
Essay review: Two books by Melissa Adler on Thomas Jefferson and information

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Abstract

Purpose – Book review of two books by Melissa Adler: *Peculiar Satisfaction: Thomas Jefferson and the Mastery of Subjects* (Fordham University, 2025) and *Surveillance in the Empire of Liberty: Why Thomas Jefferson Matters in Our Information Age* (Bloomsbury, 2026).

Paper type Book review

“America,” that presumptuous metonymic term for the United States of America, marks the 250th year of its Declaration of Independence from Britain this year in a turbulent political and social state. Western University (Ontario, Canada) Associate Professor Melissa Adler’s two timely works on Thomas Jefferson, *Peculiar Satisfaction: Thomas Jefferson and the Mastery of Subjects* (Fordham University, 2025) and *Surveillance in the Empire of Liberty: Why Thomas Jefferson Matters in Our Information Age* (Bloomsbury, 2026), allow us to understand the founding and turbulence of the country through the information and surveillance practices of none other than the author of its Declaration and its third president, Thomas Jefferson. Proclaimer of freedom and man’s inalienable rights and plantation owner of more than 600 slaves (including his sister-in-law and concubine, and their offspring); “founding father” of the country and expansionist across half of the continent; lawyer, surveyor, empirical scientist, inventor, archivist, bibliophile and documentalist; Jefferson’s invention and use of information technologies is the perfect subject by which to understand the historical dialectic of freedom and control that drives “America” and the central role of documents and data (“information”) in its founding and continuance.

Adler’s books present Jefferson as an epochal founder of the United States, whose visions and implementations of “freedom” and governance run through its subsequent history. Agential freedom in the United States, as in other modern colonies of European imperialism and settlement, was – and as has always been the case with capitalism – founded on the expropriation and the appropriation and management of “free” or profitable resources: land from native populations, labor from slaves and wage laborers, reproductive labor from women and animal lives from “natural resources.” It belongs to a history of imperialism that we see is still dominant in the world: expropriation of communal resources and then exploitation based on extracting profit through private ownership and surplus value. A way of being where the concept of freedom, much less lives and life itself, is merely an opportunity to pocket some unneeded bucks. But capital development requires documentation and information management to extract value from these resources and foster property, ownership, and the accumulation and expansion of capital. Adler’s first book largely focuses on Jefferson’s documentary technologies of naming, classifying and memory, and the second book on Jefferson’s data techniques and technologies of surveying and information management. Though both books have the other’s themes running through them, I will separately review each.

1. Adler’s *Peculiar Satisfaction* is her slightly earlier book of the two being reviewed here, and more focused on Jefferson’s knowledge organization and documentary practices.



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In this, it is the more closely related book to Adler's earlier, 2017, book, *Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge*. Focusing on Jefferson's documentary technologies and practices and their legacy in today's documentary and information systems, such as the Library of Congress classification system, the book begins with an account of the architectural monumentality of Jefferson's home in Monticello, Virginia, his founding of the University of Virginia, and his centrality in the founding and the initial collection of the Library of Congress. It then discusses Jefferson's own archiving and self-archiving practices, where he was acutely aware of his foundational role in creating future narratives of himself and the nation. Next Adler looks at Jefferson's classification practices in his management of Monticello (slaves, animals, family, etc.) and his personal library. In part two of the book, Adler examines Jefferson's libraries, both his personal library and what he later sold to the Library of Congress, and his classificatory treatment of books about slaves and the indigenous populations (he treated all of these as elements of geography and natural philosophy – i.e., as natural resources). In part three of the book, Adler examines Jefferson's home museum and the debate that arose over whether the animal remains that the Lewis and Clark expedition sent to him of what they thought was the American Antelope was truly an antelope (it wasn't, the "American Antelope" is a Pronghorn). Adler brings the case of the "American Antelope" in dialogue with mid-20th century French documentalist Suzanne Briet's discussion of a captured antelope being a document, and through this Adler argues her book's general theme of the documentary "thingification" ("information as thing" as Michael Buckland famously put it) of particular beings understood as evidential types within historical and socioculturally situated documentary categories and classifications. Adler mixes historical materials with recent critiques in critical race theory, documentation theory, critical data studies and many other disciplines. The book is very readable and is remarkable in its breadth. Throughout, Adler successfully describes Jefferson's use of documentary techniques for ontologizing and managing both his home and the nation.

In its conclusion, the importance of the book's method of mixing disciplinary genres and time periods becomes fully evident. This is shown by the book's reoccurring motif of early 20th century cultural theorist Walter Benjamin's narrative of "the angel of history" from his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" ("Über den Begriff der Geschichte"—literally, "On the Concept of History") of 1940. Adler's book ends by contrasting the democratic Jeffersonian ideals that have inspired American libraries, museums, and archives with President Donald Trump's authoritarian controls that he has imposed upon the United States' Smithsonian Museum, Library of Congress, National Archives, and other cultural, historical and documentary institutions. Inspired by a 1920 print by Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, for Benjamin in 1940 the angel of history wants to continue to fly forward on the smooth narrative of modern capitalist "progress," but it is being held at a standstill by the battering winds of the present and future tearing at its wings, its feathers torn asunder and the debris or remainder of history piling up at its feet. Benjamin's point is that the dream of "progress" has been driven by a dialectic between some people's freedom and the subjugation and control of others for that freedom, and the supposed "progress" of history is now being consumed by the contradictions that have driven it and the remainders to it that have been left in its wake. Putting Benjamin's angel of history into dialogue with John Pages's 1776 comment to Jefferson that it seems that an angel of history has been directing the Founders through the storm of the American Revolution and blessing the destiny of the nation, Adler suggests that the Jeffersonian legacy of America has the same form, with moments of rupture in the American dream by the nightmarish appearance of the contradictions of its real production. However, Benjamin's other point with the angel of history metaphor was to suggest a role for critical historiography: to show this historical dialectic before it comes to a manifest rupture, and this is done by historiographically connecting the past with the present so that the dream of progress is replaced by an account of the dialectical reality and exclusions that have underwritten that dream, and thus allowing for the possibility of retrieving the previously *buried* historical "debris" or remainders through a "messianic," rather than an illusionary "progressive,"

historiography and so, history. As one reads each instance of Adler's discussion of Benjamin's angel of history – at the beginning, middle and end of the book – one becomes aware that this is the key to the book's construction, and that she brilliantly enacts Benjamin's historiographic method. Adler shows how the Jeffersonian American dream is always haunted by what it leaves out and how this results in the sleep of reason and nightmares. How this revolutionary "dream" is founded on the unconscious repetition of 18th-century European Enlightenment ideals of "freedom" that were afforded by the dispossession of lands turned into private and national property, and capitalist and imperialist expansion, slavery and wage exploitation. As Adler concludes, authoritarian controls upon archives never win, because – like the unmarked slave cemetery at Jefferson's plantation in Monticello – ashes, traces, remain, haunting the Master's modes of documentary representation. As Martin Luther King Jr. famously said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," but only if historical narrative is critical, not mythical.

2. Melissa Adler's second book, *Surveillance in the Empire of Liberty: Why Thomas Jefferson Matters in Our Information Age*, conceptually begins where the previous book leaves off: the social circulation and function of documentary ontologies. Whereas *Peculiar Satisfaction* more focuses on the documental techniques and technologies by which social ontology becomes documentary ontology, *Surveillance in the Empire of Liberty* focuses on the social deployment of documentary ontologies by techniques of datafication ("thingification") and surveillance. Adler shows how Jefferson honed techniques and technologies for managing his plantations and how these were then exported toward managing national expansion. Jefferson was trained as a surveyor and he managed his plantation's agricultural and early manufacturing production, as well as the nation's governance and expansion, with an eye toward planning and maximalizing initial investments. Similar information management techniques and technologies were used to manage his various "families," as he called them – his White family, his slave family and finally, his national family. For Jefferson, techniques and technologies of surveying and surveillance were central to both control and freedom, respectively of course to one's "type" and its possibilities for reason (White males, women, indigenous peoples – if they adapted to settler life and capitalism's logic of enclosure and property –, and at the very bottom, African-American slaves and non-human animals). Adler examines Jefferson's use and invention of information management technologies – ledgers, accounting logs, encryption techniques, surveying tools and others – as tools for managing and controlling types of people and things, and educational institutions and libraries as instruments for shaping individual and national powers of expression. "Power" was managed liberally: toward controlling expression for productive and reproductive means. And so, Jefferson employed various "liberal" techniques of managing his variously identified families (incentives, panopticon-inspired surveillance, etc.) and authoring from the moment of the revolutionary trauma he helped set into motion a philosophy of self-governance, as well.

Surveillance in the Empire of Liberty is divided into three parts: mastery, informing and datafication. The first part examines Jefferson's organization of power at Monticello and his other plantations; both control over his slaves and discipline operating through the self. The second part examines Jefferson's attitudes toward education (including his founding of the University of Virginia), newspapers and the postal service, as means for an informed citizenry (at least initially, White men). Part three examines the processes and practices of the datafication of individuals and groups for the expansion and maintenance of Monticello and the nation. Adler examines Jefferson's labor management practices and his use of censuses and mathematical formulas. And Adler examines Jefferson's ideas about expanding and then informationally managing the new frontiers of the United States and its indigenous populations. Adler's book is wonderfully organized and massively researched across several literatures. Footnotes run into the hundreds.

Adler's works show how much *history is at stake* in the cultural and social assumptions that are embedded in and are deployed by documentary and data technologies. Her books are not only important as histories and social critiques, but as an example of a way out of the

disciplinary conundrum that results from seeing the history and epistemology of information as divided into a documentary past, information present, and data future. Adler's books nicely fit with other works in not only knowledge organization and critical documentation theory, but in critical data studies, such as Anita Say Chan's recent book, *Predatory Data: Eugenics in Big Tech and Our Fight for an Independent Future*. It centrally belongs within studies in information history (e.g., the recent *Routledge Handbook of Information History*). Adler's books draw upon and reach out, as well, to other disciplines beyond LIS/IS: of course American studies and the history of science and technology, but also ecological histories of the Americas (e.g., William Cronon; Pierre Charbonnier), critical race studies, critical theory (Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault), the economic and social history of global capitalism (e.g., the monumental works of Sven Beckert), and indigenous studies. Adler gives abundant historical and conceptual explication of the biopolitics of the United States, from settler colonialism until today. Both her books interrogate the transformation of social ontology to documentary ontology, and back again, through the documentary representation and surveillance of natural bodies.

3. To conclude these reviews: documental technologies are a funny thing. As in the case of Library of Congress subject headings, in asserting what is, they also show what isn't. Presence not only marks absence, but the stronger and more transcendental it is then the more it marks its own powers of erasure, rather than what it signifies, and so gives way to what it denies. And, like President's Trump's ordering of the removal of interpretative plaques on slavery at the Philadelphia monument "President's House" (where the first and second presidents of the United States lived) and other historic sites in the United States, the scars of their removal remain, not only on the walls, but in the memories of people, particularly those whose lives or histories are under erasure. With documents, not only do presences mark absence, but absences mark presence. This is true whether we are discussing monuments, Monticello's marked White and unmarked African-American cemeteries, or Library of Congress Subject Headings. No "metadata" is unconnected to what they leave out, nor are they forever.

Librarians know this, and so library classification systems have "hospitality" (such as decimal points) for future entries. Bibliographies reach out to previous works and those works to other works. Published research suggests that research is still to come. And "the public" of public libraries is not simply the current public, but publics to come.

As Adler's books show, the dialectic of control and freedom was central to Jefferson's documentality and it remains so in the documentary and data systems that he created and which we have inherited, including a mode of governance. But in the end, information systems, like Jefferson himself, were and are what Michael Buckland calls "leaky" and what Derrida called "haunted." Jefferson kept slaves for reasons of wealth and welfare, but he wished that there had never been slavery in the United States, and he knew it would soon pass. He knew that time would unravel his time, particularly its most authoritarian elements, and that the documentary systems themselves were fragile, like the country. He was a scientist and a colonial manager, and so he knew that abstract representations must give way to the freedom of the entities they refer to. In the end, as Jacques Derrida said, ashes – traces – remain. It is through the collective remainders of violence that freedom calls out, particularly as amplified by libraries and other documentation centers.

It is easy to be skeptical about the Jeffersonian legacy of "freedom," not only in early America, but later because of the mass media (not to mention the U.S. Supreme Court's) class remediation of "free speech." But both of Adler's books end by being politically optimistic because of libraries and other documentary centers. This is because democracy rests on a documental liberality which is, and must be, welcoming to the other, even in its technical controls. While the drive of an absolutist version of "freedom" crashes the "American Dream" into despotism, revealing the dark side of the European Enlightenment that propels it, collective freedoms emerge more quietly in texts as renewals of understanding, as traces of possibility through recovered lives and histories, through art and in the unending chains of documentary references whose very existence is the basis for a need for bibliographic

and other documentary controls. Salvation – life – always comes through another language, through what has endured.

The “public” of public libraries as an event always to appear (rather than as a stasis), as hospitality to freedom through communities of readings, stories and their possibilities, as knowledge from the unerasable evidence of lived beings, as the evidential traces destined to return to life, is the bet of “democracy” that Jefferson made with libraries, museums and archives as revolutionary institutions. For Jefferson, democracy wasn’t a state, but rather it is an event, a product of the documentary and human “collections” or communities whose powers are made public – “published” – and so are made revolutionary as time itself by library and documentation centers. This is the promise that Adler’s books end with after analyzing so many of the contradictions and aporias of Jefferson’s works and life, and the information technologies that he invented and employed.

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