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Review of Decolonial Archival Futures

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Review of *Decolonial Archival Futures*

By Krista McCracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacey. Chicago: ALA, Neal-Schuman, and Society of American Archivists, 2023. 86 pp. Softcover. \$39.99. ISBN: 978-0-8389-3715-0

Krista McCracken's and Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacey's *Decolonial Archival Futures* examines the colonial roots of archives and the importance of centering Indigenous community knowledge and frameworks to decolonize the archives. They complete a global analysis, drawing from case studies in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, to develop a set of practical suggestions for how to engage in decolonial work across the profession. Their practice is rooted in community-relationship building and they emphasize that "...there is no one-size fits all solution to the colonial nature of archives." Instead, they encourage each institution to "work with Indigenous communities to determine how best to change their practices to best serve the needs of Indigenous peoples who have ties to their holdings" (64). This book is a remarkable resource, both ideologically and practically, for archival practitioners as they engage in the essential work of dismantling the colonial structure of the archive.

Krista McCracken is an award-winning public historian and archivist whose professional focus includes community archives, residential schools, access, and outreach. They are currently a researcher and curator at Algome University's Arthur A. Wishart Library and the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre in Baawaiting (Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario), located on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe and Métis people. Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacey is a public historian, researcher and analyst. Hogan-Stacey is currently on an interchange with the office of the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves and Burial Sites where they are a policy analyst on archives, access, and data sovereignty. A descendent of the Mohawk Nation of Kahnawà:ke, their areas of expertise include community archival practices, Indigenous archive access, residential school history, Indigenous-Crown legal history and oral history.

Decolonial Archival Futures is part of "Archival Futures," a new series published jointly by the American Library Association (ALA) and the Society of American Archivists (SAA). The series engages with "the significance of archival work to the general public" while discussing professional values and innovations. McCracken's and Hogan-Stacey's book is arranged into five chapters. The first four chapters highlight specific archival practices that support Western knowledge systems and how they need to be reconstructed to better support Indigenous communities. Chapter 1 examines how to recognize colonial frameworks and proposes decolonial archival interventions. Chapter 2 looks at the essential role of cultural protocols in

the archives and the challenges that arise when they are not applied evenly or not developed in partnership with Indigenous communities. Chapter 3 challenges the archival concept of provenance and original order and examines ways in which to reinterpret it to better support community needs. Chapter 4 highlights examples of community-based archival description, shifting the work of describing from the individual archivist to multiple community voices. Chapter 5 concludes the book with a call to “active engagement, difficult conversations, meaningful partnerships, and change” (61) and the identification of concrete, specific transformations to archival practice that will directly benefit Indigenous communities.

As a reference librarian working with Indigenous collections for the first time in my career, I found McCracken’s and Hogan-Stacey’s book to be an invaluable resource. The book provides an overview of how governments and national archival organizations have approached Indigenous collections historically, current efforts to address historical harm in archives in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and concrete, practical guidance to continue the ongoing work of decolonizing archival collections at every level from local to international. While the book focuses on archival practices, the ideas presented can be used across special collections and archives including how patrons access collections in the reading room and how material is used in the special collections classroom setting. McCracken’s and Hogan-Stacey’s call to archival practitioners to engage in the necessary work of decolonization spans every aspect of archival work from education to patron engagement; I look forward to using their guidelines and challenges to affect change in my daily reference and research practices.

Decolonial Archival Futures is an engaging, practical read due to the way the text is scaled and its compelling through-line. Each chapter represents not only a new archival practice and multiple case studies, but a different type of organization. Each chapter shifts into a more granular focus, beginning with national archives and international protocols and ending with individual archives and specific, community-based projects. This range of examples is essential to McCracken’s and Hogan-Stacey’s argument as they reveal the pervasive colonial structures of the archive and offer suggestions for thoughtful, community-informed transformation. It also allows the reader to track change through institutions of various sizes, while offering flexible scenarios that can be applied to many types of organizations. The scope of institutions and collections is anchored by the consistent framing of relationship-building, a key tenet of the authors’ approach to decolonization within archives. The book reminds the reader in each chapter that every Indigenous community, their collections, and the archives that house them are different and have unique needs and considerations. The authors encourage archivists and curators to practice consistent engagement with the Indigenous communities who are connected to the archives but refrain from offering one specific mode of interaction. Instead, they offer many examples in the case studies, assessing what works well and what methods need to be reassessed and changed. This consistent through-line ties together the first four chapters and their study of specific archival practices, culminating in a series of suggestions for archival transformation in the fifth chapter. McCracken and

Hogan-Stacey wrap up the final chapter with the acknowledgement that institutional change is slow and difficult, but it will certainly be made more effective by their thoughtful, experience-based, community-informed approach to archival change.

With such a strong initial contribution to the field, I look forward to future work from the authors, particularly their analysis of how post-secondary archival education can better prepare archivists and librarians to work with Indigenous communities and their archives. While the need for this type of training was mentioned throughout the book, the overall focus was on established archival practice. Knowing how useful McCracken's and Hogan-Stacey's ideas and practices will be in the day-to-day activities of an archive, I am excited to see what transformations may occur if their framework was an established part of archival training.

I believe that *Decolonial Archival Futures* is an essential read for non-Indigenous archival professionals to, as the authors say in the introduction, "consider constructs of knowledge, which histories we tell, and how we present the past" (xv). McCracken and Hogan-Stacey show a comprehensive understanding of the state of the profession, from its difficulties and failings to the changes that are being affected on local and national levels. Their approach is concrete and practical, offering new archivists and curators valuable information and asking established archives professionals to reconsider long-established practices. I believe the content of the book moves beyond the archive to reference librarians and archival instruction librarians as well, and the ways in which they interact with collections as they work with researchers and students. The authors' relationship-based, community-informed approach to Indigenous archives should be mirrored in reference and instruction work to avoid the same extractive colonial practices that can happen at the level of organization and description or at the very premise of a beginning a collection.

As archives around the world reconsider their practices and how they interact with Indigenous communities and their collections, *Decolonial Archival Futures* offers a thoughtful, empathetic approach grounded in evidence and personal experience. The suggestions are scalable, no matter the type of institution the reader works in and look towards a transformative future. The authors end the book with an emphasis on respect, communication, and hope for a decolonized archival future: "Respectful relationships, Indigenous sovereignty, ongoing conversations, and the willingness to let Indigenous communities take the lead need to be at the center of decolonizing archival practices. Imagining the possibilities of archives led by Indigenous communities is an important part of situating archives in not only the present but also the future of Indigenous communities" (66).

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