

Detailed Snapshots Describe Ongoing Challenges in Participatory Heritage

Sarah R. Demb

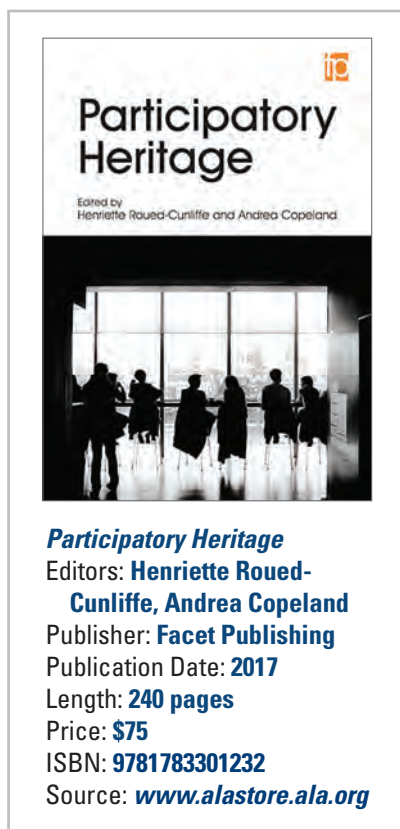
This is an odd book to review for the records management community. Its focus is on community archives and heritage, which tend to produce materials outside of the records lifecycle/continuum. That is, of course, community heritage materials are created within organizations, even when they are informal. But the nature of their production or collection often precludes – and distrusts – a systematic approach to managing them.

This is one of the key points in Roued-Cunliffe and Copeland's volume, which brings together authors' experiences in a variety of community heritage contexts to discuss participants, challenges, and solutions. My read is that despite the book being divided among those three categories, all the chapters are detailed snapshots that delineate the on-going challenges in participatory heritage.

Participatory vs. Cultural Heritage

The book describes participatory heritage in this way:

Participatory heritage could



be thought of as a space, a space in which individuals engage in cultural activities outside of formal institutions

for the purpose of knowledge sharing and co-creating with others. Those engaged with participatory heritage collaborations tend to place more importance on content and less importance on medium, process or professional expertise; thus they acknowledge a diversity of expertise and operate from a premise of shared authority.

In their introduction, the editors make a distinction between cultural heritage institutions and participatory heritage activities, which do not necessarily interact with each other, since the latter are less formal and do not employ experts in information organization, access, and use. They find this contrast in focus creates a “mission mismatch” between the two.

As a former museum archivist and records manager, I disagree that cultural heritage institutions' prime goal is to organize, access, and use information; these activities are *by-products* of the missions of museum, archives, libraries, and historical societies to educate the public and preserve material or intangible culture.

It is true that cultural heritage organizations rely heavily on sector standards to manage information, but outside of natural history museums, whose partial *raison d'être* is to classify specimens to add to global taxonomies, these activities are usually due to the volume of information that is held. The only way to manage it consistently is to use controlled vocabularies, agreed metadata standards, uniform cataloguing rules, etc.

Eventually, participatory heritage activities also run into the same issue, as in some of the examples described in the book.

International Examples

The snapshots are international in scope, which is a credit to the book, as contexts differ widely across cultural practices, public and private sector institutions, and the level of state support of heritage communities.

The communities described include Australian LGBTQ, African-American local community and church archives in two states, Australian Vietnam veterans and elementary school students, a Viking market in Denmark, the Australian Country Music Hall of Fame, British family historians, Wikipedia, informal Danish archives, Korean War massacre survivors, the Ethiopian diaspora in England, artists in Canada, local archaeology initiatives in England, and Saskatchewan heritages (Canada).

Interestingly for a book focused on participatory heritage communities, the cover image is a view from the Tate Modern, one of the most authoritative heavy-hitters in the world of modern and contemporary art.

Most of the authors work in cultural heritage organizations, so the book is aimed at this audience, with a view towards educating readers on how to better engage with and support participatory heritage communities and activities.

Not surprisingly, the book frequently references works on community heritage from archival educators

Anne Gilliland and Andrew Finn, providing additional resources for interested readers to investigate. Both discuss and suggest frameworks for effective interactions between institutions and communities.

Recurring Challenges

Technological and preservation challenges recur across the chapters. While these challenges are not particularly unique to participatory heritage activities, they may have a greater impact in that part of the sector due to lower resourcing levels and the communities' lack of sustainability linked to volunteers aging out.

The authors accurately describe the preservation dilemma posed by the increasing use of crowdsourcing data via online delivery of fragile material through digitization. One preservation challenge is mitigated, only to present new ones, such as platform sustainability, data migration, and delivery/storage costs over time.

Many of the solutions discussed are about the compromises necessary when collaborating with cultural institutions of varying size and capacity to get needed monetary or systems support, expert advice, or physical storage/delivery space. Authors routinely bumped up against issues surrounding the loss of agency by participatory heritage community members, including communications strategies; the varying success of post-custodial approaches to materials held in communities and advised or managed by institutions; and defining expert knowledge.

Practical Case Studies

I found Roued-Cunliffe's discussion of Wikipedia one of the most intriguing of the case studies. Although its premise is founded on community editing, Wikipedia has become a behemoth in which information is effectively controlled by a relatively small and homogenous group of editors, a circumstance which its parent organization – an institution of sorts – has had to

address in a variety of ways, including encouragement of “editathons” by more heterogeneous communities. It also relies on standards and rules (especially for citation), despite its principle of organic growth.

I was also particularly struck by the conundrum laid out in Cope-land's chapter on the Bethel AME Church Archive, which describes huge effort, good will, and resources that may have been for naught (or at least, for less benefit to the community than originally envisioned).

Lessons to Remember

This is a book of interesting and useful lessons learned, where readers can benefit from what the authors suggest they could have done differently. Because of this, I wish the editors had provided a summary conclusion to discuss these lessons. While the chapters describe very different projects and contexts, by the end of the book it is difficult to remember what issues were experienced in which context, and a summary would help to consolidate the information. Still, this book is a valuable addition to the literature, and I hope it is widely used. **E**



About the Author: Sarah R. Demb has been a records professional for more than 20 years. The senior records manager/archivist for Harvard University previously was records management advisor for the London Museums Hub and museum archivist and records manager for the Museum of London. Demb, who also serves on the Collections Committee of the Cambridge Historical Society, holds a master of library and information sciences degree from the University of Texas at Austin and is co-author of *Records Management for Museums and Galleries: An Introduction* (Chandos Publications, 2012).