

REVIEWS

“No Refuge in Complacency”

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The archival profession recently lost a brilliant archival scholar, educator, and advocate, Dr. David B. Gracy II. I was fortunate to know Dr. Gracy when I was a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. While I never had him as an instructor, the few opportunities I had to talk to him made a great impact on me. He was always generous with his time, knowledge, and encouragement. I will never forget a time at one of the UT Austin alumni reception “Roundups” when Dr. Gracy put a chair in the middle of the room and made everyone take turns standing on it and telling their fellow Longhorns what they had recently accomplished. We all had something to be proud of, and he made sure we knew the importance of advocating for ourselves as well. No accomplishment should go unnoticed.

Dr. Gracy’s powerful insights and archival advocacy continue to influence and instruct. In 1989, his article “Archivists, You Are What People Think You Keep” appeared in *American Archivist*. He recounted several cautionary tales of authors conjuring and perpetuating misconceptions—or worse—about archives. His fiery prose urged archivists against complacency:

... these authors in their several ways are delivering not only to us, but, worse, also to the society that supports archival endeavor, that message of uncertainty. We cannot let it go unchallenged. Instead, we must confront it at its most basic level by revising the ways we define—formally and informally—the material with which we work. There is no refuge in complacency, because, archivists, you are what people think you keep.¹

Misperceptions of archives and archivists perpetuate harmful ideas about archives that undermine our work and missions. At the same time, books published by users of archives can open our eyes to gaps in the archival record and underscore the importance of contesting and addressing archival silences. I was reminded of Dr. Gracy when I listened to a recent interview with author Maaza Mengiste,² not because of a misconception about archives, but because Dr. Gracy’s message of noncomplacency also applies to gaps in the archival record. Mengiste discussed her recently published novel *The Shadow King*, which

tells the stories of women soldiers during the 1935 invasion and attempted colonization of Ethiopia by the fascist Italian army. These women “. . . were left out of the historical record,”³ and, as Mengiste’s interview notes, records by and about women who fought in this war proved difficult to find. This was especially the case in the archives in Rome, where she was conducting research for *The Shadow King* and which contained “. . . documents [that] were fascist-approved”⁴ and replete with propaganda. These records thus tell only one side of the story. Mengiste resorted to antique stores and markets to locate journals, correspondence, and photographs that would give her insight into the stories of the women soldiers who were missing from this narrative. In no small way, this interview presents a story of archival research that should resonate deeply with archivists, but the archival silences Mengiste mentions should also trouble us. Dr. Gracy’s example moves us to address them.

This issue of *American Archivist* presents nine reviews that engage with literature about archival research—and by extension, representations of archives—and also publications by archivists who exemplify the very message of noncomplacency that Dr. Gracy advocated. Kathryn M. Neal reviews *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature* by Jean-Christophe Cloutier. Neal’s review engages with the challenges and insights of Cloutier’s research on African American literary archives, and the new questions archivists should ask themselves when acquiring, arranging and describing, and providing access to these materials. Another review engages with a book that highlights the archival research process: Dan Harper assesses Robert A. Caro’s *Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing*, which discusses Caro’s research at and representation of archival repositories, such as the LBJ Library. Additionally, Deborah A. Garwood analyzes E. Thomas Ewing and Katherine Randall’s edited *Viral Networks: Connecting Digital Humanities and Medical History* and the volume’s discussion and examples of applying network analysis to archival materials. These three reviews illustrate ways archivists can glean insights from a variety of examples of archival research.

Other reviews look at publications that seek to connect users and stakeholders with archives in meaningful ways. Anna Trammell’s review of *Teaching Undergraduates with Archives*—edited by Nancy Bartlett, Elizabeth Gadelha, and Cinda Nofziger—focuses on another important user community of archives and on the lessons learned from the volume’s case studies that can inspire new ways of approaching archival instruction. Building on this user engagement, Siham Alaoui’s review delves into strategies for creating more participatory and equitable access to archives as presented in *Participatory Archives: Theory and Practice*, edited by Edward Benoit III and Alexandra Eveleigh. Kathleen D. Roe’s *Advocacy and Awareness for Archivists* brings together vital strategies and ideas for communicating about archives and advocating their importance, and Jessica Bitter’s

review explores the value and instructiveness of Roe's volume. In the review of *Partners for Preservation: Advancing Digital Preservation through Cross-Community Collaboration*, edited by Jeanne Kramer-Smyth, Krista M. Oldham discusses the publication's premise that digital preservation requires collaboration to be successful.

Last, reviews of two publications consider the impact of new and evolving technologies on archives. Mike Shallcross assesses Luciana Duranti and Corinne Rogers's edited volume *Trusting Records in the Cloud*, which ". . . fills an important gap in the professional literature by directly addressing questions of how to establish and maintain trust in records and systems." And, Rachel MacGregor reviews *Responsible Operations: Data Science, Machine Learning, and AI in Libraries* by Thomas Padilla. MacGregor considers how archivists can apply Padilla's insights to ethically and responsibly use artificial intelligence technologies and data science principles in library and archival contexts.

Dr. Gracy wrote, ". . . one of the most fundamental, recurring, and easily seen messages of and lessons in history is that where one is not moving forward, one is moving backward. Complacency is not moving forward."⁵ Reviewing and engaging with literature about archives helps us continue to move forward, so we can understand public perceptions of archives and take note where more work is yet to be done.

NOTES

- ¹ David B. Gracy II, "Archivists, You Are What People Think You Keep," *American Archivist* 52, no. 1 (1989): 78, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.52.1.73j6730385023k87>.
- ² "A Conversation on 'The Shadow King' with Author Maaza Mengiste," interview by Greta Johnsen, *Nerdette Bookclub*, WBEZ Chicago, September 11, 2020, <https://www.wbez.org/stories/a-conversation-about-the-shadow-king-with-maaza-mengiste/bc01683c-c9e6-46a9-98b5-22a1cc11e851>, captured at <https://perma.cc/35TK-BBL3>.
- ³ Maaza Mengiste, *The Shadow King* (New York: WW. Norton & Co., 2019), back cover.
- ⁴ "A Conversation on 'The Shadow King'," audio, 12:02.
- ⁵ Gracy, "Archivists," 78.