently retired, Bastian holds several degrees and has earned numerous awards for her work. She has spoken around the world, implemented inventive archival programs, and headed multiple organizations. Some of her previous publications include the book *Owning Memory: How A Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*<sup>1</sup> and the articles "Flowers for Homestead: A Case Study in Archives and Collective Memory"<sup>2</sup> and "A Question of Custody: The Colonial Archives of the United States Virgin Islands."<sup>3</sup> *Archiving Cultures* builds on Bastian's many works, which speak to her boundless passion for her subject.

The introduction to *Archiving Cultures* is a concise overview of what Bastian hopes to accomplish in this book. Almost immediately, Bastian acknowledges that the Western idea of what archives are meant to be and do was (and still is) heavily influenced by colonialism and bureaucratic practices that were implemented for purposes of control. Bastian argues, first and foremost, that Western "archives" are limited—the idea of rock art or cave paintings may not strike the reader as necessarily archival, but the society that left the art on the rocks or in the cave was telling its stories and recording its culture for its members and their descendants just as we now keep records of our policies and procedures for those who will come after us. Bastian uses this reasoning to offer an expanded idea of archives and to show that those tools, once used for purposes of oppression, can now speak as cautionary tales against those if we broaden our ideas and see archives as "instruments of political action" (p. 6).

*Archiving Cultures* is a compilation of essays by Bastian on different ideas that work around a central theme, specifically how archives can better serve marginalized populations whose records and memory are preserved in ways different from Western archives, yet no less valid. She builds on the work of Ivor Connolley, a Jamaican archaeologist; the culturalist Beverly Butler; and Ghanaian academic Edwina D. Ashie-Nikoi, as well as many others, to demonstrate expanded views of provenance, records, memory, and archival institutions. For Bastian, as well as for those she cites, the archival profession is ever-changing and must adapt to different ideas of what an archives is, based on how populations record their memories and shape their cultures.

In the essay “Cultural Heritage, Archival Heritage,” Bastian discusses the concepts of cultural and archival heritage, including how they relate to each other and who has the ability and power to define them. Bastian states that the Greco-Roman idea of text as the most valuable type of archives lent power to modern-day Western ideas of archives, propagated by UNESCO, which has set definitions for the ideas of heritage that Western archival institutions subscribe to. She also talks about the definitions of “record” and “provenance,” asking perhaps the most important question when one considers archiving through a colonial lens: who owns the records?

Bastian’s prose is uniquely consequence driven. Rather than asking questions without providing answers or offering a simple list of how our definitions of archival heritage and cultural heritage could change, Bastian analyzes possible answers to her questions and contemplates changes to these definitions. She also considers the impact of these changes, not just for Western archives, but for the people who keep their heritages alive through means other than traditional archiving. For Bastian, “heritage” is driven by community and connected to past, present, and future, as well as to how society understands itself (p. 19).

The question of what constitutes a record comes up again in Bastian’s second essay, “The Anatomy of an Archival Record.” Bastian shows particular skill here, providing the reader with competent and concise prose that relates the information in an accessible way; a person newly interested in archival work could read this book as easily as someone with twenty years of experience working in archives. Bastian defines an “archival” record, expanding on the traditional definition by including rock art, oral tales, message sticks, and other primary modes of preserving cultures not necessarily acknowledged in Western tradition. She provides the framework for what goes into archiving; here again, she speaks of the lasting effects of colonialism, redefining our idea of a record and illustrating the risks that some marginalized, oppressed groups took to make their records. The “archival record” is changeable, just as cultural and archival heritage are, and Bastian invites the reader to expand their ideas of what a record is and how it is made and preserved. Her discussion of the purposes of archival records on pages 40–42 of *Archiving Cultures* builds on her thoughts in the previous chapter regarding colonialism and archivism and becomes a profound theme throughout the rest of the book. If we expand our definition of archives, thinking of them not as materials but as “living bodies” (p. 45), then our entire perspective on what we are capable of as archivists expands as well.

In the next essay, “Oral Traditions and Memory Texts,” Bastian’s use of stories supports her earlier claim that the concept of archives must change to be inclusive and to stay relevant. She relates her own experience while living, working, and researching in St. Thomas in the US Virgin Islands of seeing an Indigenous father and son telling a folktale to their people in the public library, setting both her experience and said “folktale” down in text and thereby backing up her conclusions in previous chapters. Not only has Bastian witnessed the archives as a living body,

but she herself is now an archives, having witnessed expanded archival traditions in action. Bastian acknowledges her own cultural roots in the introduction to the book, saying that she is white, Jewish, female, and an immigrant who first arrived in the United States with her family and then moved to the Caribbean as a young adult, following that with a move to Jamaica (p. 10). Speaking of her status as a researcher and an academic who has devoted her career to the subject of archives, Bastian writes that her work, while influenced by the places and people with which she has had extensive contact, is still that of an “outsider” and that “navigating one’s place in a society that is not one’s own requires a willingness to recognize oneself from without as well as within” (p. 10). Finally, she acknowledges, “Whether all these experiences qualify me to reflect on cultural heritage, I cannot judge; . . . these varied experiences have convinced me of the centrality of community . . . and of the critical importance of cultural acknowledgement for community and personal identity” (p. 10).

Some of the details in “Oral Traditions and Memory Texts” may seem tangential, but Bastian has a knack for making her thought processes clear to the reader. For example, a long and somewhat confusing discussion on the differences between oral tradition and the written word may lead the reader to think that these differences are obvious, but then Bastian states that “a text is a formulation or phenomenon that can be ‘read’ for its meaning” (p. 58) and that performance and oral tradition are able to be “read” as well as any text. Thus, she cleverly uses buildup, historical and academic sources, and her own relation of the tale she witnessed to ascribe to oral tradition the same value as the written word.

Unexpectedly, however, Bastian challenges her own points in the next essay, “Carnival in the Archives: Performance as Record.” While making the case for the fluidity and nuance of performance, she asks, “Does the reading of oral expressions and cultural artifacts as ‘texts’ discount not so subtly the essential qualities that characterize the oral and the performative?” (p. 71). Working to change people’s ideas about a concept, as Bastian is attempting to do in this book, makes it inevitable that the reader will run into contradictory questions or questions that they cannot answer fully. Bastian grapples with both challenges here and admirably handles the struggle. Performance as archives, she argues, is more of a gray area than the written word or simple oral tradition—a video of a festival or parade, particularly the examples she uses of Carnevale and the Fourth of July Parade, cannot be the whole record, because it is simply impossible to grasp the nuance of that record. Bastian elegantly conveys her arguments while acknowledging that no simple answer exists to the questions she is asking and that this may be an aspect of her work that will never be fully grasped, all while assigning the same amount of value to performance that she gives to text and to oral tradition.

The idea of memory plays on all the essays in this book, as text, oral tradition, and performance all require some form of memory, whether individual

or community based. However, Bastian explores these connections in depth in “Memory, Community, and Records,” using memory theory and other scholarship. She then argues that memory’s fluidity is, in fact, its strength. This may seem at odds with the final essay, “In the Cultural Archives,” in which Bastian addresses the “cultural binaries” (p. 101) she has talked of throughout the book, such as what is tangible or intangible, performative or textual (while suggesting that these binaries can connect and in fact be stored together in an archives, building or otherwise). But this seeming change of direction from the fluidity of memory to the binary of culture has a point, which Bastian once again makes in a concise and undeniable manner: archives exist where the ideas that she has spent several essays detailing come together in practical, concrete, and beautiful ways. They are called “living archives” (p. 103), and examples include the *Circus Oz Living Archive*,<sup>4</sup> *A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*,<sup>5</sup> and *The Living Archive: Extinction Stories from Oceania*.<sup>6</sup> By providing readers with these examples and others, Bastian underscores her work and its value and redefines what an archives can be and who can be one, bringing home the overall theme mentioned early in the book: the sharing of humanity, or what we have in common with each other despite outward differences (p. 13).

*Archiving Cultures: Heritage, Community, and the Making of Records and Memory* is a masterful contribution to the archival literature meant for longtime archives scholars and practitioners, as well as for archival students looking to bring their own perspectives to the profession. Concerned not just with ideas and changes, but with actions and consequences brought about by those changes, Bastian discusses changing archival theory and the actions of archives across the world as they spearhead new ways to create records and preserve them for the betterment of their communities. By doing so, Bastian firmly sets down a comprehensive, brilliant book of essays dedicated to reforming what archives have been and still are, and showing the reader what they are becoming.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jeannette Allis Bastian, *Owning Memory: How A Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Jeannette Bastian, “Flowers for Homestead: A Case Study in Archives and Collective Memory,” *American Archivist* 72, no. 1 (2009): 113–32, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.72.1.k751734304667050>.

<sup>3</sup> Jeannette Bastian, “A Question of Custody: The Colonial Archives of the United States Virgin Islands,” *American Archivist* 64, no. 1 (2001): 96–114, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.64.1.h6k872252u2gr377>.

<sup>4</sup> *Circus Oz Living Archive*, 2014, <https://circusozlivingarchive.com/>.

- <sup>5</sup> *A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland*, 2022, <https://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/>, captured at <https://perma.cc/VNB3-NGJU>.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Living Archive: Extinction Stories from Oceania*, "About the Living Archive," <https://www.extinctionstories.org/about-the-living-archive/>, captured at <https://perma.cc/YR76-XRCW>.