

Engaging with Records and Archives

histories and theories

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Edited by

Fiorella Foscarini, Heather MacNeil,

Bonnie Mak and Gillian Oliver

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Editors' introduction

Fiorella Foscarini, Heather MacNeil,
Bonnie Mak and Gillian Oliver

THIS BOOK OFFERS a selection of papers from the Seventh International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA 7), which took place in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, from July 29 to 31, 2015. I-CHORA was established in 2003 as a biennial conference series to encourage and promote interdisciplinary research into the history of records, recordkeeping practices and recordkeeping institutions. Conferences to date have taken place in Toronto; Amsterdam (twice); Boston; Perth, Australia; London; and Austin, Texas, each attracting between 100 and 130 scholars and professionals from around the world.

According to the organizers of the first I-CHORA, 'the impetus for the conference came from the archives community', which felt the 'need for greater sophistication in conceiving the history of records to address the issues of human communicative practices and the artefacts themselves as material and social products' (Craig et al., 2005, 2–3). It was evident from the outset that investigating the origins and evolution of archival ideas and practices, documentary forms and structures, and recordkeeping methods and technologies not only supported archival work and archival thinking but also had a much broader and all-encompassing relevance in that the history of archives is the history of culture. Thus, throughout the years, the conference series has increasingly been promoting an interdisciplinary approach to the study of record making and keeping in different historical contexts.

By entitling this book *Engaging with Records and Archives: histories and theories*, which was also the theme of I-CHORA 7, we wanted to emphasize another characteristic of this conference series; that is, the strong belief shared by all conference organizers and participants that *engaging* in scholarly research around histories and theories of archives and records is essential to

‘develop the maturity and self-awareness of those who work with records’ (Craig et. al., 9). Today, more than ever before, this suggests that *everyone*, not only archives specialists, would benefit from a deeper and better informed engagement with archival objects and practices as they become increasingly engrained in our daily lives, from the pervasiveness of archival materials on the web, to the use of archive-based knowledge in all sciences, to the uncertainty about the preservation of our digital memories that we may all experience sooner or later. The 11 essays selected for inclusion in this book explore different ways of historicizing and theorizing record making, recordkeeping and archiving practices from a range of disciplinary perspectives and through the eyes of creators, custodians and users.

The book is organized into two parts. The essays in Part 1, ‘Rethinking histories and theories’, challenge different concepts, models, metaphors and beliefs that form the traditional archival discourse by situating them historically and culturally, and by placing them in the context of other disciplinary approaches. A recurring theme in Part 1 is the visibility of archival objects and infrastructures and of those interacting with the archives. The essays in Part 2, ‘Engaging records and archives’, illustrate various forms of engagement with archives and archiving practices across a range of examples, from historical engagements with records and recordkeeping practices to community-sensitive ways of engaging with archives for social justice, to artistic engagements with archival practices and theories.

Part 1 opens with Jeannette Bastian’s ‘Moving the margins to the middle: reconciling “the archive” with the archives’. The author traces the history of the ‘archival turn’ and its many manifestations, and urges archivists to embrace a broader notion of the archive that continues to be discussed and explored across the humanities. Because this more flexible concept of the archive goes beyond traditional understandings of the archives proper and has benefited from various disciplinary perspectives, it might suggest new ways to enrich archival theory and practice. As ‘the archive’ as a metaphor and a virtual space becomes increasingly central and meaningful to a wide range of communities and constituencies, Bastian argues that ‘traditional archives run the risk of irrelevancy’ if they do not engage with this broader discourse and are not open to a more inclusive view of records and recordkeeping.

In Chapter 2, ‘Organisms, skeletons and the archivist as palaeontologist: metaphors of archival order and reconstruction in context’, Juan Ilerbaig takes us into the intellectual atmosphere of the 19th century, when some of the ideas about the organic nature of archives, the growth of archives by processes of

accumulation and sedimentation, the significance of the internal order of archives and the need to restore that original order emerged. By examining the connections between archival science and other disciplines interested in the historical reconstruction of past entities and events on the basis of their 'remains', such as geology, palaeontology, architecture, comparative anatomy and linguistics, Ilerbaig sheds light on the historicity of the metaphorical roots of archival theory during its modern foundational period.

The more recent origins of data modelling practices in the context of archival description are explored by Jonathan Furner in Chapter 3, "'Records in context'" in context: a brief history of data modelling for archival description'. Furner discusses the specific historical and cultural conditions under which archives, libraries and museums developed their respective data standards in the late 1980s. In particular, by revealing 'the archival community's unique take on data modeling', his analysis situates archival practice in relation to libraries and museums and draws out crucial differences that derive from the history of each discipline. The tension within current initiatives that are meant to harmonize existing standards is examined against the background of the theoretical and material characteristics of each domain.

Marlene Manoff's Chapter 4, 'Mapping archival silence: technology and the historical record' draws on concepts from the sociology, philosophy and history of science in order to investigate metaphors like 'black box' or 'archival silence', as they are used by scholars who study 'hidden and increasingly complex systems ... to articulate and theorize the unseen, the unknown, and the intentionally effaced'. Globalization and digitization raise the spectre of historical amnesia and failure to secure the past. Science studies, Manoff argues, can help us to frame and better understand the complex interplay of social, economic and technical forces that shape the digital record as both a material and a cultural object.

Concluding Part 1 is Elizabeth Shepherd's Chapter 5, 'Hidden voices in the archives: pioneering women archivists in early 20th-century England', which explores another kind of 'archival silence', that is, the hidden voice of women in the archives. Drawing upon examples from early 20th-century England, Shepherd brings pioneering women archivists out of the shadows. Her attempt to make visible the role of women in the archives aids a fuller understanding of their 'background, social lives and critical professional interventions, helps to set them in their proper historical and archival place, and gives a voice to their stories and thus to our emerging archival consciousness'.

The first two essays in Part 2 demonstrate how tracking particular recordkeeping practices through time and changing political situations is essential not only to understanding the meaning of those practices in their context, but also to gaining insights into the mechanisms through which archives and their tools are constantly reshaped to account for different needs and behaviours. In Chapter 6, 'The use and reuse of documents by chancellors, archivists and government members in an early modern republican state: Genoa's *Giunta dei confini* and its archives', Stefano Gardini presents a careful study of the transformations that occurred over time to the documentary complex of a Genoese institution which was responsible for overseeing the north-western territorial borders of today's Italy for more than two centuries. The author highlights the roles played by the various communities interested in those archives in different time periods, particularly their influence on the structure of finding aids.

In Chapter 7, 'The bumpy road to transparency: access and secrecy in 19th-century records in the Dutch East Indies', Charles Jeurgens investigates how the Dutch administration and society dealt with access and secrecy in relation to the records produced in the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century. His essay is a historical account of the 'dilemmas and inner debates of bureaucracy' as they are revealed through a study of records management practices, and a thoughtful exploration of archives as instruments of power and of the tensions inherent in such power.

Access, power and recordkeeping practices are also central themes in Chapter 8, 'Archival ethics and indigenous justice: conflict or coexistence?' Melanie Delva and Melissa Adams tackle the delicate and controversial issue of 'decolonizing' the archives as an institution that reflects and represents the values and practices of the Western world. Their essay reports on the authors' own professional experiences of negotiating access to records caught between the directives of the Anglican Church and the desires of an indigenous community on the west coast of Canada. The authors urge the archival community to move beyond its current practices and the ethical ideas governing those practices, and to look critically at its own long-held theories, 'in favour of actions which respect Indigenous ways of knowing and perspectives of recordkeeping'.

Another kind of engagement with records of colonial and post-colonial regimes is recounted in Chapter 9, 'History and development of information and recordkeeping in Malawi'. In this account, Paul Lihoma pays special attention to the ways in which different cultures, media and technologies have shaped one another and interacted with the administration of the day. By

walking through Malawi's political vicissitudes, we learn about the 'deleterious effects' that administrative changes can have on the quality of records, and how archives that are 'instruments for political oppression' can be turned into 'instruments for accountability for the atrocities suffered' by a country.

In Chapter 10, 'History of community archiving in Poland', Magdalena Wiśniewska explores community engagement with archives through the lens of two influential community archives: the KARTA Centre Foundation and the Elżbieta Zawacka Foundation. Drawing on Pierre Nora's theory of the decolonization and democratization of history, Wiśniewska traces the profound reasons for grassroots archival activism in Poland back to the tragic events the country experienced, first with the Nazi occupation and later with the repression under the communist regime.

The essay that closes the volume deals with another kind of community, the community of artists. Chapter 11, Sian Vaughan's 'Reflecting on practice: artists' experiences in the archives' explores how contemporary artists are 'encountering and reframing' the archive/archives through their practice by means of an examination of 'artists' experiences with archives where the subject matter itself is art'. Vaughan's study illustrates specific ways in which perspectives from the creative arts can challenge, extend and, ultimately, enrich archival theory and practice. Her final words, that 'artists can remind and encourage archivists to think differently', provide a fitting conclusion to the book as a whole. All of the essays included in *Engaging with Records and Archives* invite archivists to think differently about how we understand, interpret and interact with histories and theories of the archive and archives.

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PART 1

Rethinking histories and theories

Moving the margins to the middle: reconciling 'the archive' with the archives

Jeannette A. Bastian

THE EMERGENCE OF the 'archive' in the late 20th century as a focus of academic enquiry has given rise to a variety of responses from the archival profession. Rejection, indignation, speculation and even amusement have characterized the reactions of archivists to what has often seemed to them to be a misguided, misdirected, poorly understood and overly theorized construct of a primarily practical pursuit. Yet, academic fascination with the archive has lingered and in the early decades of the 21st century only grown stronger, so that the 'archive' now appears to be firmly established as a central identifier and research focus of many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.

What each discipline means by 'the archive' or the 'archival turn' may differ slightly, but sufficient commonalities suggest a general understanding that 'the archive' – in both the digital and analogue realms – is recognized as an essential knowledge space to be approached, constructed and even confronted in numerous ways and from many perspectives. Environmentalist/historian William Turkel (2007, 66) expresses this broad understanding when he claims that 'every place is an archive, one that bears material traces of the past in the very substance of the past', but this is not a view that archivists or the archival profession have traditionally embraced.

How have archivists responded to the challenges to their traditional theories and practices posed by the theorized 'archive'? Archivists often seem reluctant to stray too far beyond their comfort zones, frequently emphasizing the differences between 'the archive' as conceptualized by non-archivists, and 'real' archival practice. Interrogating the commonalities between both, however, suggests that, for archivists, embracing 'the archive' in all its diversity and latitude could open valuable pathways towards a more

inclusive and all-encompassing understanding of the variety of records that communities create and the many ways in which they tell their stories.

This essay attempts this interrogation, investigating developing multidisciplinary concepts of 'the archive' as well as their divergence from and impact on traditional archival theory and practice. It proposes to identify and map evolving concepts of 'the archive', seeking to reconcile them with traditional archival theory while exploring ways in which archival theorizing from other disciplines could expand archival thinking by archivists, and to some extent already has done so.

Given the dissonance around the contrasting and even contradictory visions of the 'archive' and the archives, discussion and analysis of both are more than just an intellectual exercise. As scholars and disciplines hone their own constructs of the 'archive' outside of the archives and absent the input of archivists, traditional archives run the risk of irrelevancy. At the same time, recognizing the values of the 'archive' offers many opportunities for partnerships, for both the 'archive' and 'the archives' have much to offer one another.

Into the archive

Let me begin by offering a personal story:

It is fairly well known among archival institutions and community groups in Boston, Massachusetts that students in our archives education programme routinely do internships as part of their academic programme. As a result, we receive many requests for records assistance both from organizations and individuals.

Several years ago I received one such individual request. Recognizing the name of the requester as that of a woman well known as an activist in the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, I was intrigued and offered to take a look at her collection and discuss options for assistance. Working on these records could, I felt, be an exciting and even inspiring opportunity for our students. Accordingly, a colleague and I went to visit her. Her small apartment was crammed with archives boxes, and so was the storage facility that she drove us to – some 180 linear feet of records in all as it eventually turned out. She was then in her early 70s, and sorting and working in her archive had become her primary occupation and concern. Although our immediate recommendation was that she should donate her collection to a traditional archives and let the professionals there describe and organize it, she told us that she had to sell her archive. It was her only asset and she needed the money.

But things were not quite so simple and her archive was much more than just an asset. The woman – let's call her Sara – was already being courted by a prominent archives. While this archives was willing to pay for the collection, the archivists had indicated interest in retaining only parts of it – primarily, material concerned with national aspects of the women's movement and not the more personal records. This was an immediate red flag! Sara felt passionately about her archive, as an expression not only of herself but also of the feminist movement itself, and specifically of the radical life that she advocated. She refused to sell unless the entire archive could be preserved – ideally, in the order that she decided on.

With the help of a student, Sara continued to work on her archive while she also actively used and interacted with it in her daily relationships with a wide and diverse community of friends and colleagues and in a surprising array of causes. Sara believed that a radical life embraces radicalism broadly – not only specific causes. Radicalism is itself a way of life. Her archive echoed that belief. Sara also began to write about her archive, taking small sections at a time, reflecting on the materials and weaving them into short narratives.

For Sara, her archive was more than a reflection of her life, it was a metaphor for a lifestyle she believed in and lived. This archive that was not *in* the archives – a DIY archive if you will – was both a personal, internal archive and an integral part of the broader external archive of knowledge on the feminist movement. Sara would have agreed with Brazilian artist Paul Bruscky, whose studio in Brazil houses a personal archive of over 15,000 items and who, when interviewed about his archives, observed that 'my art and life have always been inseparable, and the studio-archive is clearly an expression of that. How do we give form to knowledge? In this space I make no difference between my works and everything else here, the archive, my library my life' (Osthoff, 2009, 24).

Sara and her relationship to her archive – ultimately purchased by that very institution that she initially rejected – foreshadows a generational shift in that complex relationship between scholars, artists, activists and archival materials. Scholarly engagement with the archives has moved from one of wariness and scepticism to one in which the archives is embraced as 'both a point of departure and a destination' (Eichhorn, 2008, n.p.). Sara's archive, whether in her own possession or as a collection in a traditional women's archives, is always already part of the feminist archive writ large, it is a component of that broader conceptual 'feminist archive' wherever it may be located. Feminist scholar Kate Eichhorn (2010, 625), defining the archival turn

in the context of current third-wave feminism, claims that for this new generation, 'the archive has never been ... an impenetrable barrier to be breached, but rather it has always been a site and practice integral to our knowledge-making and cultural production and our activism. It is precisely where our academic and activist feminist work converge. The creation of archives is part and parcel of how we produce and legitimize knowledge and make our voices audible in the public sphere'.

I tell the story of Sara's archive to introduce an enquiry into that intriguing late 20th-, early 21st-century academic phenomenon, the 'archival turn', from the perspective of an archivist. Sara and her archive provide a small window, a lens, into comprehending a philosophical and scholarly space that envisions the archive not only as all that can be 'known and unknown' (Derrida, 1995, 36), but as a site of both community identity and self-realization, a monolithic accumulation of knowledge on the one hand, a sponge-like fluidity of information on the other, a particular location but with no fixed address, a place of affect and emotion (for both archivist and user) as well as passion (that well known 'fever') and, importantly, a context for evidence and memory. And while I recognize that the relationship between this scholarly archive and the archivist's archives is neither smooth nor seamless, and often seems barely acknowledged, I will suggest that there is much common ground and ample room for mutual understandings.

Where and how do notions of recordkeeping, recordkeeping behaviour and the relationship of records to their creator fit into the nexus of the archivists and the 'archive'? For Sara, the archive was not so much the residue, nor even the representation of her life, but a dynamic construct that was both intimate and internal, while also forming a part of a larger external and continuing story. And it may be that this internality/externality is at least one of the factors that distinguishes the archive from the archives.

In this essay, I hope to add to the analysis of the relationship between the archive and the archives by examining the following:

- 1 the archival turn and (re)turn – both metaphoric and material
- 2 how different disciplines view the 'turn'
- 3 the nexus – between academics and archivists
- 4 the challenge – how archivists turn with the 'turn'.

Turn and (re)turn

Knowledge spaces, sites of power, cultural anxiety, reading against the grain, disruption, post-colonialism, this is only some of the terminology associated with the current archival turn. What may be less known is that the archival turn of the 21st century is also a (re)turn.

The first archival turn occurred in early 19th-century European history studies when historians, led by Leopold von Ranke, turned towards archival documentation as the essential evidence needed for historical truth and began to 'equate professional historical studies with scholarship based on archival research' (Herman, 2013, 68). Previously, history had been struggling to become an independent discipline and it was not until the late 17th and early 18th centuries that history became 'increasingly accepted as independently valuable without the validation of the universal principles of philosophy or the coherence of rhetoric' (Eskildsen, 2013, 10). In concert with other academic scholarship of the time, the tools of the historian were empirical, relying on philosophical reconstructions, first-hand accounts, grand narratives and the work of previous historians. Von Ranke and his followers focused on texts, primarily those found in archives. His 'turn' included a belief in historical objectivity, historical truth and trustworthiness. Through the use of primary sources in the archives, 'one could trust the work of one's fellow historians because one understood and shared their procedures of working and writing. Even historians who did not share Ranke's belief in historical objectivity described critical methods as such a guarantee' (Eskildsen, 2013, 19).

This first 'turn' established a methodological terrain for the discipline of history that persists today. But, beginning in the mid-20th century, a new kind of 'archival turn' or a (re)turn fostered a redefinition of the relationship of the archives to historical scholarship that not only questioned historical truth but also re-imagined historical sources. This 'archive' expanded beyond the text to include memory, witnessing, materiality, performance, art – a broad and deep spectrum of what can be 'known and not known'.

This expansive view of the archive helped construct a conceptual and analytical terrain for discourse in a range of disciplines within the humanities and social sciences. It relocated the archive as both a theoretical metaphorical space and potentially many physical spaces. In this formulation, for example, a historian pursuing the archival silences of slavery in the American South might interrogate 'slavery's archive', meaning all the relevant and existing and silenced knowledge in a vast array of archival materials across a wide range of locations (Klein, 2013). 'Slavery's archive', to continue that example, is in no one place, and is never completely knowable; rather, it is an imaginary

with no specific location but exists wherever the material might exist – in traditional archives, but also in the abstract and in the possible. While archivists often see a physical or virtual space populated with records, papers, manuscripts, scholars envision a wider sweeping space of knowledge, a potential for knowledge that may be found in a variety of materials including those that are yet undiscovered.

History is not the only discipline that claims both a ‘turn’ and a ‘re-turn’. Scholars of photography trace the entry of the archive to the early 19th century, when the invention of the stereograph heralded an abundance of documentation that could be stored and organized into a body of evidence. Photography theorist Alan Sekula (1986, 16), studying the effect of the photograph on criminology, describes it thus: ‘in short, we need to describe the emergence of a truth-apparatus that cannot be adequately reduced to the optical model provided by the camera. The camera is integrated into a larger ensemble: a bureaucratic-clerical-statistical system of “intelligence”. This system can be described as a sophisticated form of the archive. The central artifact of this system is not the camera but the filing cabinet’.

A theorist writing in 2012 describes Sekula’s ‘shadowy presence of the archive’ in the countless, neatly packed files, folders, drawers and shelves where, in the years between 1880 and 1910, ‘the archive became the dominant institutional basis for photographic meaning’. He notes that, ‘for Sekula and for some others at the end of the 1970s ... the archival mode was a political apparatus inseparable from the rationalization of information’ (Tagg, 2012, 26). The archive as a source of power and control, an instrument of the state then, was recognized early on in the development of photography, particularly in its ability to compile and categorize.

In today’s (re)turn of the photographic archive, remembrance and collective memory are central to the visual image, where ‘the forces of self-determination, decolonization, and their counter-movements have made it a highly politicized space, as communities have come to be seen as being made and remade through the sharing of the ethical obligation of remembrance and through the claim to “collective memory”, of which the archive is now seen as the repository’ (Tagg, 2012, 32).

Many disciplines in the social sciences and humanities have embraced the archive as a core knowledge site, and engaging and interrogating the archive has become a paramount academic activity. Although in this essay it is not possible to do justice to all the various theoretical perspectives from the many academic disciplines that have embraced the archive, it nonetheless seems clear that whether the ‘archive’ is considered in terms of film, photography,

art, literature, history, anthropology, performance arts or rhetoric, each discipline establishes and develops its own particular constructs and meanings. But while each discipline may focus on its own formulations, there are commonalities.

Commonalities

Among these commonalities is the perception of the archive writ large as the core but dispersed resource for specific disciplines. Eichhorn (2010, 623) writes that ‘since the “archival turn” in the Humanities and Social Sciences, it has been commonplace to understand the archive as something that exists well beyond the boundaries of the institutions that have historically authorized their existence’. Importantly, this ‘archive’ is often digital, with the affordances of digitalization enabling the linking and data mining across complementary or even seemingly disparate and unrelated collections. In fact, one could say that these technological affordances are vital to the existence of the scholarly archive.

The ‘archive’ is also always a deliberate site of power. Comparing the word ‘collection’ to that of ‘archive’, Eichhorn notes that ‘to adopt the term archive over collection is to consciously choose to think about documentary assemblages as sites that are as much about texts and textual practice as they are about people and relations of power’ (Eichhorn, 2008, 3).

Deconstructionism or the close reading of individual texts was the popular critical trend in the late 20th century. The archival turn has moved that focus from the primacy of the text itself toward situating the text within the context of the archive. For example, film theorist, Eric Smoodin (2014) explains that, historically, students of film would study and analyse a single film, but today films are widely studied as components of more complex activities that embrace all the contextual information about the film, not only the obvious tropes such as creator, actors, etc., but historical knowledge as well. For Smoodin, in film studies, ‘the archival turn refers to a new consideration of the materials we might use for writing history and to our sense of institutional relations in that history’ (96). He points out that, even more significantly, the ‘archival turn’ suggests an intersection between film theory and history. As with photography and their file cabinets, Smoodin finds that the technologies associated with the archive (for example, editing machines that archivists use in the archives to describe and preserve film) help to situate the films and their styles ‘at the very center of the discipline’ (97).

Just as context is gaining ground, evidence is also a key aspect of the

archival turn. In examining different theories of the archive, Marlene Manoff (2004, 16) notes that ‘the archive anchors explorations of national identity and provides the *evidence* for establishing the meaning of the past’. In 2014, a forum of literary scholars devoted an issue of the *Journal of Nineteenth Century Americanists* to ‘Evidence and the Archive’. In the introduction, ‘The Aesthetics of Archival Evidence’, the author critically examines the current path of literary criticism in terms of the archival turn, concluding that ‘we came to see the “archive” (both as a term and a practice) as a way of guarding literary studies against accusations of interpretive triviality ... what is the status of the epistemological category that brings us to the archive in the first place: evidence’ (Hyde, 2014, 157). Similarly, a visual artist finds that her studio, ‘with all its interior and objects, can still be viewed as a physical space filled with “evidence”’ (Sjöholm, 2014, 501).

Different views

But, while converts to the ‘archival turn’ in various disciplines have many commonalities (certainly, many that archivists should also find familiar) and might also agree as to the ‘increasing significance given to the archive as the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered’ (Merewether, 2006, 10), they differ in their perceptions of exactly how the turn impacts on their own particular knowledge spaces. For example, art critic Simone Osthoff (2009, 12), considering the archive within the context of art, posits that ‘the archive as artwork challenges the notion of history as a discourse based primarily upon chronology and documentation’. A working artist who sees her studio as her personal creative archive is described as recognizing that ‘the studio as an archive is clearly a space of productive remembrance. Being her own archon, one artist has, throughout her work process, collected and constructed her own archive’ (Sjöholm, 2014, 512). Anthropologists find that ‘the reflexive turn from the 1980’s led scholars to question more explicitly the role of archives, just as they had become accustomed to questioning the contents of documents. They began to explore the implications of thinking of documents and the archives that held them as social artefacts’ (Trundle and Kaplonski, 2011, 408).

These different views also suggest new paths for archivists. While the ‘archival turn’ may signal an academic turn towards an archive of knowledge that metaphorically constitutes both the totality of information about a discipline and the context within which to understand it, for archivists the