

REVIEW OF: COLLINS, SAMUEL GERALD (2008)  
LIBRARY OF WALLS: THE LIBRARY OF  
CONGRESS AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF  
INFORMATION SOCIETY. LITWIN BOOKS,  
201PP. \$32.00 USD, ISBN-13: 978-9-9802004-2-3

by Anne Mostad-Jensen

Four troves of books, that fill three city blocks,  
All gathered in one cluster, are so rare  
We feel like Ozymandias when he mocks  
“Look of these works, you mighty and despair.”

We have room for no more buildings anywhere;  
We can only expand by growing small.  
Newspapers have been shrunk to one inch square;  
Ten million cards into one breadbox crawl.  
We will shrink, like Milton’s angels, the Readers last of all. (Boswell 1994)

In this poem, Paul Boswell, a former employee at the Library of Congress, describes the changing world behind the immense walls of this Library and the affect this has on the Readers. Like the poem, *Library of Walls* seeks to understand this unique environment through an ethnographic study of the “information society” at the Library of Congress. The author, Samuel Collins, argues that in the 1990s this Library had an image of the “information society” that was “grounded in technological determinism (the development of a digital library) and appropriating a powerful discourse of democratic access referring to the (mythical) past as well as the (utopian) future (Collins, 9).” Collins finds this picture to be disingenuous, as it glosses over the complexities of the environment. In his ethnographic study Collins explores the Library of Congress as place, explores the interstitial spaces between the Library’s information systems and the people of the library; all while exploring their relation to the “information society”.

In the second chapter, *Anthropology and the Imperial Archive*, Collins explores the role of the Library of Congress as a national institution and the contradictions that arise between the Library as a symbol of the nation and the Library as an institution that legitimizes the nation by providing a means of transparency between government and governance, by providing access to information and a continuous flow of knowledge. Collins expresses the laments of many employees and users, who are surprised when “*symboling* functions are funded over more bureaucratic and scholarly projects (Collins, 27).”

In the third chapter, *From Knowledge Machines to Information Scapes: Tracing the Library’s Places and Non-places*, Collins examines the massive challenges of the physical space of the Library throughout its history and the way in which the “virtual future” of space has influenced the Library of Congress.

In the next two chapters, *Ghosts in the Information Machine* and “Getting the Champagne Out of the Bottle and Into the Six-Pack”: Laying the Foundation for the Virtual Library at the LC, Review, Mostad-Jensen | urn:nbn:de:kobv:11-100173740 | Creative Commons: by-nc-nd///

Collins discusses the spaces in between the Library's information systems — the books, its cataloging, its computers — and what they tell us about the “information society”.

In *Ghosts in the Information Machine* the author traces the interdependence and coexistence of printed and electronic information technology. This coexistence and interdependence exists because the institutions, organizations and relations of the publishing systems of printed works cannot be summarily dismissed and replaced by digital information technology.

In *Laying the Foundation for the Virtual Library at the LC*, Collins takes the reader through a history of the Library of Congress' move towards a virtual library, from the de-skilling of cataloging, to “optical disk” technology, to partnerships with corporations like American Online (AOL) with the “American Memory” project, to in-house projects like LC MARVEL, to the opening of the Digital library visitors Center, to the role of cataloging in making the collections accessible to the public in an age of the Google search, and the institutional identity in a networked world. He also closely relates this move to the digital to a reduction in resources at the library, the virtual presence as a replacement of the physical.

Early in the book Collins shares a comment that a LOC cataloger made: “You can catalog a sandwich if you know the cataloging rules” (Collins, 9). Collins went on to say, “the most noteworthy dimensions to the Library are those social conditions that make the work possible in the first place” (Collins, 9). In the final chapter, *Corporeal Work at the Virtual Library: Research and Scholarship in the New Age*, Collins explores the social conditions further as he focuses on the “society” in “information society”. He looks at the interplay between corporations and the public mission of the library, the technologies that increasingly intertwine the corporate and the public, and the effect this has on the perspective people at the LOC have of themselves and the work they do. Collins especially focuses on the labor issues at the Library of Congress and how they have affected the work of the LOC.

While there was a rich amount of information about the Library of Congress in this tome, considering it was an ethnographic study, there seemed to be a lack of actual information about the people he interviewed in the Library of Congress. Collins stated that he interviewed 130 researchers and staff members, yet the voice of the people who work at the Library of Congress was seldom heard throughout the book. Also, while the author seeks to “understand information in all its discursive and institutional complexity” by analyzing the Library of Congress as it works towards its goal of having a “National Digital Library”, I find the emphasis placed on this “National Digital Library” was rather lacking.

Overall, *Library of Walls* is an interesting look inside the walls of the Library of Congress – walls you want to look behind.

## Reference:

Boswell, P. (1994). *No anchovies on the moon*. Washington, D.C.: Seven Locks Press