

**Jen Hoyer, Nora Almeida, *The Social Movement Archive*,**  
ISBN: 978-1-63400-089-5, Litwin Books, Sacramento 2021,  
pp. 244

*The Social Movement Archive* by Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida is not a book that focuses on traditional archival theory, nor is it a book that is meant to provide practical information for working with archival material related to activism. Instead, the goal of the authors is to explore “what archives mean to and for activists who are involved in producing cultural ephemera... [and] tensions the archive produces and how archivists working in spaces that collect social movement materials navigate that tension”<sup>1</sup>. There is no discussion about strategies for outreach, connection making, or community building, or even mentions of resources available to archivists to address some of the discussion points that come up in the text. Instead, *The Social Movement Archive* is a book that presents conversations and perspectives. Following the introduction, J. Hoyer and N. Almeida offer fifteen interviews with a wide variety of North American based activist organizations who vary in their age, race, gender identity, sexuality, the age and mission of their organization, and their previous experience with archives. The interviews are semi-structured to allow for the subjects to explain and critically engage with their own work, as well as share their perspective regarding basic archival realities such as stewardship, attribution, and access. Threaded throughout the text are full color images of the graphics, photographs, and other ephemera associated with each interview subject. This not only demonstrates the importance of the material itself but creates a beautiful book. Tension is the key theme of *The Social Movement Archive*, and it begins with the conflict between the reader and the text itself. In reading through the interviews, an archivist may have defensive moments. When speaking about archives and archival practice, the interview subjects vary in their prior experience with

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<sup>1</sup> J. Hoyer, N. Almeida, *The Social Movement Archive*, Litwin Books, Sacramento 2021, p. 1.

archives, opinions, and knowledge about existing resources that are meant to address some of their questions. Some raise concerns about how archives-as-institutions reinforce the problems or systemic structures that their activism is meant to confront. More than once I found myself wanting to defend the archives and the immense amount of time and effort archival workers dedicate to making material accessible and providing welcoming environments. When I felt this defensive reaction, I paused and asked myself “why is this my reaction?” Finding the answer helped me to critically engage with the concern or problem expressed by the interview subjects and points to underlying divisions between what an archivist understands about their own work and the understanding of the public.

Because of the diversity of the interview subjects and their organizations, there was a wide variety of responses during the interviews, even to seemingly straightforward questions. For example, one of the questions asked across all interviews is related to attribution, and is typically phrased as some variation of: “Archives will often ascribe authorship to material and try to ascertain who owns the rights... [How do you feel about authorship and attribution?]” Many interview subjects come from highly collaborative organizations that place a value on a sense of collective work. Susan Simensky Bietila, who began her activism career in the 1960s with an emphasis on design and illustration for underground newspapers in New York City, including “RAT”<sup>2</sup>, notes that for her, the work is collective because the “ideas were not plucked from [individual writer’s] brains. They came out of the group process”<sup>3</sup>. However, S. Bietila believes that when artists are named in a work or newspaper masthead, archivists should notify them that their material is going on display<sup>4</sup>. Two interview subjects associated with Decolonize This Place<sup>5</sup> suggest that the better way to consider attribution is to ask “who organized the action, who are the people who came out, who brought their energies, what happened”<sup>6</sup>. Other answers such as Terry Forman’s reflect group discussions of the implications of authorial attribution. Her organization, the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee, “began to sign with both collective and main artist names because it was requested of us for archival purposes. We also

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<sup>2</sup> “Rat Subterranean News”, New York’s underground newspaper created in March 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Decolonize This Place – a movement based in New York City, organized in 2016 around Indigenous rights, black liberation, Palestinian nationalism, de-gentrification, and economic inequality.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 41.

recognized, over time, that people often wanted to know who the main artist was to follow their work”<sup>7</sup>. A similar response comes from two members of Pink Bloque, a feminist dance troupe organization that arose out of the September 11, 2001, attacks. Two members comment that often times individual names are listed as “a conscious effort to validate everyone’s intellectual labor” but for other material created collectively by the group, “those things should just be credited to the Pink Bloque”<sup>8</sup>. All of these answers reflect activists’ understanding that action and creation are collective and fluid.

Questions and concerns about access occur frequently in the interviews, often unprompted by the interviewers. Filmmaker Fivel Rothberg addresses access directly, as well as the harsh reality of archival labor that complicates access. When asked about what grassroots community films contribute to the historic record, F. Rothberg begins by stating the plain fact that all types of media must be collected and made accessible, before noting that “some archives don’t take video and I think it really just comes down to money. Yes, it’s technically more complicated to archive, but the only hindrance there is money, because you just need to pay someone to do the work of film preservation”<sup>9</sup>. The question of funding picks up later in his interview, as he astutely observes that in the United States, funding archives in public institutions is not a priority. He recounted his experience doing research in an archive and finding that it “was missing so much, there’s so much that could’ve ended up there, and it’s obvious that it’s all about finances. What is accessible to a broader public is really important”<sup>10</sup>. On the other hand, the interview with two members of Nodutdol, a New York City based group inspired by similar movements in South Korea that focus on Korean unity and self-determination, approaches access from a different angle. There is a genuine interest in preserving organizational history, but there are worries about access expressed by certain members, such as academics, who have concerns “about being featured in our images because they don’t want it to hurt their tenure possibilities”, or for their actions to be viewed through a specific political lens that could then bring them into contact with laws such as the South Korean National Security Act. This measured and considered response underscores the need for sensitive considerations that can lead to restrictions being placed on collections.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 206.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 91–92.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 93.

Amid the multiplicity of perspectives on attribution and access, there are some universal responses the vast majority of activists share. When asked who they think the ideal person to care for the collections would be, the consistent reply is that it should be someone who knows the material, has the subject matter expertise, may be engaged with the cause or organization itself, or is otherwise genuinely knowledgeable about the group the material represents, so that the intent of the creators is clearly expressed and preserved. Likewise, when asked about the ideal institution to care for the material, the term “living archive” is frequently mentioned. Most interview subjects were concerned that if material went to an archival institution, it might never be used again or ever see the light of day, or otherwise the audience for the collection would only be academics rather than the public. As activism means engaging the public, providing counter-narratives, and offering education, these concerns are understandable. An unspoken implication in these responses regarding subject matter expertise and providing public access is a sense that each item of ephemera (posters, newspapers, banners, etc.) be worked on at the item level, with additional context provided in the description to fully center the meaning and intent of the piece. This creates an immediate tension with the realities of archival labor, which often precludes detailed item-level description.

The frequent mention of a “living archive” points to one of the additional themes that is less explicitly discussed in the interviews – that of archives as an institution, often connected to existing power structures. Given that many of the organizations highlighted in the book are working to expose the issues of existing power structures, provide counter narratives, and advocate for change, it is surprising that this theme does not have a question about it unto itself. It is left for the interview subjects to approach, such as the individuals speaking from the perspective of *Decolonize This Place*. In being asked if it is important for the material created by the organization to be placed in an archive, the response includes the observation that “there’s so much with archives, the history of archives, and the colonial roots of classification. Movement-based material can get stranded in history and I wonder how that can not be the case”<sup>11</sup>, before the discussion contemplates a vaguely defined counter- or non-linear archive, as well as other means of passing down history such as through

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 36.

oral tradition. This response aligns with Decolonize This Place's perspective, and the previously addressed notion of a living archive where access and frequent use are prioritized. Another articulation of archives-as-an-institution comes from Catherine Tedford, whose activism frequently comes in the form of publicly posted stickers, who observes that "putting stickers into an archive takes them out of their original context, which means that the stickers become somewhat disembodied from time and place"<sup>12</sup>. Tedford goes on to observe that the resources of an academic institution are useful, but they are not the only thing to be relied upon. The reoccurring remarks regarding time and place are intriguing as they appear in connection with questions of institutions, but the observation has no follow up. This is a disappointment, as this question of power structure is important for so many of those being interviewed in their work.

One of the greatest strengths of *The Social Movement Archive* is the selection of interview subjects. The organizations range from well-established to fairly new, many active but a few now disbanded, with causes that run from environmental concerns to Black liberation to decolonization to the peace movement, and everything in between. The activists also vary in age, the mediums they work in, and the end goals of the material they create. In several cases, the older activists have either had the luxury of time to think about the lifespan of their material after those materials have served their immediate purpose, have donated material to archives, or have otherwise seen their material exhibited in gallery settings, and have formed opinions about how they wish the public to engage with their material when presented in an exhibition context. Speaking regarding her own work and that of her RAT colleagues, Susan Simensky Bietila suggests an exhibition should focus on those involved with creating the original work and providing information about their current work as well<sup>13</sup>, encouraging dialogue and sustained connection but not touching on any specific archival relationship she has developed. This contrasts with the individuals at the War Resisters League, founded in 1923. The organization has some of their material at the Swarthmore Peace Collection at Swarthmore College and have developed relationships with the staff there. In their interview, the staff members speak positively of the relationship with and access to the Peace Collection, as well as pointing out that

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p. 154–155.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

“we’ve got to take archiving seriously because our history is going to be written by whoever decides to write it with whatever material they have”<sup>14</sup>.

The nature of the book and its structure does create some issues. Because *The Social Movement Archive* is focused on conversations rather than the practical work of archiving, there is no engagement with archivists who have worked on activism related collections and been able address the concerns of the activists. In the introduction, J. Hoyer and N. Almeida mention discussions had with Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz at the Lesbian Herstory Archive and Zakiya Collier at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, as well as the staff at the Swarthmore Peace Collection<sup>15</sup>. Including those conversations would have defeated the purpose of the text as outlined in the introduction but would have been informative. The lack of archivist perspective is a drawback, but a justifiable one given Hoyer’s and Almeida’s aims.

At several points in the interviews, the activists express the knowledge that their material does have historic value. I would have liked to see a question or two about what self-stewardship or post-custodial arrangements might look like, to provide not only access and information about the organization each activist represents, but to ensure that their voices are heard in the historic record. Many of these groups are focused on looking at history or our current moment and correcting mistakes, and several have conducted historical research only to find minimal information – if there is anything at all – leaving them frustrated. Having worked in a local history archive housed within a public library, I have often shared that feeling when finding that there was no material associated with local causes that are integral to community history. Of course, this feeling is one such example of the tension between the book and the reader, as the immediate archivist response is most likely “how can we provide access to material if it is never given to the archive in the first place, or we otherwise do not know about its existence?”. Likewise, a question regarding how organizations would want their digital material saved would have been insightful and provided further moments for reflection.

What the authors of *The Social Movement Archive* have created is a book that offers a critical perspective and moments for archivists to reflect on their work. The themes expressed by the activists interviewed – questions about self-archiving,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 139.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 8–13.

about decolonization, about who can access their material, about making sure their material is placed in a living archive – mean that archivists need to continue to think about outreach and provide clarity about the nature of their work. There is a strong undercurrent in the book regarding how archives as an institution are viewed as a means of perpetuating existing systemic issues. Archives-as-an-authority is a problem for organizations that represent marginalized perspectives and have no reason to trust places that, for them, represent the same inequities that they are fighting against. The question becomes how do we support and work with others, not as an authority but in a facilitative role? How do we provide resources so that groups can care for their history in the way *they* wish to do so? There are projects in the United States that are already working on this question such as Archives for Black Lives in Philadelphia<sup>16</sup>, the Texas After Violence Project<sup>17</sup>, and the Community Archives Lab<sup>18</sup>. However, the fact that such projects are not known to the interview subjects makes it clear that there is more work to be done.

In reading *The Social Movement Archive*, one should walk away with points of conversation to have with co-workers, with donors, within institutions, and at the regional and national level. The topics addressed by *The Social Movement Archive* are rich, of the moment, and critical to the archival profession.

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<sup>16</sup> Archives For Black Lives. Archivists responding to Black Lives Matter, <https://archive.sforblacklives.wordpress.com/>, accessed 26 September 2023.

<sup>17</sup> After Violence Archive, <https://www.afterviolencearchive.org/>, accessed 26 September 2023.

<sup>18</sup> Community Archives Lab UCLA – Uplifting Liberatory Memory Work, <http://communityarchiveslab.ucla.edu/>, accessed 26 September 2023.