

Book Reviews

Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia by MICHELLE CASWELL. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014. xii + 231 pp.; illustrations; notes; index; paperbound, \$29.95; eBook, \$24.95.

Archiving the Unspeakable is a finely crafted, almost elegant, exploration of the history of one of the most iconic and most reproduced set of images from the Cold War: the five thousand-plus mug shots of somewhere between twelve and twenty thousand Cambodian prisoners that passed in front of a trained photographer before their interrogation, torture, and death at the hands of the guards of the Khmer Rouge's Toul Sleng prison (also known as S-21). In this deceptively slim monograph, Michelle Caswell, a scholar of archival studies, explores the history of the photographs and the ways that historical actors have given the images meaning. Influenced by theories from both archival studies and the social life of material objects, *Archiving the Unspeakable* argues that these powerful photographs are in a constant state of reinvention and recontextualization. According to Caswell, "they are always in the process of becoming" (156).

Archiving the Unspeakable is a model of concise scholarly writing tackling a complicated subject. Although Caswell writes with theoretical sophistication about the details of Cambodian history, thanks to her clear and concise prose the book remains accessible to a rather wide audience. Scholars of archival and museum studies will learn much from this important case study, as will general readers interested in human rights, social justice, and the history of memory. The brevity given to the political narrative may frustrate some experts in twentieth-century Southeast Asia, but these readers should recognize that Caswell offers sufficient historical context to pursue her analysis. To her credit, she studiously avoids easy explanations and diligently presents serious complications to her argument, such as the fact that these images of five thousand executed prisoners are atypical of the 1.7 million who died under the Khmer Rouge primarily from malnutrition, disease, and government incompetence.

The author grounds *Archiving the Unspeakable* in Michel-Rolph Trouillot's anthropology of the archives in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995), Arjun Appadurai's edited anthology *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, and a continuum model of archives that recognizes past, present, and future moments as creating and re-creating meaning as archives move from historical context to historical context. Caswell presents a nuanced analysis of these perspectives but,

fortunately, refrains from going too far down the postmodern rabbit hole and losing the uninitiated reader in a linguistic Wonderland. On the contrary, the author is to be commended for making complicated and, on certain points, contradictory theoretical arguments comprehensible and relevant to her case study. If *Archiving the Unspeakable* makes a contribution to larger discussions of the theory of archives, it never loses sight of its topic, those haunting photographs of people about to be tortured and killed in the notorious Khmer Rouge prison at Toul Sleng.

After a contextual and theoretical introduction, the book offers four short chapters devoted to the ways in which these photographs have been made into records, archives, narratives, and commodities, before wrapping up with a brief self-reflective conclusion. At each stage in the history of these images, Caswell persuasively argues that specific historical context transformed the photographs into new forms. That is to say that they were, and are, constantly being remade. Her research links the surveillance techniques of French imperial rule (1863-1953) to the Pol Pot regime's (1975-1979) fanatical drive to define, control, and, if necessary, remove individuals under their power. Taken at Toul Sleng prison (once a French school), the mug shots are evidence of the Khmer Rouge's totalitarian aspirations. Explaining that the photographs were part of the Santebal's (secret police) obsessively meticulous yet fantastically erroneous dossiers, Caswell invokes Hannah Arendt's portrait of Adolf Eichmann as evil yet banal. Upon the 1979 invasion of Cambodia and the overthrow of the genocidal regime, the Vietnamese occupiers appropriated the images and former prison site for their own political purposes. Meanwhile, Cambodian families slowly began to use the photographs to confirm the death of disappeared loved ones, essential knowledge to perform Buddhist last rites. Later, as scholars and human rights activists arrived during the civil war of the 1980s and the United Nations' occupation of the 1990s, the images became evidence in the ongoing struggle to bring the perpetrators of mass murder to justice. Caswell takes us up to the present. Her ethnographic work shows that although the now iconic photographs helped to convict Duch, the former head of Tuol Sleng, in an international human rights court, only two of a small handful of survivors were using the images to make a living on the museum grounds. The melancholy performance of victimization by survivors posing for pictures stands in sharp contrast to the controversial 1997 exhibit of decontextualized and estheticized mug shots at the Museum of Modern Art.

Caswell does not avoid engaging controversies but only touches on the most serious contradiction of all. Although she goes so far as to question her own complicity in paying the survivors to pose for photographs at Tuol Sleng, critiques the use of the images by filmmakers, journalists, and NGOs, and entertains the notion of "dark tourism" as an explanation for why wealthy foreigners go to Tuol Sleng, she never questions the presumed universal victimhood of the individuals in the images. As most of those that passed through its gates were members of the Khmer Rouge suspected of treason,

it is likely that more than a few of the faces staring at us had blood on their own hands. If, as Caswell so eloquently proves, context is everything, we must face this uncomfortable fact.

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The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict, and Ecology by DEREK WALL.

Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014. xv + 165 pp.; notes; selected readings; index; clothbound \$26.00.

Every fall semester I start my environmental planning class off with several weeks of property theory, challenging the students to dig into and question what it ultimately means to *own* something, and why alternate kinds of ownership might matter. I believe that having a better understanding of the often-murky divide between public and private—as well as recognition that ownership does not always equal control, and awareness of the variety of tenure arrangements that people devise—sets the stage for my students to really think about the role of practicing planners in helping to look forward in time for a variety of resource and management issues. Similarly, these concepts are increasingly important for public historians, as the field aims to link preservation issues to both economic and community stability and resilience.

One of the most difficult concepts for the students to grasp, during this unit on property theory, is that of common property, or commons. So deeply steeped in a culture that prioritizes private property, they struggle to get their heads around systems that, instead of focusing almost entirely on the right to exclude others, emphasize the right to be *included*, as part of a group that is co-managing a given area or resource collectively. Understanding cultural and natural heritage as a commons, a shared sense of place and meaning that may be based in the past but is actively maintained and shared, and sometimes contested, in the present, can be a powerful framework for many public history projects.

Hence I was excited to see Derek Wall's new volume, *The Commons in History*, hoping for a new reading to include in my syllabus, as well as something that could be more accessible to nonacademic practitioners in the field. However, I'm not entirely sure it lives up to its promise, as the first in a new series on History for a Sustainable Future. Wall's book seems primarily definitional, like a textbook—perhaps in the process of trying to produce a slim volume that will appeal to scholars, policymakers, and the public alike, some of the liveliness of this subject has been lost. It has a bit too much of a Cliffs Notes-like tone to it, like it's been distilled a bit too far, and become a bit too dry and disengaged.

To be fair, it is an ambitious task: compiling research on, and arguments for, commons throughout an enormous variety of geographic and temporal locations, as well as from several different disciplines—mostly economics,

anthropology, and history, and in particular the works of Elinor Ostrom, E. P. Thompson, and William Cronon. This approach seems like it should be a strength, but it gets confusing and harder to follow Wall's larger points, particularly when the jumps are too abrupt, like shifting from an example in twelfth-century Holland to Wikipedia in 2012 in the space of only a page (72). His discussions of the commons as ecological space, economic abstraction, and management practice unfortunately get somewhat muddled along the way, unless one is already fairly familiar with the field. This seems to miss the goal of accessibility to a more general audience.

Overall, the book feels mostly like an argument about economic theory, asserting that commons actually *do* exist, as locally adapted systems of management that usually only become ecological “tragedies,” contrary to the well-known 1970s essay by Garrett Hardin, when they are enclosed or privatized. I believe the material could be strengthened by a clearer description of property theory early on, drawing more from the legal literature (and perhaps particularly work by Carol Rose, such as her wonderful collection of essays *Property and Persuasion*¹)—specifically how *all* types of property can be thought of as a “bundle of rights,” with different types containing different combinations of rights. By more deliberately contrasting the pros and cons of private property (familiar to most readers) with the often-misunderstood commons (often confused with open-access resources, where there is no sense of ownership or management at all), grasping the power of the commons could be made easier and more effective for noneconomists.

In his concluding chapter, Wall highlights the need to “ask why many environmental policies appear to be failing at present and to what extent commons-based solutions provide an alternative,” particularly as alternatives to extractive capitalism (104). I think it is important, especially in the context of public history, to remember that commons are systems that generally develop over time—as a local group or community adapts to its particular needs and circumstances, in part through trial and error—and therefore are not necessarily approaches that can be “applied” from the outside. The core issue, as Wall quotes from geographer Kenneth Olwig, should be one of *promoting* historically produced sustainable commons; in some ways, this statement sums up the entire book. The concept of commonly managed resources can be incredibly powerful in understanding heritage management, and particularly recognizing the essential role that local communities should play. Wall's book is a step in the right direction of bringing more attention to this area of research and scholarship, but more could be done to make it more generally accessible and applicable.

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1. Carol M. Rose, *Property and Persuasion: Essays on the History, Theory, and Rhetoric of Ownership* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994.)

From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement by ANDREA A. BURNS. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013. x + 249 pp.; illustrations; notes; index; clothbound, \$80.00; paperbound, \$24.95.

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of tumultuous civil unrest in the United States. In addition to the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, a global undertaking of the African Diaspora, gained a solid foothold. Newly established black museums of this era echoed the sentiments of both movements in their exhibitions, educational programs, and community outreach events. In *From Storefront to Monument: Tracing the Public History of the Black Museum Movement*, Andrea Burns traces the history of four black museums established in the 1960s and 1970s with the intent to show “ties to the Black Power movement” (14): the DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago (1961), the International Afro-American Museum, Detroit (1965), the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, Washington, DC (1967), and the African American Museum of Philadelphia (1976). The outcome is a thoroughly documented book of value to anyone interested in the intersections of black history, public history, and museums.

Burns begins her narrative in 1969, at a critical juncture where mainstream museum professionals and black museum professionals collided at what was intended to be a conference on how “traditional museums could remain relevant in the context of recent social and political upheavals,” and whether opening “small branches in neighborhoods historically neglected by these institutions” would aid them in this endeavor. The expected attendance of twenty to thirty participants swelled to more than two hundred, including a “militant minority” that drove attendees to the realization that discussions of decentralization were “premature until more basic issues that concern minority groups [had] been dealt with” (1,2). The voices of the conference’s “militant minority” echoed the “often combative discourse of the Black Power Movement” (3), and cautioned attendees that “[m]erely setting aside a room or a portion of an exhibit hall for artifacts related to black history would not suffice if the institution continued to blindly (or intentionally) neglect this community” (2).

Establishing the effect of the era’s social unrest on the interpretation of black history through museum experiences, Burns goes on to tell how African American neighborhood museums established themselves on their own terms, “contesting and reinterpreting traditional depictions of African and African American history and culture” (3). She highlights the DuSable’s emphasis on science and industry, and its educational programming designed to inform both children and adults. She also discusses an innovative “foreign guest hospitality program,” which allowed international visitors to visit the museum and the surrounding community, and dine in the homes of museum members. The International Afro-American Museum (later known as the Charles H. Wright Museum) considered its operations a revolutionary force

for change beyond the city of Detroit, establishing a conference on the campus of Wayne State University that solicited black museum leaders from around the country.

Planning for the nation's bicentennial celebration "signaled who was to be included in the official vision and interpretation of local and national history—and, most critically, how their stories would be told" (107). Out of the "contested struggles" of these plans emerged the African American Museum of Philadelphia in 1976, a testament to the untold organized collective efforts of black museum advocates, community activists (including the Philadelphia Black Panther Party), and local political black leaders.

The Black Museum Movement continued beyond the 1970s in part through the Association of African American Museums, established in 1967 as the collective "voice" of the movement. That voice still unifies over two hundred black museums traversing the tributary rivers of "mainstream" museums today.

Reflective of the title, Burns brings her accounting of the Black Museum Movement full circle with two Smithsonian Institution museums—the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, established in the storefront featured on the cover of the book, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, in development amidst the nation's most prized monuments and museums. Burns recounts the remarks of Sidney Dillon Ripley (eighth Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution) at the opening ceremonies of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in 1967. "This is no ordinary museum," he said. "I suspect that museums will never quite be the same again . . . perhaps our cities won't be either" (37). In 2012, the Smithsonian Institution broke ground for the National Museum of African American History and Culture, scheduled to open in 2015.

Given the protracted history of racism in the United States, it is understandable that Burns would include challenges faced by leaders of the black museum movement, particularly the ambivalence of their white museum counterparts, as detailed in Anacostia and Philadelphia. What is unfortunate, however, is her overarching emphasis of the existence of black museums as "counterpoint" to white museums. The Black Power movement was a global cultural and political phenomenon, echoed in the homefront voice of James Brown's anthem "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud!" Burns's interpretation is, at times, almost apologetic in both the acknowledgement of the movement and in its impact on the museums that emerged, missing the opportunity to render a comprehensive accounting to inform readers about both the struggle, and the power, of black museums to transform not only neighborhoods but the nation.

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Nature Next Door: Cities and Trees in the American Northeast by ELLEN STROUD. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2012. xx + 207 pp.; illustrations; notes; bibliographic essay; index; paperbound, \$19.95.

In *Nature Next Door*, urban and environmental historian Ellen Stroud poses a provocative question: how did northeastern forests stage their comeback in the late nineteenth century at the same time that adjacent northeastern cities were experiencing record growth? It's a solid research question and one that no other historian has posed before in such a pointed manner. Aimed at environmental and urban scholars, Stroud examines northeastern forests from 1890-1930 in four states—Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine—and draws some important new conclusions while also treading some well-worn ground. Most importantly, Stroud argues that the cities and the forests formed a “symbiotic” relationship, and that reforestation in the northeast was not due to benign neglect of the land as many assume, but to urban dwellers' demands on the forests and the resulting decisions made by policy makers and other officials.

Stroud's first case study provides the strongest support for her argument. Pennsylvania's story of reforestation is most clearly tied to urban needs. In particular, Philadelphia's growth and that city's need for a clean and reliable drinking water supply from the Schuylkill River drove the demand for watershed protection in upstream hinterland regions. This wasn't a story of passion for the forests, but of pragmatic recognition of the forests' role in protecting water quality. This in and of itself is not a new or surprising finding. However, Stroud's paradigm of city-rural symbiosis is, and it is significant.

The other case studies, although interesting and useful for understanding how this remarkable transformation took place, do not fit quite so neatly into the urban/rural framework. Perhaps it is because the states themselves are not the obvious choices for studying urbanized areas of the northeast. Or maybe it is because the stories revolve more around capital, industry, and upper-middle-class desires than about strictly urban demands. In New Hampshire, for instance, Stroud argues that folks interested in reforestation were driven by the need to protect summer scenery. She protests that the story is deeper than the oft-told conservation stories of upper-middle-class Americans who were keen to protect their *own* nature, but its setting *is* the tony resort area around Lake Sunapee. Nevertheless, she succeeds in complicating the story, telling of pragmatic considerations—on the order of Philadelphia's need to protect its water quality—in which New Hampshire industry's demand for a reliable water supply brought them and their elected officials into a coalition with the fashionable resort crowd to reforest Green Mountain. That said, it's hard to overlook the fact that the others came to the party only after several major floods resulted in lost wages for many workers. Vermont's story is similar in many ways, in that reforestation was driven by people trying to achieve a certain image for the state—that of a bucolic country setting. It, too, was driven

by industry's desires to boost tourism. But how this is necessarily urban in nature is not entirely clear, and I found the symbiotic ties in these later chapters to be more tenuous. On the flip side, the case study model often leads to this type of messy history, which can take an overarching argument slightly off-kilter while still conveying several important histories.

In addition to telling interesting stories through a framework that turns the old city versus nature prototype—in which the growth of cities is bad for nature—on its head, Stroud does an excellent job of integrating and differentiating among the complex local, state, and national laws that affected each of these states. Writing about law and policy is a hard thing to do well, but she does. She succinctly describes the significance of various tax, structural, and legal issues, including the fact that Pennsylvania's governmental structure allowed for counties to act as fundraisers through a mechanism the other states lacked, and that New Hampshire's tax structure charged land owners more for parcels with a stand of trees than those that had been cleared. Those details reflect both diligent research and a strong aptitude for the writing craft. The facts alone are exceedingly useful for public historians who might be designing exhibits for public entities in those states and for whom the tedium of parsing out such details is often outside of their budget parameters.

There are a few other highlights in the book that deserve a level of recognition difficult in a short book review. So here they are, briefly: Stroud's protagonists include several interesting women that she snatches from the jaws of history and whose stories fill some important gaps in the gendered history of conservation. Also, her chapter on Maine, which felt a bit out of place despite being quite provocative, seems to deserve its own book, and may perhaps lead to another scholar's fuller treatment in the wake of this publication. Finally, all historians will appreciate Stroud's attention to differentiation among forest species and the book's many well-chosen photos and graphics.

Reforestation history in these four states points not to an emerging passion for forests and trees, but to a growing sense of alarm over the results of runaway nineteenth-century industry and hundreds of years of policies promoting agriculture. Although some of the stories sound familiar, the arguments are new.

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