

Data Archive Infrastructure: September 12

Some key archival ideas that we won't have much opportunity to discuss today (since we're on a field trip!), but which I hope will resonate with you and inform our future discussions:

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Arkhe: “names at once the **commencement and the commandment**. This name apparently coordinates two principles in one: the principle according to nature or history, *there* where things *commence* – physical, historical, or ontological principle – but also the principle according to the law, *there* where men and gods *command*, *there* where authority, social order are exercised, *in this place* from which *order* is given – nomological principle” (1) (nomological = relating to basic physical laws)

“...from the Greek *arkheion*: initially **a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates**, the *archons*, **those who commanded**.... It is thus, in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that **archives take place**. (2) – “the documents...are only kept and classified under the title of the archive by virtue of a **privileged topology** (relating to deformations of objects). They inhabit this uncommon place, this place of election where law and singularity intersect in **privilege**. At the **intersection of the topological and the nomological, of the place and the law**, of the substrate and the authority, a scene of domiciliation becomes at once visible and invisible.” (3)

“The archontic power, which also gathers the functions of unification, of identification, of classification, must be paired with what we will call the power of *consignation*” – “here the act of **consigning through gathering together signs**.... *Consignation* aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a **system or a synchrony** in which all the elements articulate the **unity of an ideal configuration**.” (3)

“There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective **democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation**” (n. 1, p. 4)

Death drive (incites forgetfulness, annihilates memory, eradicates the archive) vs. pleasure principle

the whole of psychoanalysis itself has been, to some degree, “determined by a state of the technology of communication and or archivization” (16)

“the **technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content** even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The **archivization produces as much as it records the event**” (17)

Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archives from Across the Disciplines,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4:1 (2004). [Manoff is a former MIT librarian]

Manoff offers a reading of Derrida *and* a critical analysis of the broader, trans-disciplinary archival discourse; she notes a “**conflation of libraries, museums, and archives**” and an “**inflation of the term ‘archive,’**” which has become a kind of loose signifier for a disparate set of concepts” (10)

She addresses different disciplines’ relationships to the archive, and their debates over what is deemed archive-worthy (e.g., popular culture materials). And she acknowledges that “saving,” “preserving” isn’t inherently good; archives have been put to nefarious – colonialist, genocidal, culturally-annihilating – uses

Trevor Owens, “What Do You Mean by Archive? Genres of Usage for Digital Preservers,” *The Signal* (February 27, 2014). [Owens is Head of Digital Content Management @ Library of Congress]

Archives = the records of an organization (as in “records management”). Archive = the *fonds* of an individual or organization, kept in their “natural” order. Archive as in “right click → save to archive.” Archive as a particular modality of storage (i.e., tape archives) in the technical back-up “stack.” Archive as in “web archive,” or creating back-up of web content using web crawlers. Archive = crowd-sourced collections of digital content. Archive as a humanist theoretical construct (Manoff, Lingel and Caswell also address this divide between archivists’ archives and humanists’ and social scientists’ notions of “the archive”).

Jessa Lingel, “This Is Not an Archive” [Lingel is a faculty member at Annenberg/Penn, and a trained librarian]

Lingel laments how carelessly archives are employed as metaphors, and how frequently they’re conflated with libraries. “Before asking the archive to bear the weight of these metaphors, it’s incumbent on us to have **basic literacy of the archive as it relates to their distinct institutional, professional, and disciplinary identities.**”

Notes the “absurdity of people who are...fluent in Marxist discourses of labor and subjectivity being blithely indifferent to the fact that **actual work is required** to make archives function on a daily basis...”

She laments that humanities + social science scholars rarely consult LIS research literature

One of our supplemental readings, Michelle Caswell’s “‘The Archive’ is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” *Reconstruction* 16:1 (2016), echoes Lingel’s critique:

Why are archival practice and professional archival literature often ignored in humanities scholarship? In part because “archival studies as a field has been **feminized and relegated to the realm of ‘mere’ service-oriented practice** rather than engaged with as a serious intellectual project.”

“For humanities scholars, ‘the archive’ denotes a **hypothetical wonderland**, the ‘first law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events,’ according to Foucault, or a curious materialization of the death drive and pleasure principle according to Derrida.... For archival studies scholars and practicing archivists, archives – emphasis on the ‘s’ –are **collections of records**, material and immaterial, analog and digital (which, from an archival studies perspective, is just another form of the material), the institutions that steward them, the places where they are physically located, and the processes that designated them ‘archival.’”

She encourages us to recognize key texts in archival studies + practice: e.g., 1898 *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (“The Dutch Manual”), which introduced the principles of **original order and respect des fonds**; 1922 *A Manual for Archive Administration*, which argued for importance of **provenance** over content

...And to familiarize ourselves with key concepts in archival practice: **the record** (how does something become, or gets counted as, a record?), **provenance** (who gets credit as a record’s ‘creator’? what about colonized or indigenous archival ‘subjects’?), **value** (who decides what has value, and in accordance with what criteria?), **representation/description** (how do archivists order, interpret, describe, and create system that structure who and what gets represented in the archives?)

On how archivists give form to archival collections and make them accessible:
I don't expect you to remember these technical details, but it is important for us to acknowledge archivists' specialized knowledge and to be aware of the general *principles* informing their labor.

The Hairpin's "ask an Archivist"

"archival records **aren't catalogued by subject the way that books are. Instead, they're first described based on who created them**, and only secondarily by what the record's actually about."

Volume: "Big archives **describe the size of their holdings in terms of miles and terabytes**. Describing every archival record the way every book is catalogued in the library is just not feasible..."

Origin: "**Archival records were made over the course of doing business or living a life without any thought to their eventual archivy-ness.**"

Preserving Context: "We believe there is **inherent meaning in the very way you've decided to organize things** and we want to preserve that when we're describing the records... This dedication to **preserving context** means that we describe the records based on where they came from and how they were originally arranged. That way we preserve a snapshot of their original order. The downside of this is that we can't describe things by subject as easily."

Neutrality: "One way to **limit our own biases is by confining our descriptions to explaining who created the records**, and letting the researchers figure out what they want to do with the records."

The Peel Art Gallery's "How Do Archivists Describe Collections? (Or, How to Read a Finding Aid)"

Fonds → sub-fonds → series → sub-series → folder → item

While a library's contents are described through its catalogue, an archive's contents are described in **finding aids** which generally contain (1) the collection/fonds name; (2) their dates of creation; (3) a physical description of the collection (e.g., linear feet, # of boxes); (4) a biographical sketch or administrative history; (5) a description of the scope and content of the collection (i.e., record formats [photos, letters, etc.], topics, events addressed via the records]; (6) access restrictions

NYPL, Transmissions from the Timothy Leary Papers

Processing, *respect des fonds*, **More Product, Less Process** (MPLP)

How to honor Leary's own attempts at organization while adhering to standard archival protocol?

Interview with Marvin Taylor, NYU Workshop in Archival Practice

Taylor speaks of archivists' historical reluctance to collect non-paper-based materials because of "storage [challenges], lack of preservation expertise, and difficulty in describing such items"

"...each time I bring in a collection that **confounds typical archival practice, I am reminded that libraries and archives are grand narratives of culture that impose the epistemology of their time onto materials rather than merely describing those materials**. Downtown art questioned these structures of culture. Downtown collections query the library and archive in the same way. To adequately represent downtown work, I have to constantly be careful **not to let the systems of the library and archive undermine the disruptive qualities of downtown work**. This disruption that downtown work causes should make us look at all library and archival systems for their **inherent modes of power and control.**"