

Hannah Turner, *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation*

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Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation. Hannah Turner. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2020. xiv, 260 pp. 9780774863957

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In recent years, archival scholars have been increasingly looking at how record-keeping strategies – through selection, appraisal, standardized metadata, and description – can marginalize, exclude, and erase narratives. However, little research has been done to examine how specific legacy recordkeeping frameworks are articulated in institutional settings and how they contribute to particular memory conceptions based on power dynamics and Western knowledge organization. In *Cataloguing Culture: Legacies of Colonialism in Museum Documentation*, Hannah Turner sets out to fill this gap by discussing the colonial component of documentation practices at the Smithsonian Museum Department of Anthropology and its impact on both knowledge production and the nature of anthropological and ethnological research. Turner is an assistant professor at the University of British Columbia School of Information and holds a PhD from the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto.

Cataloguing Culture traces the evolution of cataloguing practices and classification technologies at the Smithsonian. Examining systems from paper classification systems, including ledgers, field guides, and other documentary resources, to rigid systematic information collecting systems and computerized functions that struggle to make sense of legacy data, the book problematizes cataloguing practices at the museum. The first chapter, “Writing Desiderata: Defining Evidence in the Field,” sets the tone of the book by conceptualizing the association of ethnological museums’ bureaucratic structures with settler colonialism.

The chapter sheds light on the powerful reach of bureaucracy at the Smithsonian Department of Anthropology, which has prescribed systems of categorization, metadata, and the use of language that ultimately contribute to epistemological and dynamic colonial developments. To illustrate the mutual relationship between the development of settler colonialism and the development of memory institutions' knowledge organization, Turner mentions that "throughout the history of settler colonialism, administrative and bureaucratic structures would enable and solidify" interpretations of "European primacy and progress" (p. 28).

In the second chapter, Turner writes about paper classification systems of the late 1800s as dynamic media that shaped knowledge. In the same vein, the third chapter presents card catalogues as "organizational devices" and "paper machines" that standardized and stabilized the documentation of ethnographic specimens. The subsequent chapter expands on this theme by emphasizing that the routine, mundane work of cataloguing in the second part of the 20th century was intimately linked with controlled vocabulary, nomenclatures, and naming conventions. Throughout the book, the author writes about the performance and reperformance of cataloguing. While Turner discusses the problematic nature of these cataloguing systems in terms of incomplete and erroneous data, in the last chapter, their importance for repatriation conversations and processes is highlighted. In a final demonstration of the staying power of recordkeeping, Turner uses discussions of repatriation to illustrate the book's main argument about the lasting impacts of cataloguing, controlled vocabulary, and the mundane component of data entry at the Smithsonian.

The book convincingly demonstrates both the power of cataloguing and its impact on knowledge production by observing that "objects [collected] were not fully realized as specimens until they were documented, classified, and registered in the museum" (p. 123). Turner accurately portrays systems of naming as a "world-building activity" (p. 158) and expands on this by noting that "constructing a proper [anthropological] discipline . . . required the trappings of scientific work" (p. 33). These "trappings" manifested in the elaboration of standardized categorizations that would allow uniform records creation and recordkeeping practices. Furthermore, Turner signals that there was an inherent "belief that arrangement and classification generated true or accurate knowledge" (p. 101), which further demonstrates the impact of documentation practices. The strength of the book is in the frontier between highlighting the stability of classification categories and demonstrating how these contributed to dynamic knowledge development.

Practitioners in memory institutions are aware of how problematic colonial legacy data can be, but there is little scholarly research examining these issues from a broad historical perspective, and the topic remains under-theorized. Although Turner's references come from the field of anthropology, the book's arguments resonate in the archival world. The association of archival initiatives with anthropological and ethnological research and data, especially concerning Indigenous recordkeeping initiatives, has been noticeable in recent literature.¹ In parallel with this research and these initiatives, questions of legacy data in anthropological and ethnological research are crucial to making sense of the colonial reach of documentary practices and to conceiving decolonial practices.

Archivists must undertake the uneasy task of dealing with the historical authenticity of records creators' descriptive frameworks, hence attributing value to them, while providing appropriate terms along with critical historical context. Archival redescription is at the heart of contemporary archival conversations and currently occupies many archivists. In practice, confronting legacy archival conceptions and practices is far from straightforward and brings to the surface a vast array of questions and problems. Turner writes that the "balance between public engagement and maintaining a historical record on the one hand, and offending particular people, on the other hand, is difficult" (p. 170). Decades of problematic metadata, classification categorization, and descriptive practices at the Smithsonian require more than replacing some categories and taxonomies. Discussions about the use of language in cataloguing systems, and its significance as a technology, are at the centre of contemporary archival thinking and highlight the value of the book for those involved in archival redescription.

Interrogations of inappropriate and racist language used in description are inherently associated with the resurgence of Indigenous languages. For instance, projects such as the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit – Indigenous Ontology framework and the Manitoba Archival Information Network's initiative seeking to change terminology by or about Indigenous people in the Library of Congress

1 See, for example, Diana E. Marsh, Ricardo L. Punzalan, and Jesse A. Johnston, "Preserving Anthropology's Digital Record: CoPAR in the Age of Electronic Fieldnotes, Digital Curation, and Community Sovereignty," *American Archivist* 82, no. 2 (2019): 268–302, <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc-82-02-01>; Ricardo L. Punzalan, Diana E. Marsh, and Kyla Cools, "Beyond Clicks, Likes, and Downloads: Identifying Meaningful Impacts for Digitized Ethnographic Archives," *Archivaria* 84 (Fall 2017): 61–102.

Subject Headings² are at the forefront of explorations of colonial legacy systems. Simultaneously, these initiatives are supporting notions oriented toward the development of Indigenous ontologies. Crucially, *Cataloguing Culture* insists that the processes of navigating legacy data and developing new structures that modify nomenclatures and classification structures are parts of the complex intellectual work that brings important epistemological questions. The understanding of archival interventions and processes as part of dynamic knowledge development, rather than as strictly forms of institutional preservation, is representative of current directions in archival theory and must be further developed in the field.

While the book adroitly identifies ramifications of the bureaucratic aspect of cataloguing and classification, it offers little discussion of the bureaucratic structures themselves. Cataloguing and dealing with legacy data do not happen in a void, and examining the evolution of the Smithsonian's institutional policies would have provided additional context. Instead, Turner emphasizes the contributions of individuals who sought for decades to ameliorate and transform these policies and implement new technologies of classification. Was there any tension between these individuals managing the collections and the organization within which they operated? The focus on individual curators who shaped the nature of recordkeeping tells a story in itself and testifies to the subjective nature of different data systems and technologies. In addition, *Cataloguing Culture* sheds light on the labour associated with recordkeeping practices at the Smithsonian. While the author signals that conversations about gender and cataloguing structures and practices are not the objective of the book, such a conversation is evoked. Further discussions examining the extent of colonial practices at the Smithsonian from a gender analytical framework would have been interesting. Addressing the entanglement of gender and recordkeeping would have expanded the argument regarding questions of knowledge development, scientific empiricism, and the objectivity of observations claimed by the collection curators, mostly men, who forged the museum's recordkeeping practices.

Moreover, one is left to wonder whether an exploration of scientific management, as a theoretical framework, would have been beneficial to examining power dynamics found in cataloguing procedures throughout the 20th century.

2 See, for example, Christine Bone and Brett Loughheed, "Library of Congress Subject Headings Related to Indigenous Peoples: A Project Changing LCSH for Use in a Canadian Archival Context," *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2018): 83–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639374.2017.1382641>.

As scholars have recently discussed the reach of neoliberalism in contemporary memory institutions, including in conversations about labour,³ what can be said about 20th-century scientific management capitalism and class relations in a national museum setting – especially given that the tasks of cataloguers have been defined from the 1950s onwards as mundane, repetitive, and unskilled? For instance, is there a deeper connection between the nature of settler colonialism and capitalist knowledge development structures and cultural infrastructures that should be explored more thoroughly?

Cataloguing Culture offers a rich and complex analysis that puts forward a multitude of reflections that are crucial to understanding the power of information and legacy data and the scope of settler societies' documentation of Indigenous material across memory institutions. The clear emphasis on the performative nature of cataloguing and the development of classification systems testifies to the intellectual and epistemological dimensions of data management and makes the book essential reading for those who wish to understand and participate in the decolonization of memory work. As Turner points out, grasping the nature of recordkeeping in memory institutions must be an integral part of conversations about decolonizing memory places. *Cataloguing Culture* represents a powerful voice in those conversations that will hopefully lead to other explorations.

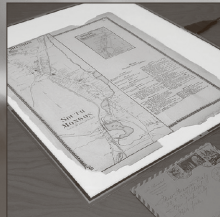
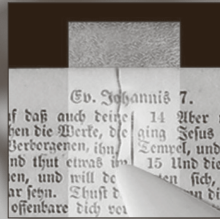
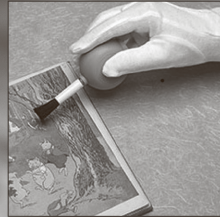
3 See, for example, Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i1.10>; Karen P. Nicholson, "The McDonaldisation of Academic Libraries and the Values of Transformational Change," *College and Research Libraries* 76, no. 3 (2015): 328–38, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.76.3.328>.



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