

## Conceptualizing 21st-Century Archives

By Anne J. Gilliland. Chicago, Ill.: Society of American Archivists, 2014.  
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It is mind-boggling to maintain emotional and intellectual distance while living through a revolution. We now should agree that the early twenty-first century marks a turning point in the fourth revolution, the information revolution, a fundamental dislocation (along the lines of the challenges posed by Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud) that the philosopher Luciano Floridi writes must, once again, alter our perceptions of ourselves in relationship to the universe. For Floridi and an international school of thought for which he is the most prolific spokesperson, humans do not sit atop the pyramid of life but are “informationally embodied organisms, mutually connected and embedded in an informational environment, which we share with both natural and artificial agents similar to us in many respects.”<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years into the twenty-first century, it is clear that archivists are still coming to terms with the information revolution and need to embrace colleagues who dare to look backward and beyond the boundaries of such fundamental, transformative change.

In *Conceptualizing 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Archives*, Anne J. Gilliland draws on some of her most important writings over the past decade. She extends this important and influential work by incorporating the perspectives of an international coterie of archival scholars who themselves have been struggling to define the domain of archives as it had come to be understood by the end of the last century. Gilliland’s approach to charting the transition of archival thinking over the past decade is highly selective, informed more deeply by her research partnerships past and present than by any particular conceptual framework. The book is informed by a deep historical sensibility but is not a history of archival ideas in any formal sense of the term. Gilliland resists the temptation to predict the future, instead providing ample evidence for the likely trajectories of archival descriptive practices, electronic records and recordkeeping, and digital curation. Near the end, she hazards some recommendations for deeper investigation, but readers seeking signposts or guidance for navigating the information revolution might be disappointed.

Anne Gilliland is a scholar and an educator who has focused her research on the distinctive elements of the “archival paradigm” that may survive the massive adoption of information and communication technologies for nearly all

human transactions. Gilliland has built her scholarly career at the University of California, Los Angeles, where she has chaired the Department of Information Studies, founded the Center for Information as Evidence, and is now a full professor with an extraordinary track record in graduate education of archivists at the master's and doctoral levels. Her research is highly collaborative and international in scope. Indeed, between her long-standing and fruitful collaboration with Australian archival scholar Sue McKemmish, her deep engagement with the InterPARES research on authentic archival records, and her leadership with Elizabeth Yakel in directing the Archival Education and Research Institute, Gilliland is one of the few American archival scholars whose work is consistently informed by international perspectives.

Gilliland introduces her book as an effort to explore the lessons that the history of the archival field in the twentieth century has to offer twenty-first-century archivists. She summarizes her important work from 2000 to define the continuing relevance and value of core archival ideas for the digital world. Gilliland argues that seven emerging constructs are central to discussions of archives in the twenty-first century. Her consideration of postcustodial thinking, archivalization, communities of memory, community archives, cocreatorship, digital repatriation, and the archival multiverse is woven through the volume, and she provides definitions and pointers to important secondary literature.

Emerging constructs, however, do not provide structure for the book. Instead, Gilliland establishes the context of postcustodial archives (via F. Gerald Ham's classic 1981 article<sup>2</sup>) in a postmodern world and then presents three pairs of chapters on the nature of the archive, descriptive practices, and electronic records that move fluidly between historical insight and recent developments. Chapters 2 and 3 frame archival ideas in today's information communication technology revolution, followed by a historical treatment of the relevance of the documentation movement of the first half of the twentieth century. Gilliland largely succeeds in highlighting the distinctive archival point of view that crystallized a century ago and in demonstrating how parts of that view remain true and strong.

Chapters 4 and 5 work together as a survey of descriptive practices that emerged in the middle of the twentieth century and how archivists have adapted those practices through thirty years of digital technology innovation. Gilliland's synthesis is refreshing in its scope and a useful reminder that archival best practices have been and continue to be inextricably tied to national and international technology standards. As she moves through her story of innovation and development, Gilliland's perspective widens from its American foundation to encompass practices pioneered in Canada and Australia.

Gilliland's rhythm of juxtaposing historical analysis with contemporary issues continues with chapters 6 and 7, which focus on her deep scholarship

on digital recordkeeping and electronic records management. The foundation of these chapters is an important literature review that Gilliland prepared in 2005 for the *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*. In this new book, Gilliland builds on that analysis, updates concepts that have emerged in the intervening years, and provides pointers toward future developments. The extensive table of research projects in electronic records management is a very impressive overview of two decades of entangled experimentation, false starts, dead ends, and brilliant inspiration.

When Gilliland shifts her attention to the contribution of archival constructs to present and emerging digital technologies, she tends to sacrifice depth of analysis for breadth of coverage. The brief chapters 8 and 9 start with the “in the news” familiarity of personal archiving, social media, digital forensics, and cloud computing. Any one of these topics warrants a chapter, given the widening base of research across multiple disciplines. Similarly, Gilliland’s treatment of recordkeeping models seems cursory and out of place as a transition to her substantive writing on long-term sustainability. In chapter 10, Gilliland provides a very useful path through the complex and competing concepts of digital stewardship, preservation, curation, and their kin. The great service she provides in this chapter is to make the connection between enduring archival principles and a wide variety of national and international information and communication technologies. It is somewhat ironic that as fundamental archival principles become deeply embedded in the world’s cyberinfrastructure, archivists are increasingly in the position of reacting and reaching for the type of influence that they clearly exercised in the areas of metadata and digital records.

The last, short chapter in *Conceptualizing 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Archives* takes the form of a conclusion, but raises a serious challenge for practicing archivists. Gilliland states directly that “the ability to conceptualize archival ideas and practices . . . is an essential part of twenty-first-century archival work” (p. 256). But surrounding that unambiguous claim is her recognition that archival records “have become secondary to doing business” (p. 255) and also that archivists are the “profession of the record” whose essence is about evidence (p. 258). Gilliland is right to see the conundrum for professional archivists posed by the loss of control over the definition and implementation of archival principles in a digital, global world. Near the very end of her book, Gilliland asks a great question: what would archival principles look like if archivists started from scratch in the middle of today’s information revolution? Although she points backward to a century of growth of the archival paradigm, the real answer to her question may lie a hundred years hence, when archivists will know whether their ideas changed the world or the fourth revolution rendered them unrecognizable.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution: How the Infosphere Is Reshaping Human Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> F. Gerald Ham, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *The American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981): 207–216.

## Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia

By Michelle Caswell. *Critical Human Rights* series. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014. 246 pp. Softcover. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-299-29754-1.

The Khmer Rouge photographed prisoners at Tuol Sleng prison before executing them. These mug shots mutely attest to human rights crimes by the former Cambodian regime. As Michelle Caswell deftly examines the archival evidence of genocide, these photographs witness atrocities that are at once both “unspeakable” in their horror and also unspoken, due to the silence of the 5,109 killed at Tuol Sleng. Taking a “records-centered approach” to this topic, Caswell both explores the contributions archival theory can make to “the ongoing discussion about evidence, power, and historical production” and challenges archivists to “embrace their own power to counter the silences embedded in records, particularly those that document human rights abuse” (p. 7).

Written for archivists and nonarchivists alike, *Archiving the Unspeakable* contributes a vital perspective on social justice. It is essential reading for anyone interested in the ongoing discourse on archives and society. Carefully grounded in both historical and archival theory, this volume presents a nuanced case study of the mug-shot photographs with which the Khmer Rouge identified and controlled their victims. These images capture only a portion of those murdered at one of many extermination camps. Among the estimated 1.7 million victims of execution, starvation, or disease under the Khmer Rouge regime (one-quarter of the nation’s population), the dead of Tuol Sleng represent only a sliver of a sliver of those silenced during the four years from 1975 to 1979.

Caswell frames her analysis according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s concept of four key moments in which power relationships embed silences in historical analysis.<sup>1</sup> The first chapter, “The Making of Records,” echoes Trouillot’s “moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*).” The Khmer Rouge’s “systematic prison bureaucracy,” Caswell argues, “hinged on documentation” (p. 29). The photographs at the center of her analysis represent only one of many forms of records created by the regime. Placing these records in context, Caswell effectively traces these mug shots to earlier French colonial police photography and