

***Decolonizing the Caribbean Record: An Archives Reader.***

Jeannette A. Bastian, John A. Aarons, and Stanley H. Griffin, eds.  
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“The Last Bastion of Colonialism: Decolonizing Caribbean Archives” was the title of Stanley Griffin’s paper at the Association of Canadian Archivists’ annual conference in 2020, its title alone indicating how different decolonization looks from the Caribbean than from Canada. From Griffin’s position as lecturer in archives at the University of the West Indies (UWI) at Mona, Jamaica, colonialism was down to its “last bastion,” the archives. In Canada, there remain many bastions of colonial power: Canada may have exited the British Empire a century earlier than Jamaica, but we merely exchanged a distant colonial government for a settler government that practices its own forms of colonialism.

This difference in perspective is perhaps the best reason for Canadian archivists to pick up this excellent volume of essays, edited by Griffin along with Jeannette Bastian and John Aarons. Archives in the Caribbean face a host of challenges that may be unfamiliar to Canadian archives, including “a tropical environment characterized by high temperatures, recurrent natural disasters, and the susceptibility of pest and insect infestation,” (p. 11) as well as many with which we are also familiar, such as the disparity between mandates and funding, the difficulty of catching and holding the attention of users and funders, and the frequent inadequacy of facilities to archival work. Whatever these similarities

and differences, in thinking through and responding to the challenges of decolonization, Caribbean archivists are far in advance of most archivists in Canada and the United States, if this volume is any indication.

Bastian, Aarons, and Griffin have given themselves a generous canvas: 816 oversized pages, densely printed, delivering 39 essays, by 38 contributors, and a brief but trenchant editors' introduction. Upon this oversized canvas, they have depicted an appropriately vast subject: Caribbean culture, breaking through in a dazzling sunrise, as characterized by Nobel laureate Derek Walcott: "There is a force of exultation, a celebration of luck, when a writer finds himself a witness to the early morning of a culture that is defining itself, branch by branch, leaf by leaf, in that self-defining dawn, which is why especially at the edge of the sea, it is good to make a ritual of the sunrise" (p. 4). This is a visualization of the task that Bastian, Aarons, and Griffin set for themselves, combining the breaking of the night of colonization with the force of creativity that animates so much of Caribbean culture and achievement.

Key to that dawning archival decolonization in the Caribbean, and to the genesis of this volume, is the launch of the region's first Master of Arts in Archives and Records Management, at UWI in 2016. The editors explain that "these essays are meant to serve as educational tools for students and models for archivists in the region" (p. 6). Faced with an archival literature that skews toward theorizing and case studies from Europe, North America, and Australia, and recognizing the inadequacy of this literature to support their vision of a decolonizing archival theory and practice in the Caribbean, the editors have assembled a body of case studies, practical guidance, and theory that would better suit these needs. The book is studded throughout with textbook-style expositions of specific aspects of records work. Among the best of these are Aarons' essay on the collection, management, and use of private archives (one of four pieces he wrote or co-wrote); Cheri-Ann Beckles' treatment of information rights (including rights of access to information, privacy, and intellectual property); and Elizabeth F. Watson's detailed exposition of the cultural need for, and technical requirements of, archives of sound recordings. As a Canadian archival educator, I found these pieces to be engaging, up-to-date, and well-rounded, and I intend to make use of several in my own teaching. Graduates of the UWI MA in records work undoubtedly will keep this reader close at hand as they transition to the workplace, and so will have a handy reference guide and a perennial source of professional development. All of the essays have a

distinctly Caribbean flavour, and many, including Gracelyn Cassell's contribution on natural disasters and disaster planning and Margot Thomas's look at archival outreach through Caribbean festivals and other public events, focus on opportunities and challenges specific to the region.

Grounding and enriching this professional guidance are a series of essays that lay out the history of archiving and records management in the region, each contributing to a larger understanding of the impact of colonization on Caribbean society and records work. Through these essays, the reader understands a rough periodization of the history of records and memory work into pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial<sup>1</sup> eras, with a new era of revitalized and resurgent Caribbean culture currently underway. The pre-colonial era is represented through essays that discuss the genocide of the First Peoples through disease and at the hands of European conquerors and colonizers, and through an extended treatment of the archaeological evidence of Taino culture in Jamaica by noted archaeologist Ivor C. Connoley. The colonial era is well represented in many of the pieces, which are peppered with angry denunciations of oppressions and human rights violations perpetrated upon Caribbean peoples by a range of European colonizers. Verna Penn Moll, former National Librarian and Chief Records Management Officer of the British Virgin Islands, notes, "The countries of the Caribbean share a common history of exploitation, colonialism and slavery, and the records of the business transactions of those plantation societies, however brutal, form the nucleus of Caribbean archives" (p. 126). Many of these pieces discuss the unjust removal and holding of colonial records in archives outside the region, often in the national archives of former colonizers, including British, French, Spanish, and American archives. One invaluable counter-example is provided by Rita Tjien Foooh, who describes the long campaign and recent success of the National Archives of Suriname in securing the return of the records of the colonization of Suriname from the National Archives of the Netherlands. This essay should be studied by all archives that hold colonial archives distant from the people who were colonized. Appropriately, costs for the construction of the requisite archival facility and

1 I am using the term *post-colonial* as it is used in this volume: to indicate the era following the departure of the various countries from the British Empire. I am mindful of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's warning that "Naming the world as 'post-colonial' is, from Indigenous perspectives, to name colonialism as finished business." Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012), 101. As several essays in the volume demonstrate, the post-colonial era in the Caribbean was marked by the continuance of oppressive practices and beliefs from the colonial era.

for the return of the archives were borne by the Dutch, who for centuries had extracted wealth from Suriname.

What I am calling the post-colonial era here – the era in which Caribbean nations were finally freed from colonial shackles, in the 1960s for the most part – is represented by the many essays that explore specific national experiences and record or memory traditions throughout the region, and by Sharon Alexander-Gooding's thoughtful treatment of the records of the West Indies Federation of 1958–62. The terrible impact of colonialism within the sweep of Caribbean history is perhaps best represented in those essays that provide focused discussions of the history of records work in individual nations. A reader unfamiliar with this history might read "Distant, Damaged, Destroyed and/or Disappearing: The Archival Records of Tobago," by Rita Pemberton, to get a sense of how this history has unfolded and of its consequences for Caribbean nations today. This attention to the experiences of colonialism specific to individual Caribbean nations and, in many essays, even to individual people and families, is a strong expression of how deeply rooted the volume is in historiographical sensibilities. This results in a collection that pays attention to the variety of experiences in the region while still providing a cohesive portrait of something that might be called Caribbean colonialism writ large, which is distinct from experiences of colonialism in Canada and elsewhere. An essay by Aarons and Sharon Alexander-Gooding on "Historical Developments in Caribbean Archives and Record Keeping" notes that Caribbean colonizers had little interest in history, culture, or records – not even their own. Throughout the Caribbean, records were alternately destroyed, neglected, abandoned, or removed once they ceased to have administrative or legal value; colonial administrators and workers focused primarily on extracting wealth, even as colonists in other parts of the Americas initiated historic societies and proto-archiving began. "As far as Britain was concerned," write Aarons and Alexander-Gooding, "the colonies were plantations and not settled communities that needed to preserve records for their own use" (p. 14).

The focus of the volume, however, is on the current era of revitalization and resurgence in Caribbean culture, and it is here that Canadian archivists – despite different colonial experiences – may recognize affinities with archival decolonization in Canada and, indeed, will be drawn to the keen analysis and bold prescriptions presented here. As the literature on archival decolonization continues to grow, we are starting to see a set of strategies and best practices emerge. The reader offers a crash course for Caribbean and non-Caribbean

archivists on the kinds of policies, practices, and mindsets that are essential to the task of archival decolonization, providing a wealth of excellent essays on this aspect of Caribbean archiving.

Archivists may be surprised to see their familiar world, viewed through a decolonizing lens, turned upside down. Official records often are among the least valuable to a post-colonial society, while also being the most plentiful in the archives, where they were often the principal focus of past records work. Genealogy, too often considered the harmless pursuit of amateur family historians, is revealed to be deeply political and essential to communicating with ancestors and to enabling them to tell their own stories of resistance and survival. Built environments, monuments, and museums are treated as archival records. Oral traditions, ceremony, and performance are examined to determine how an appropriate record might be located and accessed within them, not necessarily in order to extract it, but perhaps to understand such oral traditions as a form of archive or social memory in their own right. Archivists, far from being neutral keepers or custodians, are themselves activist memory keepers, fighting to keep social memory alive and making precious recordings of performances or oral histories – often of events that otherwise have no records, minimal records, or only racist and colonialist records among current archives. This is not work for the timid or retiring: it requires a commitment to decolonization, a passion to reverse injustices, and a willingness to depart from established approaches and precepts of Western archival theory and practice.

Indigenous archivists of Turtle Island may well read the volume and find its themes familiar, as so much of this has been loudly and clearly stated by Indigenous archivists, scholars, knowledge keepers, and memory workers in the past few decades. For settlers like myself, *Decolonizing the Caribbean Record* offers both analysis and a game plan. For example, Pedro L.V. Welch, in “Reparations and the Historical Record,” offers an engrossing critical reading of colonial records, paying particular attention to records of enslavement. Focusing his efforts on scattered and incomplete records that are still in the Caribbean, Welch demonstrates that genealogical research is central to advancing the case for reparations and “groundings with the ancestors” (p. 312). Several of the essays explore Caribbean carnival and masquerade (or *mas*) as major cultural forms that present distinct challenges to archivists. Included among these is one of only three reprints in the reader, Jeannette Bastian’s essential study of carnival on the US Virgin Islands, as well as a new essay by Lorraine Nero on “Documenting Trinidad and Tobago’s Mas.”

Bastian and Nero's thoughts on archiving mas address the urgent need to create archives of unique cultural forms like mas and rich but ephemeral events like carnival – always recognizing that the appropriate response is rarely the simple solution of recording, extracting, documenting, and owning. Woven throughout the volume is, above all, a concern for voice and ownership in all of its dimensions: the spoken words of those left out of colonial archives and colonial histories, like Thomas “Sugar” Riley in Gracelyn Cassell's essay “Capturing Personal Stories, Oral Histories and Microhistories: A Case Study from Montserrat”; the carefully preserved broadcast records of the anti-authoritarian Radio Haiti-Inter in Laura Wagner's essay on the digitization project she is running out of Yale University; the support for the oral traditions practiced by Rastafari at their reasonings, as described by Griffin in his article “‘Putting Up Ah Resistance’: Rastafari Records, Struggles and Triumphs.” It is frequently noted that Caribbean archives must pay attention to audio recordings of music and performance as well as spoken words. Another running theme is that any Caribbean archives must do justice to the artistry and creativity of Caribbean people and not just collect the official records of institutions and governments.

It would be entirely appropriate to offer not one but four reviews of this volume, as it contains at least four different “books”: (1) a primer on archival studies, for use in the Master of Arts in Archives and Records Management at UWI; (2) a survey of the history of archives in the Caribbean; (3) a collection of in-depth case studies of archives and records management in more than a dozen Caribbean nations; and (4) a nuanced, thoughtful, and forceful exploration of how to decolonize archival collections, services, and institutions throughout the Caribbean. Perhaps that is why this review is four times longer than it might have been! In the final analysis, however, these are not disparate topics or projects. For instance, they all come together in Griffin's essay on Rastafari records. Griffin explores the history of the Rastafari movement, which he characterizes as a folk religion emerging in the 1930s as well as a social movement and framework that creates something unique out of African retentions and Afro-centrism, Judeo-Christian beliefs, and a radical reading of the Bible from an Afro-centric perspective. “Rastafari emerged as a space for resistance to the oppressive hegemony of post-emancipation society,” with no distinct leadership or structure but, “in very loose terms, a community” (p. 478). Blending oral histories of the notorious Bad Friday atrocities – committed against Rastafari in 1963 at Coral Gardens to make way for the development of Montego Bay, much

as Winnipeg eradicated the Métis settlement of Rooster Town in the 1950s and Halifax dismembered the Black settlement of Africville in the 1960s – with his knowledge of the connections between reggae music and the Rastafari movement and of the unique ceremonial or philosophical form of the Rastafari reasoning, Griffin offers an affecting and profound assessment of the legacy of colonialism, even in the early days of Jamaica's post-colonial government. As a way forward from this terrible history, for Rastafari and for all Jamaicans, Griffin proposes a fusion of community and university archives, recognizing Bad Friday as part of the history that all Jamaicans must know even as its meanings for Rastafari will always be their own. In the concluding pages of his essay, Griffin offers up a theory and practice of community archives as a means of decolonizing archives and other memory infrastructure in Jamaica and in the Caribbean.

Of course, even within the girth of this book, not all topics can be fully addressed. Digital preservation is treated only briefly, though both digitization and microfilming are treated in relation to preservation and access. As in any project of this scope, there is some unevenness in the quality of individual papers. Nonetheless, this is a landmark publication. In a sustained and successful feat of editorial audacity, Bastian, Aarons, and Griffin have made available a substantial body of work on Caribbean archives that builds upon and vastly extends the extant coverage in the archival and historical literature. They have provided a multi-perspectival, diverse, even cacophonous guide to archival decolonization that moves in every direction except backwards.

The author of one essay, James Robertson, asks, “How can researchers [and archivists, I would add] circumvent the blinkers . . . official records are prone to impose; to see beyond the view from the Governor's window?” (p. 329).

There is no better answer to this question than to read this volume.