



Archival thinking: archaeologies and genealogies

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Even as we are seeing a renaissance of archival theory, and significantly, the arrival of “critical archival studies” (Caswell, Punzalan and Sangwand 2017, pp. 1–8), the field of archival studies in the West has not done much to trouble its origin story, which recites a lineage of ideas that come down to us through the texts of Muller, Feith and Fruin, Jenkinson and Schellenberg. Are there different stories we can tell about our intellectual past(s)? Stories that help us see the present and future differently by casting the past in new light?

In July 2019, at an Archival Education and Research Institute session on archival history, James Lowry read at length from Toyin Falola’s “Ritual Archives,” which describes “the conglomeration of words as well as texts, ideas, symbols, shrines, images, performances, and indeed objects that document as well as speak to those religious experiences and practices that allow us to understand the African world through various bodies of philosophies, literatures, languages, histories and much more” (Falola 2017, 703). Complex and accommodating of change,

...ritual archives are huge, unbounded in scale and scope, storing tremendous amounts of data on both natural and supernatural agents, ancestors, gods, good and bad witches, life, death, festivals, and the interactions between the spiritual realms and earth-based human beings. To a large extent, ritual archives constitute and shape knowledge about the visible and invisible world..., coupled with forces that breathe and are breathless, as well as secular and non-secular, with destinies, and within cities, kingships, medicine, environment, sciences and technologies. Above all, they contain shelves on sacrifices and shrines, names, places, incantations, invocations, and the entire cosmos of all the deities and their living subjects among human and nonhuman species (Falola 2017, 703).

This unbounded archive would have been unrecognizable as archival to the colonial administrators of Nigeria who received, in 1948, Jenkinson’s memorandum

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proposing a survey of records and offering technical assistance in their preservation. The offer was not taken up, and Abiola Abioye (2013) describes how papers languished in colonial offices. Offices around which (before which and after which and we should say *through* which) moved the colossal apparatus of the ritual archive. Falola's text depicts archival thinking with a history that stands apart from the well-rehearsed narrative of tabularia, chanceries and manuals, while also being ancient and global, through the Yoruba diaspora and its cultural heirs. It is possible to see in its glimpses of concepts such as the archival bond (extended far beyond material records), but what it offers is not a chance for comparison or reconciliation into a universal metanarrative, but a disruption of historiographical hegemonies.

Questions about orders of value, subjugated and resistant knowledges, the right to look outside our own contexts and how we do that, exoticization and othering, such questions trouble and propel critical intellectual history. Falola describes the ritual archive so that readers may learn about it and through it, and papers in this special issue are offered in the same spirit: they unsettle our master narrative. For this issue of *Archival Science*, we called for papers that examine the development of archival practices, theories and traditions in different national and social contexts, and their transposition and movement over time. Many features of Western archival theory and practice have unclear and under-criticized genealogies, and non-Western or non-dominant archival intellectual traditions are often poorly understood and ascribed subaltern status within the global Anglophone discourse. There is thus a pressing need for work that questions the history of ideas in the archival field. As scholars and practitioners remake archival theory and practice, imagining new futures, we want to ask about new pasts, to look back and ask, "What else was going on while the edifice of Western archival science was being constructed?"

Michel Foucault's archaeological and genealogical methods offer a useful entry point into answering that question; through them, Foucault transformed the study of the history of ideas into the study of the discourses through which "history" is constituted. His archaeological analysis concentrates on identifying and describing "discursive formations" or "epistemes," specifically within the history of science. An episteme is the underlying system of thought that, within a given culture and historical period, "defines the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice" (Foucault 1970: 168); the "general horizon" of archeological analysis is "the never completed, never wholly achieved uncovering of the archive." (Foucault 1972, p. 148). By archive, Foucault means neither the totality of texts preserved by a culture to attest to its past nor the institutions in which those texts are preserved; rather, it is "the general system of the formation and transformation of statements" or "set of rules" that govern a particular episteme (Foucault 1972, p. 148; 146; Foucault 1991, p. 59). This conceptual archive determines, among other things, what may be spoken of in discourse, what statements will survive and disappear, what statements will be recognized as valid and invalid, and what individuals, groups and classes will have access to particular discourses. (Foucault 1991, pp. 59–60). As Elizabeth Yale observes, Foucault's archive is "paradoxical ...existing at a level beneath the archive of documents, books—the texts that constitute the discourse—but accessed through our analysis of those texts." (Yale 2015, p. 335). The ultimate aim of his archeological analysis is

“not to trace the origin of discourse to a particular mind or founding subject, but to document its conditions of existence and the practical field in which it is deployed.” (Smart 2002, pp. 48–49).

Genealogical analysis, for its part, identifies the causes of the transition from one episteme to the next, revealing its emergence and disappearance as “the result of contingent turns of history rather than the outcome of rationally inevitable ends.” (Gutting and Oksala 2019, n.p.). It aims to surface “subjugated knowledges”; such knowledges include, on the one hand, scholarly or scientific knowledges “buried” under the dominant discourse and, on the other hand, a wide range of other knowledges disqualified as “nonconceptual,” “insufficiently elaborated,” “naïve,” “hierarchically inferior” or “below the required level of erudition or scientificity” (Foucault 1997, p. 7). For Foucault, genealogies constitute:

...a way of playing local, discontinuous, disqualified, or nonlegitimized knowledges off against the unitary theoretical instance that claims to be able to filter them, organize them into a hierarchy, organize them in the name of a true body of knowledge, in the name of the rights of a science that is in the hands of a few. Genealogies ...are about the insurrection of knowledges. ... an insurrection against the centralizing power-effects that are bound up with the institutionalization and workings of any scientific discourse organized in a society such as ours. (Foucault 1997, p. 9).

Foucault’s methods furnish the conceptual tools for uncovering a given system of thought, the discourses and cultural practices constructed around them and the power–knowledge relations at play within them; they are complementary means to a particular end, that is, “the removal of the tyranny of overall discourses.” (Foucault 1997, p. 8). As Foucault succinctly puts it: “Archaeology is the method specific to the analysis of local discursivities, and genealogy is the tactic which, once it has described these local discursivities, brings into play the desubjugated knowledges that have been released from them. That just about sums up the overall project.” (Foucault 1997, pp. 10–11).

Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical methods have reshaped the landscape of intellectual history and their influence on historical studies of the archive and archival practices both within and without the archival field has been far-reaching. Such studies draw on a wide range of disciplinary perspectives to trace the reception and transformation of ideas about records and archives within a given society in a given historical period; to uncover and describe the interconnected systems of knowledge and power that have shaped the making and keeping of records; and to expose the part played by archivists over the centuries “as performers in the drama of memory-making” (Cook and Schwartz 2002, p. 172). Foucauldian themes are detectable, for example, in thematic issues of archival and historical journals that showcase investigations into the making and keeping of records and archives in the early modern period. (Blair and Milligan 2007; De Vivo et al. 2016; Head 2010; Walsham 2016). As Alexandra Walsham observes, many of these investigations proceed “from the conviction that archival cultures are historically specific and contingent” and shaped by the systems of thought (religious, political, intellectual, cultural) dominant within a given society (Walsham 2016, p. 12). Foucault’s influence is also discernible in histories examining the politics of discourse at work in the French national archives of the nineteenth century as it weaponized the archival

principle of provenance to assert its exclusive prerogative as the only legitimate preserver of “authentic” sources of French history and collaborated with the state in constructing a particular version of “national identity” and “the public interest” (Milligan 2005, 2006; Moore 2008). Some archival histories written over the past decade or so wear the specific influence of postcolonial and archival turn scholarship, examining colonial archives and record-keeping regimes as powerful “technologies of rule” aimed at controlling colonial subjects (Stoler 2002, p. 87; Burns 2010; Raman 2012; Stoler 2009; Punzalan 2006, 2009).

The articles included in this special issue deepen and extend these studies, tracing histories of archival ideas with a view to understanding their place(s) within paradigms, historical trajectories and social moments and movements. In their contributions, Juan Ilerbaig and J.J. Ghaddar look at the beginnings of the so-called “modern period” of Western archival history when centralized public archives emerged and archival theory began to take shape. In “Archives as sediments: metaphors of deposition and archival thinking,” Ilerbaig traces the history of the concept of sedimentation in geology and its subsequent adoption as a metaphor for the organic accumulation of archival documents in the late nineteenth century. His account begins in the eighteenth century as early geologists, seeking a stable foundation on which to assert the reliability of their inferences about the history of the Earth, positioned themselves as historians of nature, whose aim—to uncover the evidence embedded in “natural records,” that is, rocks, strata and fossils—was comparable to that of historians who sought to uncover the evidence embedded in more traditional records. As analogous sources of reliable evidence and inference, history and archival documents provided a language of validation for the emerging discipline of geology. By the early nineteenth century, however, geologists had found their own language of validation in the stratigraphical principles underpinning the geological process of sedimentation. The concept of sedimentation was soon taken up by a variety of disciplines concerned with the historical remains of human activity and, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the comparison between the organic accumulation of archives and the geological process of sedimentation was woven, directly or indirectly, into the writings of a number of archival scholars including Muller, Feith and Fruin, Jenkinson, and Casanova. Just as history and archives had provided the new discipline of geology with a language of validation in the eighteenth century, geology now provided the emerging discipline of archival science with a legitimizing metaphor that “aligned archival science along with other historical sciences that could boast a measure of reputation and success.”

Ilerbaig’s study demonstrates how specific disciplinary discourses in the nineteenth century were deployed to shore up the legitimacy and authority of the new discipline of archival science. Ghaddar’s study shows how, during roughly the same period, settler discourses were deployed to subjugate Indigenous knowledges. In “Total archives for land, law and sovereignty in settler Canada,” Ghaddar revisits the origin story of Canada’s total archives tradition through an anti-colonial lens. The familiar version of that story recounts the efforts of Canada’s first national archivist, Douglas Brymner, to build a national archive that would be “a great storehouse of the history of the colonies and colonists ... in every aspect of their lives as communities.” In pursuit of that “noble dream,” Brymner and his delegates traveled

across the country and to France and Great Britain to collect or copy documents from a range of public and private sources that would provide the raw material on which that history would be written. For Brymner, the archivist's role was akin to that of "the pioneer whose duty is to clear away obstructions; the cultivated fields will follow." The collecting practices of Canada's early archival "pioneers" laid the foundation for what is now called the total archives tradition, a tradition that aspires to an inclusive historical representation of all segments of Canadian society. Ghaddar argues that the noble dream origin story of Canada's national archives helped to shore up colonial sovereignty through the "archival fiction" that the collecting practices of Canada's early settler archivists and historians were directed toward the creation of an inclusive history of Canada; the effect of this fiction was to deflect attention from the role played by these practices in constructing a particular version of the Canadian nation, one that privileged the perspectives of settlers, military figures and imperial authorities, excluded Indigenous perspectives and traditions, and erased the history of Indigenous dispossession and genocide. When these exclusions and erasures are taken into account, the metaphor of the archivist as a pioneer who clears the land for settlement takes on a darker connotation. For Ghaddar, exposing the ignoble history submerged in the noble dream of total archives is a critical starting point for the project of reimagining and restructuring the national archive as "an instrument for symbolic and material decolonization, the reclamation of Indigenous knowledges and lands, and Indigenous resurgence."

In "The Wayback Machine: notes on a re-enchantment," Surya Bowyer draws a connective thread between the aspirations of the Wayback Machine—"the largest publicly accessible archive in the world"—and Foucault's description of the "episteme of absolute accumulation" that underpinned Western museums and libraries in the nineteenth century. He sees a further connection between Foucault's argument that our reality is shaped by language and James Bridle's argument in the *New Dark Age* that our understanding of new technological tools is shaped and constrained by the metaphors we invoke to help us make sense of them. "For Foucault," Bowyer explains, "language forms the object of which it speaks; for Bridle, our objects are saturated with our own ideas and understandings." Bowyer takes up Bridle's call for us to "re-enchant" our technological tools through "thoughtfulness" by critically examining the metaphors through which we apprehend the Wayback Machine. He walks us through a series of metaphors used to describe the Wayback Machine, showing how they act to obscure the human agency behind it, the agency that determines, for example, what webpages will and will not be crawled, what links will and will not be maintained and, therefore, what will and will not be preserved in the "archive." By de-familiarizing these metaphors Bowyer exposes the "gap between language and tool" and demonstrates the value of examining our technological tools through the lens of language as a way of "re-inscrib[ing] that which is lost in familiarisation."

In their contributions, Jeannette Bastian and Sumayya Ahmed invite us to re-enchant the conceptual tools of archival studies by re-thinking some of the ways we think about them. In "Mine, yours, ours: archival custody from transaction to narrative," Bastian situates the concept of archival custody within a framework of custody, care and control and tracks the historical trajectory of the concept to show how

it has been shaped and reshaped over time as it has adapted itself to new modes of archival thinking and new record-keeping environments. From that history, Bastian locates the essence of archival custody in “control of the narrative that records tell, or, put another way, control of the narrative that the institution, community or group wishes to tell.” The capacity to control the narrative that records tell, she argues, can be realized in ways that are both oppressive and beneficial. It can act to marginalize and exclude certain ethnic and cultural communities when it is wielded by a single authority; but it can also empower those communities when it is exercised in a spirit of partnership, “mutual stewardship” and community ownership. In support of this empowering potential, Bastian makes the case for adding the element of collaboration to her custodial framework of custody, care and control in order to “suggest a path that envisions full participation in the archival record by all the actors in that record.” As Bastian observes, this interpretive shift in custody from mine to yours to ours also “reinforce[s] a recognition that records exist beyond the textual to embrace an archival heritage that includes the oral, the geographical, the symbolic, the performative.”

Bastian’s advocacy for a more expansive understanding of the nature of records—one that encompasses oral, symbolic and performative modes of recording—is echoed in Ahmed’s meditation on the memory practices of Sufi devotional communities. In “People of remembrance: archival thinking and religious memory in Sufi communities,” Ahmed conceptualizes tariqa-based Sufism, the mystical aspect of Islamic practice, as “a system of conscious documentation of spiritual lineages, practices, sacred and liturgical texts, and experiential knowledge of the Divine.” Religious memory is transmitted “and thus preserved” through the “living records” of each Sufi community’s rituals and practices embodied in the singing of ecstatic poetry, the reciting of litanies, the visiting of tombs and the performance of sacred dance. Ahmed finds in these methods through which Sufi communities seek to preserve spiritual knowledge and experiences certain resonances with Western archival concepts such as authenticity and provenance. They are detectable, for example, in the “chain of initiation” through which the spiritual lineage of a Sufi community’s founding saint or sheikh is traced, and in the tomb-shrine of that saint or sheikh which marks the “spiritual provenance” of each community. One of Ahmed’s sources of inspiration is Falola’s ritual archives. Like Falola, Ahmed’s purpose in showing some points at which Sufi memory practices correlate with Western archival thinking is not to try to validate those practices through such comparison, “but simply to point out to the reader the existence of nuanced archival thinking in a spiritual context which is not often approached in archival literature.” Her study is a conscious effort to build on Falola’s explication of ritual archives by presenting Sufi religious rituals as yet another example of a “boundless” archive that possesses a deep history and richly generative understandings of the archival.

The special issue closes with Zhaogui Qin, Chunmei Qu and Ashleigh Hawkins’ English translation of Qin’s poem “The Three-Character Classic of Archival Work.” The poem summarizes the history of Chinese archival history and practice in the format of a Sanzijing, or Three Character Classic; a traditional Chinese form of verse used to teach children the principles of Confucianism. Qin’s poem, though, outlines the evolution of archival thinking and practice from 1400 BC to the present. It was

first published in 2009 and was widely read and enjoyed by archivists across China, and it has been translated and glossed by Qin, Qu and Hawkins for this special issue of *Archival Science*, responding to our call for work that translates canonical texts across languages, while it also responds to our evocation of genealogical forms. The poem is heavily annotated to explain the references, which detail a vivid history of thefts, restorations, reforms and innovations. The references also name models and methods such as the Shishi Jingui (metal chests in a stone hall) tradition established in the West Zhou period, or the Document-Archive Chain Method and its “three unifications,” instituted during the Communist reforms of 1933. The insights offered by the Three Character Classic prompt questions about how such models and methods figure in our international standards and the systems and practices they normalize, and more generally the poem opens a window into a long and fascinating tradition of practice.

This special issue has its own intellectual history. It comes out of the *Archival Discourses* research network, which fosters inquiry at the intersection of intellectual history and criticality (*Archival Discourses* [2020]). In a sense, the network’s own family tree includes critical archival studies and its genealogy, as well as that historical work that goes back to Terry Cook’s 1997 call for historicization in “What’s Past is Prologue” (Cook 1997) and which includes Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood’s *Archival Thinking* volumes (Eastwood and MacNeil 2010; MacNeil and Eastwood 2017), the International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (ICHORA), and the work of historians of archival science around the world. The articles in the special issue build on those foundations, bringing to light new examples of subjugated and parallel archival histories, and offering conceptual tools for analyzing the discourses through which “archival history” is constituted.

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