

Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala. KIRSTEN WELD. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. xvi, 335 pp. ISBN 978-0-8223-5597-7.

In Terry Cook's article *The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country*, he laments that the archives "is a foreign country to many historians. Of course, it is one they visit frequently but perhaps mainly as tourists passing through, focusing on their guidebooks, intent on capturing appealing views, but overlooking their surroundings, not talking to the local inhabitants about what they do, thus failing to understand the country's real character and animating soul."¹ *Paper Cadavers* is clear evidence that Kirsten Weld is no tourist, and her book is an exception to the general indifference and disregard that Cook accuses historians of giving the archives and the archivists that work within them. Weld, an assistant professor in the Department of History at Harvard University, has created an institutional history of the secret police archives of Guatemala, looking at the political, social, and financial drivers of its creation. In four sections – Explosions at the Archives, Archives and Counterinsurgency in Cold War Guatemala, Archives and Social Reconstructions in Postwar Guatemala, and Past Present and the Future Imperfect – Weld examines the creation of the archives and the archival processes that are carried out therein, articulating the reasons the work done by archivists and other non-professional workers merits attention. She looks at the history of the police force from an organizational history perspective, and through interviews with employees and archivists she presents an oral history of not only the tasks they undertake, but also the effect of their employment on their emotional well-being. She concludes by delving into the roles that archives (as institutions) and archivists play in articulating ideas around memory, subjectivity, and the writing of history.

In 2005, the police archives almost literally exploded onto the fraught political landscape of Guatemala. Documents long thought destroyed, or indeed thought never to have existed (as had been claimed during various attempts to gain access to the information), were uncovered during a search for possible flammable materials located near munitions depots. The size of the cache was enormous; over eighty million documents were found mouldering in the outbuildings of the police headquarters in Guatemala City. Upon their discovery, concern for the documents came from many different quarters with many different fears: Would the records quickly disappear now that people knew they were there? Would they physically survive their environment? Would they ever be accessible? Should they be accessible? Although they were "routine" police records, they documented police actions during the civil war and counterinsurgency campaigns carried out between 1960 and 1996 by the Guatemalan police against activists or suspected activists who routinely "disappeared" or were tortured. Many people wanted access to the documents,

but no one seemed to want the political responsibility of managing that reality. Nor were there people capable or experienced enough to deal with the physical encumbrance of processing the papers. The dirty, messy, politically charged work that was needed to haul this material out of deteriorating piles in order to create an accessible digitized collection is the focus of Weld's book.

Differing from many academic discussions that often theorize about a Derridean or Foucauldian ideal of "the archive," Weld's book celebrates the physical existence and presence of the archives. This is not to say it is not also theoretical. Refreshingly, the theory has been deeply rooted in the very mechanics, concepts, ideas, and practices that are carried out in an archives and that lend themselves to the realization of this construction. Weld ties archival concepts such as provenance and original order into these larger theoretical discussions, pointing out that this archival thinking has an important role to play when using records in a legal process such as the pursuit of human rights justice. While the archival bond and archivists' sanctity around trying to preserve it may seem unimportant or illogical to those untrained in the profession, knowing who may have seen a particular document, and when they may have seen it, could translate into who could be charged with particular human rights abuses.

Differing again from work done by other historians, Weld does not fetishize the documents, revelling in the historian's intimate encounter with the dusty and musty relics of the past, which is often the case when archives get positive attention in historical texts. In point of fact, when she started this research, Weld was required to sign a confidentiality agreement explicitly agreeing not to publish the information contained in the documents. While the information is at the heart of the matter and behind the motivation to save and promote this archives, Weld's history of how those documents came to be opened and accessible is a far more compelling story about the practice of politics and the role of "archival thinking" in projects such as this. As Weld states in her introduction, "I tell the history of the archives as a way of telling the history of the war" (p. 12).

The more formal historical text that Weld constructs from her time spent with this material comprises the second section of the book, entitled "Archives and Counterinsurgency in Cold War Guatemala," which, through archival eyes, is essentially an administrative history of the various factions, groups, corps, and units that made up the Guatemalan police force's counterinsurgency movement. This history is an important and contextualizing part of the book, helping the reader who may be unfamiliar with the history of the insurgency movement in Guatemala to gain background about and insight into the records. Going further, Weld talks not only about the salvation of the police archives, but also the creation of the documents that came to comprise it. The desire to document, the need to actually create physical traces of actions, particularly in the context of human rights abuses, is an interesting and crucial element

of this book. A thought-provoking irony is presented in her examination of the role of the United States in this project. Starting in the late 1950s, the US government provided records management training to the Guatemalan police during their counterinsurgency campaigns, promoting effective social control through effective recordkeeping. As Weld states, “U.S. assistance in matters archival cannot be separated from U.S. assistance in matters more broadly counterinsurgent” (p. 93). Their assistance led directly to the creation of this archives, which now involves a number of US aid organizations and a cast of foreign governmental groups that are financing the salvation, protection, and dissemination of the archives in pursuit of human rights justice.

The section entitled “Archives and Social Reconstructions in Postwar Guatemala” offers a unique and powerful examination of the very human side of community archiving projects and the benefits and perils of this work for the members of that community. Those who began the work of processing the secret police archives were often those same people whose families and friends were being surveilled or made to disappear by the police. In some cases, the community workers themselves were the subjects of the archives. Hearing the voices of those so deeply involved on so many levels in this archives adds an emotional charge to this book. As Weld contends, for many of these community members, the archival work “acted as a finger in the wound, compounding pains still acutely felt” (p. 155). Having worked alongside the community members for a year and a half, Weld is always respectfully conscious in her study of these individuals and the psychological toll it took on them to carry out their jobs, and she presents an important narrative for those interested in community archiving. In the portrait of this project as a community archives, Weld also examines the nature of institutional bureaucracy. She highlights the conflicts between what she calls the “artisanal” quality of the work at the beginning of the project and the bureaucratization of the process that came later. It is amazing to learn that there was one point in the project when over two hundred people were employed. The operational needs of a project of this size often seemed at odds with the nature of a community archives project, and there are valuable lessons here for archivists about working with participatory communities and hoping to utilize subjectivity in building archives from the ground up in a meaningful way.

If there is one criticism of the book, and it is a stretch to find one, it might be that it tries to cover too much ground. It could be three different books – the creation of the archives, the history of the police force, and the sociological look at the community workers. However, all three themes are intertwined, none would be better served by looking at them in isolation, and Weld has given archivists what they are always asking for: context.

While promoted as a “history book,” Weld’s publication is a serious contribution to archival literature. Weld places front and centre the activities carried out within the archival walls in human rights struggles. While this is about

the police archives of Guatemala, it is also about archives in general and the sometimes strained and tenuous positions in which they find themselves in relation to the powers that fund, operate, and sanction them. Even for archivists who have visited the country or who live there, not only is it reaffirming to examine archival practice and theories in a very real world setting, seeing the challenges and benefits of our professional process through this particular lens, but it is also revelatory of our own subjectivity in what we do.

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