

REVIEWS

Sas Mays (ed.), *Libraries, Literatures and Archives*, Abingdon and New York, Routledge, 2014. 308 pp. ISBN 978 0 415843 87 4. US\$140.00.

Libraries can no longer be taken as read. The recent unveiling of Florida Polytechnic University's bookless library – 11,000 square feet of gleaming metal and glass, housing not a single printed volume – shows yet again that what a library is, and does, is becoming ever more difficult to define. This collection responds to the current need to rethink libraries and archives, examining their place in contemporary scholarship and literature. But at the same time it demonstrates the difficulties of such a project. To what field of study does the library properly belong? Where to archive the archive itself: under Literary Studies or Librarianship? Book History or Philosophy? Editor Sas Mays situates the collection notionally at the 'intersection' of critical theory and the practice-based knowledge of Library and Information Science. And although in truth it is heavily weighted toward the former, Michelle Kelly's analysis of the struggle to develop a classification system for fiction does indeed attempt to operate at such a juncture. But it is an awkward balancing act, suggesting conflicting agendas more than interdisciplinary dialogue, and highlighting literature's troublesome resistance to the library's taxonomic imperatives.

Precisely this tension between the unruliness of books and the grid of classification is what emerges as the volume's overriding theme. If the Greek term *bibliothēke* initially indicated a place or 'slot' for a book, then the focus is on the potentially uncomfortable fit between the two. In this sense, the influence of Foucault is pervasive, if not often explicit, providing a vision of the archive as a site of disciplinary power, and prompting questions about how such power might be circumvented. From the perspective of gender and sexuality, Emily Bowles explores how Margaret Cavendish disrupts the masculine space of the seventeenth-century library, and Kaye Mitchell analyses the potential of LGBT collections to perform an analogous feat of 'queering' the archive in our own era. Simon Morgan Wortham describes the subversive force of Helene Cixous's personal diaries and dream-writings as they enter (and alter) the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Wendy W Walters reads the fictions of VY Mudimbe as a postcolonial critique of the imperial archive, while Dan Smith and Richard Crownshaw look respectively at the power of the folk archive and cultural memory to counter and challenge authoritative versions of history.

Libraries, Literatures and Archives is in part an exploration of archival systems through their disruptions. Walter Benjamin's brief essay 'On Unpacking my Library' provides a compelling theoretical touchstone, in its description of a moment of productive irrationality and disorder when 'the books are not yet on the shelves, not yet touched by the mild boredom of order'. It is an image that seems to exert an almost irresistible pull: Benjamin is made to unpack his library no less than five times by various contributors. However, it isn't he or Foucault who cast the longest shadow over this

volume, but Derrida. Geoffrey Bennington's dense poststructuralist meditation on the index sets an agenda as the opening chapter, and after this the archive fever is contagious, with roughly half of the 14 chapters engaging with Derrida's *Mal d'Archive* to one extent or another. Perhaps Martin McQuillan deploys the deconstruction of the library to most enlightening (and readable) effect, showing, via Derrida's *Post-Card*, how its authority is always compromised from within; its classification systems never more than a secondary outcome of their own performance.

A similar point is conveyed, albeit in a quite different mode, by Elizabeth Evenden in her chapter on early modern collector Archbishop Matthew Parker, whose library created an authoritative version of church history, harnessed to his own political agenda. Parker not only selectively bound and categorised Anglo-Saxon manuscripts into codex books to suit his own ends, but even counterfeited material where necessary, effectively producing the very texts on which he based his authority. The strength of Evenden's piece lies in its thorough grounding in historical and material specifics. Elsewhere, 'The Library' threatens to become a rather diffuse term, with a tendency to slip too easily between designating physical books, buildings, cultural institutions or, more nebulously, a rhetorical figure or a concept. 'The Archive' is even more mutable; assuming forms as diverse as a landscape, the contents of a carrier bag, a general and abstract 'encyclopaedic principle' and a shared store of cultural memory.

Indeed, following the train of Derridean logic, as Tom Cohen does in his chapter, there is no 'outside' to the archive. Its logic is inescapable; it is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in particular. And yet, even if this collection risks losing purchase on its object at times, its attempt to map out this speculative and interdisciplinary field of study is nevertheless a bold, not to say necessary one. Its diverse perspectives on archives and libraries may not quite cohere into a whole, but their juxtaposition hints at future trajectories for research and at conversations yet to be had across boundaries of period and discipline.

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Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, translated by Thomas Scott-Railton, foreword by Natalie Zemon Davis, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2013. xvi + 131 pp. ISBN 978 0 30017 673 5. US\$25.00.

This is a remarkable book that offers the reader not only pleasure and instruction, but also opportunities for thought. Although it is plainly intended for an academic audience, it is an unusual academic work, combining a vivid, funny and touching description of the experience of working in an archive with an account of archival materials (especially those in the judicial archives of Paris), some advice on reading, organising, interpreting and writing about historical documents, and some reflections on history as a discipline. These different aspects of the book are interwoven, so that the book itself becomes the kind of document that interests the author: personal, sensory, complex and yet written in plain language.