

Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World. BILL ADAIR, BENJAMIN FILENE, and LAURA KOLOSKI, eds. Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011. 436 p. ISBN 978-0-9834803-0-3.

Letting Go? consists of twenty-six thought pieces, case studies, published interviews, and commissioned art from almost thirty leading heritage practitioners. Published by the prestigious Philadelphia-based Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, this volume's gorgeous production risks academic credibility with its colourful tabs, alluring textured matte cover, and charming French flaps that seem more suited for a coffee table than a reference shelf. The design, however, is perfectly appropriate for the content, and, most importantly, the text is well written, informative, and rigorous in its descriptions of concepts and theory. Chapters are punctuated with illustrations and photographs, giving the reader a visual idea of the projects and design techniques described. The book is the culmination of a three-year project led by editors Bill Adair, Director of the Heritage Philadelphia Program; Benjamin Filene, Associate Professor and Director of Public History at the University of North Carolina; and Laura Koloski, Senior Program Specialist at the Heritage Philadelphia Program. Together, the editors guide readers to current thinking about participatory approaches to museum practices and provide examples of how innovative design can engage museum audiences "from the bottom up."

Despite a growing body of archival literature that evokes Archives 2.0 (see Kate Theimer's book *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections Between Archives and Our Users*, reviewed in *Archivaria* 74¹), archives remain very much behind museums in their inclinations toward participatory approaches. As the editors note in their thoughtful introduction, "digital technologies and social media only partially account for the willingness of museums to explore, at least tentatively, relaxing their control over historical accountability" (p. 11). From the emergence of "new social history" in the 1960s to the so-called culture wars of the 1990s,² museum workers have scrambled to respond to shifting audience

1 Kathryn Harvey, review of *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections Between Archives and Our Users*, ed. Kate Theimer, *Archivaria* 74 (Fall 2012): 229–33.

2 This expression "culture wars" was introduced in the early 1990s by sociologist James Davison Hunter to describe what he saw as a significant polarization in American culture and politics. He argued that an increasing number of defining issues, such as homosexuality, abortion, censorship, and privacy, produced conflict between those Americans whose cultural values were considered more conservative or traditional and those considered progressive or liberal. While in the United States this ideological division had a significant impact on national politics, culminating in the presidential elections of 1992 and 1996, culture wars in Canada have been less pronounced. The expression is most commonly used in reference to the Quebec sovereignty movement, Aboriginal conflicts, and Western alienation. However, recent debates concerning hot-button issues such as the gun registry and net neutrality have produced increasing hostility between conservative and liberal Canadians, suggesting the emergence of a new era of culture wars.

demands for more inclusive exhibits that reflect ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as critical programming that challenges gaps in the collections. Museums have also developed strategies to counter the perception that they are exclusive institutions, relevant only to a small fraction of society. Perhaps most surprising, museums are starting to admit to their own limitations. On her blog *Museum 2.0*, contributor Nina Simon has frequently written about the ways in which traditional museums are constrained by their conservative structures and often seek out the expertise of external culture makers to produce thoughtful and creative programming for audiences that might not otherwise visit the museum. In these endeavours, historical authority is extra-institutional, although museums still remain a central part of its construction.

This is not to say that museum workers have found it easy to let go of their traditional roles as cultural authorities; as many of the contributions to *Letting Go?* convey, sharing authority is often a gamble and success not easily evaluated. Their expertise, however, has been more frequently and visibly challenged than anything we have experienced in the archives. Indeed, the book's four main sections, (1) authority and the web, (2) communities as curators, (3) sharing authority through oral history, and (4) artists and historical authority, represent the ways in which museums experience challenges to their competence. An additional section by Tom Satwicz and Kris Morrissey, which offers invaluable insight into research-based practice and the evaluation of public curation, really deserves better framing against the other, more robust sections. All other sections include an introductory note and several chapters; this section consists of only one single, albeit important chapter.

Archivists will find value in the case studies of projects, such as Melissa Rachleff's description of an artist-in-residence program at the Rosenbach Museum and Library or Benjamin Filene's piece about an exhibit at the Minnesota History Centre in which visitors can walk through a re-creation of a single, ordinary house in St. Paul. Each case provides a description of a non-traditional outreach project and notes from the program designers about the challenges and opportunities these projects presented – a good resource for archivists looking to develop outreach programs that incorporate museum sensibilities. In particular, these stories will be useful for archivists who work in institutions with gallery or exhibit spaces, or who are part of larger heritage institutions with exhibition programs. The commissioned piece by Otabenga Jones, which explores the relationship between artists and historical authorities, brings an interesting and critical user perspective, but seems out of place among the other contributions because it has a completely different tone and purpose. Thus, the editors' motives for including it remain unclear. Without additional pieces written by museum visitors and researchers, Otabenga's contribution feels tacked on.

Perhaps most relevant to archivists is the series of pieces capturing current thinking about participatory approaches to heritage. Nina Simon, for example, provides a short introduction to the participatory museum, a concept that she

has developed in a full-length book. In “Participatory Design and the Future of Museums,” she admits that most participatory content is only “compelling to highly specific and limited audiences” (p. 19). She goes on to describe a participatory institution as one that (1) displays user-generated content, (2) identifies popular or provocative collections and alerts the audience, (3) helps visitors find others who share their interests, and (4) provides a forum through which visitors can engage heritage professionals to seek contextual information about objects, add to the collection, or make suggestions for how to better represent collections. She claims, “Participatory techniques are particularly useful when institutions are trying to connect with members of the public who are not frequent museum-goers, people who might feel alienated, dissatisfied, or uninspired by museum experiences” (p. 21). Archivists might consider adapting Simon’s participatory museum concept to validate decisions to accept user-generated finding aids or invite researchers to contribute complementary metadata.

Michael Frisch provides one of the more important contributions in *Letting Go?* Professor and Senior Research Scholar in the Department of History at the University at Buffalo, Frisch is a frequent commentator on the implications of new digital methodologies for public history, pedagogy, and community-based documentation projects. In his piece, he reflects on his groundbreaking 1990 book *A Shared Authority*, which first introduced the problem of museums’ reticence to acknowledge oral and public history in core interpretation and curation tasks. As Frisch claims, these histories challenge heritage professionals to admit that we are not the “sole interpreters” of the past. Rather, “the interpretive and meaning-making process is in fact shared by definition – it is inherent in the dialogic nature of an interview, and in how audiences receive and respond to exhibitions and public history interchanges in general” (p. 127). Authorship and authority are shared. Frisch’s call for museums to become more open and to incorporate user-generated content into their collections is at the heart of *Letting Go?* Still, he remains cautious about the wholesale adoption of user-generated content and worries about the potential commodification of histories by corporate interests in Flickr, YouTube, and other documentation technologies. He is also careful to note that the temptation of scale does not necessarily make for more inclusive heritage. YouTube may capture the voices of thousands, but some remain marginalized by the ever-expanding digital divide. Ultimately, Frisch remains concerned that the production of histories will again fall into the control of an elite, this time comprising those who can access technologies to record and broadly disseminate these histories. More does not make better.

Both Frisch and Benjamin Filene describe the work of StoryCorps, a traveling non-profit initiative that invites Americans to record their stories and promises to deposit them with the Library of Congress. Frisch shares concerns that StoryCorps does not collect histories using any set of professional standards, and it does so with an emotionally charged mission inspired by the work of Alan Lomax and Studs Terkel. Nevertheless, Filene defends StoryCorps for its

transformative potential as it sets out to “spark a shift in historical understanding: it wants to demonstrate powerfully, viscerally, exhaustively that ordinary people shape history” (p. 176).

Archivists, like historians, have been trained to be wary of subjective interpretations, particularly when it comes to the tasks of accessioning and appraisal. What *Letting Go?* brings to our attention is that sharing authority requires us to admit that we are emotional about our work and it is not easy to let go. There is much to be learned from our museum colleagues, in particular how to balance our professional duties to develop and care for collections for future use and our responsibility to serve the present needs of our publics, including people who will never set foot in the archives. What Adair, Filene, and Koloski promise is that sharing authority may throw light on the limitations of heritage institutions, but it also reasserts the expertise of heritage workers. Sharing does not mean giving over. It does, perhaps, mean a significant shift in our cultural roles from “sole interpreters” to “cultural facilitators.” Once we have admitted to our vulnerabilities, we can then move on to serve as stewards of cultural history and provide guidance, when requested, to audiences who would like to take the making of heritage into their own hands.

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A Tyranny of Documents: The Performing Arts Historian as Film Noir Detective. Performing Arts Resources, vol. 28. STEPHEN JOHNSON, ed. New York: Theatre Library Association, 2011. xiii, 353 p. ISBN 978-0-932610-24-9.

This twenty-eighth volume in the Theatre Library Association’s monograph series, Performing Arts Resources (PAR), contains thirty-nine essays dedicated to the late Brooks McNamara, one of the key figures in theatre and performance studies in North America. As illustrious scholar Don B. Wilmeth describes him in the foreword, McNamara was the “Master of the Archive” and was an excellent detective when it came to following research clues. Edited by Stephen Johnson, himself one of the most prominent contemporary performing arts scholars in North America, *A Tyranny of Documents* presents insightful contributions that illustrate the many aspects of performing arts history research conducted in archives. All the essays have one thing in common: their authors are researchers who never take anything for granted and who go to great lengths to get to the heart of the matter at hand. They are open to surprises and to being taken in unforeseen directions.

Introducing the essays, Johnson outlines several threads that run through the course of the book. These can be grouped as follows: the elusiveness of documentation (for example, documents that should exist but are nowhere to be