

The Record and Repository as a Cultural Form of Expression

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Archives appear transparent in the construction of history. When historians consult documentary records in the archive, they and their information sources are contextualized within a cultural process: the agency of the historian and the notion of a source/referent are assumed. But archivists participate in a silent process that precedes this, in which an *archive* selects, preserves, organizes, and presents those records. Even before that, a *record* must be created within the course of administration or cultural production. In this closed environment, histories can only be written based on documents in the archive, and the archive is inherently dependent on documentary records being created in the first place. As archivists, we examine what informs the creation, selection, and preservation of the documentary records on which histories depend. We can also reflect on our own historicity, and the culture within archives that informs our practice.

The archive is a privileged site—by definition, the legitimate place to find authentic/official answers about our histories. At its most noble, it is linked to serving the democratic process by preserving the public record and protecting rights. At its most benign, it is the dusty attic safely keeping nostalgic “golden oldies.” The popular image of archives evokes a remarkably unchallenged level of disinterested goodwill and trust that the job is being done. Variations on the image all reflect an inherent honesty or at least a benign lack of vested interest, so that archives appear to be working neutrally, in the interests of society as a whole. Histories bear revision. Historians, through their authorship, are vulnerable to challenge about the validity of the histories they construct, while archivists are cast as messengers, and remain relatively invisible in the process. As archivists embark on awareness programmes and promote their work in order to ensure public funding and support, they are inserting archives as a visible step in the process of creating history.

Archivists and Archives

Contemporary archives, as a profession, draws on patterns established during a modern rational age. The operative term is “archival science,” validated upon a body of theory and practice that presumes objectivity and methodology. Rather than aligning with subjectivity or cultural expression, where diverse perspectives or individual variation are acknowledged, archivists have appropriated a professional discourse characterized by an objective approach and normalized practice, with systems and methodologies that present themselves as value-neutral

and common to all practitioners. Creative or interpretive attributes, valued in the context of cultural expression, are suppressed in collective goals and objectives, in the way archivists represent themselves, and in what is considered to fall within the spectrum of archival work.

Selective vestiges of professional discourse from other periods have survived, and have been revived, in order to inform the contemporary practice. Western archives began with the earliest recording of information on perishable supports; grew into the legal record-keeping repositories serving the Church, monarchies, and national and municipal administrations; and flourished in the centralized archival repositories of European "administrative monarchies" of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when distinct archival tasks and skills were first recognized. With dramatic changes in institutions and governments during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, archival holdings that once supported the evidential systems of active administrations became recognized for their cultural or historical value. During the last century, the link between historical value and public record-keeping has been developed through notions of archives supporting informed citizenship.¹

Throughout this history, the focus of archival work has ranged from the clerical record-keeping functions of classification and retrieval to authentication functions inherent in diplomatics, paleography, and philology. The influence of the former survives in arrangement and description methods, and the present links between records management and archival practice. The latter has been refocused into current acquisition criteria, where the composition of the holdings is no longer a matter of straight authentication and evidential value, but includes a process of selection based on evaluation of historical importance. It also lingers in preoccupations with preserving information in its original artifactual form.

The distinction between archives and libraries has been maintained throughout this history, and the theoretical implications of bibliography have been largely excluded from archival practice in favour of authentication concerns. However, with increasing considerations of user access to the information content of archival records, archives have not hesitated to draw on library subject cataloguing practices. In addition, the interest in applying computer technology to facilitate archival work, and the operational challenges to concepts of the original/unique documentary record inherent in the electronic environment, have brought the interests of librarians and archivists close together.

Inspired by information science and the promises of automation, major recent undertakings in the archival profession have been preoccupied with developing norms and descriptive standards, striving for a state of consistency and efficiency that transcends both the individual archivist and the separate interests that constitute an archive. Reflecting modernist universalizing tendencies, these broad directions taken by the profession can be set within traditions that sought essential languages to transcend cultures and borders. Like abstraction in the visual arts or international classification and notation systems in the sciences, these directions have presumed a unitary subject position from which a set of rules can be devised and subsequently interpreted.

Taking up several years of concentrated effort and applied resources, the preoccupation with establishing descriptive standards is one example. The extent of the undertaking in relationship to the Canadian profession's capabilities reveals that such choices imply default decisions about all the issues and directions not pursued. The preface to the *Rules* commences with a quote affirming its place in the established canon of modern archives:

And if the Archivist is here provided with a general guide rather than a detailed set of rules at least we should be sure that no theories are enunciated which are not applicable to archive work in any country, nor on the other hand [are] any first principles omitted. In most sciences and arts it will be found that special cases can be satisfactorily met by any one who combines a sound theory with ordinary common sense and both with practical experience. It is that combination that we wish to commend to the Archivist.²

While the long history of archival practice has covered a more extensive and complex set of concerns, and recent theoretical inquiries have challenged the canon's framework,³ the state of applied practice remains largely informed by the tenets of modern archives—*respect des fonds* applied in terms of original order and constitution of provenance, and in terms of the transparency of archival processing and contemporary values deferring to the contemporaneous systems that produced the record. If archives are to be judged by the documentary value (in other words, authenticity) of their holdings, then it is assumed that the hand of the archivist is driven by the will of the original author or creating body. Professional practice consists of “sound” methodology, not interpretation and style.

Archives in the Context of Other Professional Approaches

Other collecting cultural institutions, such as museums and galleries, have been more inclined to view their work in terms of curatorship, interpretation, and research. Curators have traditionally held some degree of authorship and individual positioning attached to the scholarly aspects of their work. Changing patterns in acquisition and interpretation can be openly attributed to individual curatorial influence over the course of, for example, the National Gallery of Canada's administrative history. In this model, archivists resemble the anonymous technical employees in the service of the institution, such as registrars or conservators, and not the academically-associated curators. While archivists methodically preserve the lineage of old knowledge and its authorship, curators are expected to uncover new knowledge and contribute to ways of understanding that build upon each other in order to form the cultural continuum.

Can one imagine individually-recognized archivists, highly visible for the peculiarities of their acquisition practices? Can one ever see archival work distinguished by openly stylistic attributes that expose the differences in the way in which individual archivists or institutions work? In archives, individual influence is dismissed for the sake of professional homogeneity, and qualitative difference is attributed to levels of administrative efficiency and effectiveness.

Architecture is one example of a profession which asserts a systematic yet idiosyncratic character. Its highly technical and regulated engineering aspects support a creative element akin to artistic endeavour. “Good” architecture comes from individual inspiration within a framework of regulated technical practices. In both the popular imagery that recognizes signature work and the professional canon, architects are celebrated for their individuality, not their understanding of technical matters. In archival practice, could one ever see such difference, not only in content and mandate, but also in approach and style, as in Douglas Cardinal's Canadian Museum of Civilization and Moïse Safdie's National Gallery of Canada? This would be an open declaration of an institutional approach extending beyond mandate and objectives—an admission of institutional cultures and the personalized application of professional methodologies. Positioned as the keepers of the collective memory, can archives clearly declare that documentary heritage has been filtered through arbitrary occurrences that took place long after the creation of the records, as well as through the more systematic methods of the profession? Can archivists admit that, having followed prescribed archival practices, there is still a large degree of individual influence over the holdings in a repository? From a broader vantage, can the cultural and ideological positioning of archival institutions be explored in the context of national histories?

Image, Fact, and Fiction

The image of archivists as objective professionals who conduct their work consistently, transparently, and without authorship in institutions tagged with honest intention and social good, has developed without apparent contradiction in this society. Integrity, neutrality, and a lack of vested interests might be added to this profile. As archives evolved from their origins as legal

repositories, they retained the content association with evidence and fact, rather than the functional association of supporting the interests of an administrative régime. As their role in democratic government and informed citizenship evolved, archives have been positioned within the social context of the protection of rights and access to information, rather than reinforcing an oppressive authority of information-gathering about citizen/subjects. Negative images of archives have been portrayed in the context of over-bureaucracy or the totalitarian state. Nevertheless, from the pointless record-keeping in the realm of the absurd to the document as mechanism of absolute oppressive authority, this depiction of archival work is safely dismissed as a function of other times, other places, and other régimes.

Aligned with systems of non-fiction, archives are linked to notions of truth, fact, and reality. While it is not assumed that everything held in an archive represents reality and truth, once a record is in an archive it acquires a legitimacy and is embraced within a context of non-fiction that refers back to the origins of archives as legal record repositories. The connotation of both the words *record* and *archive* place them in a framework of factual consideration, even if not of facts in themselves. To take one example, the *Globe and Mail* features a regular column “from the archives....” As something brought up from the past, its reading is suspended in a different, neutral context, while current reporting is cynically understood to be coloured by a media point-of-view. The current reporting can have an active impact on opinion and the outcome of events—a vested interest—while the “archived” past acquires a non-threatening, detached credibility that is connected to its definition as administratively no longer active. Archives mean *dead files*.

Yet there is a twist to this non-fiction reading that resonates as nostalgia, fantasy, and imagination within the other role that archives play as a cultural heritage asset in the service of revealing histories. It is in this sense that dead files can be revived. While imaginary fictions are entrenched in art and literature, archives in the cultural context still maintain non-fiction as the operative mode. The archives’ role in governance and evidence promotes the sense of truth in history. An implied faith prevails—one that not only trusts the veracity of the information content in archival records, but also trusts that the records are there somewhere in the first place. An archive is as deep as the imagination, with vast unending holdings that contain the promise of answers, or ultimately reveal the causal relationships that form the historical narrative, the history. In this context, archives serve as potential history, and archivists are assigned the essential function as its neutral keepers. The cultural products that issue from archival documents carry with them those non-fictive attributes. The historian’s references, the footnotes, and the sources invoke the legal precedents of archives.

Favouring the model of knowledge-archaeology, where history is a process of uncovering facts and exposing existing causal relationships rather than a model of ideological construction, works not only to diminish the extent of agency implied in archiving, but it also feeds the fantasies of potential history. What is held in the collective memory may be conveniently endless and unknown. It can potentially respond to anyone’s projected fantasies about his or her past, that of an organization or a country. The historic facts will be there somewhere, preserved for the time when the citizen/subject needs them; unfortunately, most citizens are too busy dealing with the present and the future to be uncovering the past. There is, however, a comfort in presuming that the records will still be there in the imaginary archives tomorrow and tomorrow.

The Collective Memory

In 1912, legislation established the Public Archives of Canada to “consist of all such public records, documents and other historical material of every kind, nature and description” from both government and private sources. Outside this brief listing and explicit statements allowing the Archivist to acquire originals and copies, and transcribe, bind, and repair them, the *Act*

did not venture any further expectations about what the obligations of the institution might be.⁴ New legislation in 1987 responded to the multiplicity of media formats that the documentary record might take, and decreed that the primary legal object and function of the Archives was "to conserve private and public records of national significance and facilitate access thereto."⁵ In the course of practical administration as a government department, the institution interprets its legislation in an applied set of objectives. It is here that the National Archives of Canada identifies its work: "to preserve the collective memory of the nation and the Government of Canada, and to contribute to the protection of rights and the enhancement of a sense of national identity."⁶ In one smooth leap from a legal/evidential obligation to a social/cultural mission, the trope of a collective memory is formally stated in the imagery and the language of a functional bureaucratic definition of archives in Canada. While this applies specifically to the federal archive, it effectively serves as a model for other archival institutions across the country, and serves as a referent in promotional materials on Canadian archives.

Benedict Anderson's explanation of genealogical views of history as national inheritance provides an apt context to examine this construction.⁷ He identifies the origins of "national imagining," and attributes the first self-conscious writings "on behalf of the dead" to Michelet (National Archivist of France between 1830 and 1852). Notions of retrieving memory from the fate of oblivion figure in this imagery; Anderson explains how selective those elements of remembrance are, serving as complements to political imperatives.⁸

Archives justify themselves by drawing on that imagery, and reinforce the implied consequence that the nation will experience a sense of irretrievable loss if some defined universe of national "Kodak moments" is not preserved. In this context, remembrance serves as continuity and reassurance. The archival heritage is viewed not as the "collective unconscious," where deep dark secrets and random elements might be stored, but as an ordered repository of documentary records deemed "nationally significant." The collective memory invokes a system of more personal and local parallels, drawing links to family and community histories that come together to form this heritage. It also invokes an imagery of popular culture referents to archives, continuities, and nostalgic reassurances, as illustrated in the "Dear Abby" column that dwells on the profound experience of loss of family photographs in a house fire.⁹ Images of well-intentioned protection of a collective heritage are also invoked in an *American Film* cover depiction of Ted Turner as the "Raider of the Last Archives."¹⁰ A collective right of inheritance underlies these allusions to the loss of heritage.

Contradictions

While this sense of public mission and lofty purpose is applied unproblematically in promotional materials and formal mission statements of archival institutions, and thrives equally well in popular culture references, it poses contradictions in the course of day-to-day archival work. According to professional theories, sound archival methods are supposed to deliver a representative documentary heritage. When short-comings or biases are pointed out (as in the context of gender, race, or multicultural issues), well-intentioned archivists have rushed to respond, assuming that the satisfactory remedy can be incorporated within the existing context of archival institutions and the archival profession. They have refined systems and methods, devised documentation strategies that include under-represented groups and perspectives, attempted value-free cataloguing vocabulary, and established multicultural units.

Dismissed in the earnestness of this rush, are the acknowledgements of the inherent biases of the institution and the inherent characteristics of the archival record. The language of heritage documentation still carries the connotations of neutral witness. Yet, the government files in a state-sponsored repository are informed by the administrative structure in which they were created. As John Tagg has illustrated, historical records are generated in the context of a vested interest.¹¹ That past is part of the historical record itself and should remain evident to those

consulting the archive. Yet where administrative evidence and cultural heritage come together in one “imagined community,” inherent contradictions of purpose strain the parameters of the institution.

In their conscientiousness, archives are coming close to influencing the creation of the records themselves and challenging the inherent parameters of archiving—encroaching more and more into contemporary records, reaching out to preserve ephemeral material that may not have survived the course of record-keeping entropy, creating oral history, chronicling aspects of our own times, and actively seeking documentation to fill perceived gaps. Motivated by intentions to be relevant and meaningful, archives are importing methods into an infrastructure designed for other purposes and administrative systems.

Looking at Documents/Records as Forms of Cultural Expression

The assumptions of evidence and fact have strained the cultural side of archives, and confined the acquisition of archival records to uneasy definitions of “documentary.” A reflexive look at archiving and record creation provokes a new reading of an archival historicity. No matter how hard archives try to penetrate and document all aspects of society, they can only capture aspects relating to record-producing activities. The acknowledgement of the record as the legitimate form of documentary expression is an essential condition for the existence of archives. However, instead of attaching connotations of fact and truthful evidence that come from legalistic precedents, can we also look at the record as a form of cultural expression? Can we probe the notion of the documentary archive to uncover its structural perspectives, and liberate its delineations of fiction and non-fiction?

In his tribute to Michelet, Roland Barthes wrote in a chapter titled “Death-as-Sleep and Death-as-Sun”:

The roots of historical truth are therefore the documents as voices, not as witnesses. Michelet considers in them, exclusively, that quality of having been an attribute of life, the privileged object to which clings a kind of residual memory of past bodies. Thus the closer the document comes to a voice, the less it departs from the warmth which has produced it, and the more it is the true foundation of historical credibility. This is why the oral document is ultimately superior to the written document, the Legend to the texts...¹²

Could this philosophy be applied to archival practice? Could we have selection appraisals less concerned with distinctions of legitimacy and authenticity that ultimately reflect positioning within society, and more concern for a broader range of formats that reach well into the realm of ephemera and popular culture? Can we contemplate blurring the distinctions between non-fiction and fiction in the documentary record, and analyzing the documentary record as a cultural construct? Would this be a step towards inserting archives as a visible layer in the continuum of cultural production?

Notes

- * Paper originally presented at the 56th Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Montreal, 17 September 1992.
- 1 Michel Duchéin provides a concise contextual overview in “The History of European Archives and the Development of the Archival Profession in Europe,” *The American Archivist* 55 (Winter 1992), pp. 14-25.
- 2 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (Oxford, 1922), p.19, quoted in Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, 1990-), p.xi.
- 3 Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 78-100.
- 4 Canada, *Public Archives Act* (1912).

- 5 Canada, *National Archives of Canada Act* (1987).
- 6 National Archives of Canada, "Operational Plan Framework." The objectives identified in this document are published annually in the Government of Canada's Budgetary Estimates.
- 7 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* 2nd ed. (London, 1992), pp. 196-97.
- 8 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 197-99.
- 9 *The Ottawa Citizen*, 20 December 1991.
- 10 *American Film* (January/February 1989).
- 11 John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst, 1988).
- 12 Roland Barthes, *Michelet* (New York, 1987), p. 81.