

Review of Peculiar Satisfaction: Thomas Jefferson and the Mastery of Subjects

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ABSTRACT: Review of Adler, M. (2026). *Peculiar satisfaction: Thomas Jefferson and the mastery of subjects*. Fordham University Press.

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Keywords: critical cataloguing, critcat, reparative description, Thomas Jefferson



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Journal of Radical Librarianship, Vol. 12 (2026) pp. 33-36. Published 30 June 2026.

I happened to finish Melissa Adler's new book, *Peculiar Satisfaction: Thomas Jefferson and the Mastery of Subjects*, on the same day that I learned that Fab Morvan of the disgraced 1990s pop duo Milli Vanilli had decided, at the time, to push ahead with his performance at President Trump's Freedom 250 anniversary celebrations in Washington (Young, 2026). Though the performer later withdrew from the concert (Willman, 2026), something about Morvan—one half of the duo whose legacy was infamously tarnished by a lip-syncing scandal—forging ahead with the gig while, absurdly, the actual voices behind Milli Vanilli's music had to disavow their association with it, felt like it captured a spiritual truth about contemporary America similar to Trump pretending to work at McDonald's on the campaign trail (Contorno, 2024), or the White House X account posting mash-up videos of epic football tackles and military strikes soundtracked by AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" (The White House, 2026). The way that the second Trump administration would choose to mark the country's semiquincentennial would, of course, be fraudulent, myth-making pageantry designed to distract its populace from the president's cratering approval ratings, a senseless war in Iran, ICE agents' terrorization and murdering of Americans in city streets earlier in the year, and the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Trump's celebration of Freedom 250 in 2026 is, to significantly understate the case, a deeply ambivalent project, one where an all-pervading sense of declensionism in response to the sundowning of the American democratic experiment will be sure to discordantly clash with pure, unadulterated MAGA fabulism come July 4th.

Like Freedom 250, Adler's *Peculiar Satisfaction* is also marked by a strong note of ambivalence that runs through the text, and that never entirely resolves. The book is an in-depth analysis of Thomas Jefferson's information practices: as manifested in his own recognition of the importance of archives' role and the archival impulse in the nascent United States, in his personal library and library catalogue that he eventually sold in 1815 to the Library of Congress, and in his impact on museums through his own "Indian Hall" at Monticello. *Peculiar Satisfaction*'s ambivalence relates to the open question of whether American democracy can be salvaged at this conjuncture—particularly in the face of the Trump administration's ongoing antidemocratic, white ethnonationalist, ideological project—*despite* its own exclusions and elisions that date back (at least) to Thomas Jefferson's time and his own information infrastructures. Adler (2026) contends that Jefferson's information infrastructures continue to shape the present, raising a central question: how can we preserve the democratic promise of the systems that such infrastructures undergird—manifested in public education, access to information, and freedom of assembly—while confronting the racism and exclusion built into those same systems from the start? (p. 47).

The tension that comes through in Adler's main question—as well as in her book's conclusion—concerns Americans' desire and ability to not only defend, but to repair, revise, and reinvent their information infrastructures and public institutions (Adler, 2026, pp. 251–252). A defense is necessary, as Adler articulates in *Peculiar Satisfaction*'s conclusion, in the immediate present in the face of the onslaught of Trumpist attacks on said institutions. Repair, revision, and reinvention—arguably the even harder work—are what would be required to ensure those institutions actually live up to their core principles and ideals, perhaps for the first time in their history.

Across the text, Adler returns frequently to Jefferson's many contradictions. As the Declaration of Independence's principal author—which famously holds that “all men are created equal”—Jefferson also possessed at least 607 slaves in his life as a plantation owner at Monticello (Adler, 2026, p. 40), including Sally Hemings who bore six children by him across her lifetime (The Thomas Jefferson Foundation, n.d.). Though Jefferson's relationship with Hemings is not a new revelation—it having been confirmed by DNA testing in 1998 (Gordon-Reed, 2024)—Adler's identification of his omission of the depth of his relationship with Hemings (and his family by Hemings) across different informational contexts is powerful. For example, Adler (2026) notes that Hemings and their children surface only in “business-related contexts, such as ‘slave rolls’ in [Jefferson's] Farm Book” at Monticello (p. 52), whereas his white family is extensively documented in the historical record in letters and other writings. Another striking instance of Jefferson's hypocrisy is found later in the text when Adler (2026) describes the differences between the graveyard for his white family and the Burial Ground for Enslaved People at Monticello (pp. 244–247). Jefferson deemed his white family deserving of obelisks and thoughtfully considered literary epitaphs. In contrast, as Adler (2026) articulates, “[d]espite Jefferson's reputation as a meticulous bookkeeper ... we have no documentation in his hand of any burial grounds or funerals for the people he enslaved” (p. 247).

There is much to recommend about *Peculiar Satisfaction*. The book is clearly the product of Adler's extensive archival work, and her engagement with theory throughout is sophisticated but not inaccessible to a library science readership. Parts two and three, focusing on Jefferson's influence on libraries and museums, are the text's strongest because it is in these chapters that Adler's examples drawn from Jefferson's own information practices are the most specific, and traceable through to present work in memory institutions. Chapter 5, “The Racial Aesthetics of Jefferson's Library Catalog,” interrogates why Jefferson consistently places books by and about Black people at the ends of sections in his book catalogue. In order to contextualize this ordering, Adler (2026) analyzes Jefferson's understanding of racial aesthetics and politics, ultimately drawing a throughline between his deliberate placement of these titles and the way that contemporary books like Simone Browne's *Dark Matters* are catalogued and placed “in the section on African Americans, near books about other ‘elements of the population’” (p. 171).

Similarly, chapter 6, “From Geography to History,” explores the way that Jefferson's own library classification's marginalization of Indigenous peoples—consigning them to Geography and outside of (American) History—persisted even after the Library of Congress changed from the Jeffersonian system to its current classification around 1900. Though the reclassification moved many of Jefferson's volumes related to Indigenous peoples out of Geography to History, contemporary books about Indigenous peoples are often still othered in the Library of Congress classification by their placement under “Indians of North America,” “hierarchically locat[ing] [them] in precolonial times, outside of the United States or North American present” (Adler, 2026, p. 187). Reparative cataloguing movements such as decolonizing description have pointed out the deep inadequacy and colonial heritage of the “Indians of North America” Library of Congress classification and subject headings (Laroque, 2018; Haberstock, 2020; Canadian Research Knowledge Network, 2022), but Adler's illustration of how Indigenous peoples were marginalized in the Jeffersonian classification adds nuance and depth to this understanding. In particular, Adler's (2026) point that “[c]urrent efforts toward decolonizing libraries and archives confront the complexities and incommensurability of Indigenous and settler time” (p. 189)

makes clear that there is far more work to be done in libraries and archives than the largely cosmetic diversity initiatives (Hudson, 2017) and neoliberal EDI policies (Liu, 2024) that one commonly sees.

The book's final chapter, "How the American Antelope [sic] Became a Document," is Adler's direct engagement with documentation, and with thinkers like Suzanne Briet, Michael Buckland, Ronald E. Day, Bernd Frohmann, and Joacim Hansson. Though this chapter feels slightly separate from what comes before, it is still an engrossing read. Essentially, Adler examines the history of the American pronghorn antelope through the journals of Lewis and Clark and traces correspondence between Jefferson and Charles Willson Peale that exhibits their frustration at attempting to classify what eventually became known as *Antilocapra americana*. While Briet famously used the antelope as an example of "how the human use of an animal renders it a document" (Adler, 2026, p. 221), Adler (2026) complicates the antelope's "thingification," connecting it explicitly to colonialism:

The processes by which a pronghorn becomes a document (and an antelope) are submission by force, killing, mounting, and naming. We see the relationship between naming, classification, and colonialism in this process of objectifying animals for the sake of science. And we see that epistemic violence is not just a metaphor, but that there is a series of violent acts that produces the docile subject and renders it into a document. (p. 237)

One of the most powerful interventions in *Peculiar Satisfaction* is Adler's ability to draw out heretofore underacknowledged connections between the classificatory practices of the natural sciences and the information sciences, and this is perhaps most adeptly illustrated by this concluding chapter.

Peculiar Satisfaction is a highly interdisciplinary volume, weaving together scholarship from Jefferson studies, American studies, Black studies, Indigenous studies, critical theory, critical cataloguing, information studies, and documentation. It will be interesting to observe the text's reception in each field, and the linkages across fields that Adler's work will inevitably nurture. As to Adler's concluding admonishment that, "[i]mperfect as they may be ... democracy requires us to defend our public libraries, archives, and museums" because "they stand as a testament to the ongoing and necessarily incomplete project toward freedom" (p. 255), only time will bear out to what extent Americans will be successful at not only defending but reimagining these institutions.

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