Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice

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RÉSUMÉ La relecture du passé est souvent une occasion excitante lorsqu'on donne ainsi accès à des documents qui étaient auparavant inaccessibles et inconnus. Le passé est aujourd'hui relu à cause d'un intérêt grandissant pour 1'histoire des documents eux-mêmes. Influencées par les perspicacités post-modernes, les approches à cette forme d'histoire ont pris radicalement de nouvelles directions dont les implications profondes sur le travail archivistique sont encore aux premiers balbutiements. Cet article offre un survol de la relecture du passé en exposant comment les idées et le travail archivistique doivent être re-conceptualisés à la lumière des perspectives changeantes de 1'histoire des archives.

ABSTRACT The opening of an archives is often an exciting occasion when access is gained to once inaccessible or previously unknown records. Archives today, though, are being reopened through growing interest in the history of records and archives. Approaches to this history have taken some radically new directions, influenced by postmodern insights. The profound implications for archival work of these new directions are still in conceptual infancy. This article offers an overview of this reopening of archives by outlining how archival ideas and work might be reconceptualized in light of these changing perspectives on the history of records and archives.

Although conventional openings of archives occur somewhere every day, archives are also being reopened in other and more profound ways through growing interest in the history of records and archives. Perhaps as never before, discussion of archival records and activities is being stimulated through closer examination of them from an unprecedented variety of archival and other scholarly perspectives. This has renewed discussion of the entire range of familiar archival concepts, functions, and purposes. The first International Conference on the History of Records and Archives at the University of Toronto in October 2003, itself a key milestone in this discussion, provided an opportunity for reflection on the key features of these intellectual trends and the directions in which we may be heading with them.

From one angle, the intellectual history of the archival profession is the history of thinking about the nature of contextual knowledge about records. In the last thirty years or so, we have experienced a pronounced contextual turn

in archival communities in many countries, or a turn toward deepening appreciation of the role of contextual knowledge about records in archival work. Since the 1970s archivists have been responding increasingly to this contextual turn with renewed commitment to, and exploration of, the concept of provenance, rising interest in the evolution of various media of record, administrative functions, and institutional and personal record-keeping, development of much more contextual descriptive work, greater attention to diplomatics, and debates over how to apply contextual knowledge in fonds or series systems, and over how much contextual information is enough to protect the integrity of records and assist records and information retrieval in reference work.

Recently, this contextual turn has taken some important, radically new directions in archival thinking, influenced by postmodern insights. A wider view of relevant contextuality is emerging as a result. The postmodern emphasis on the importance of understanding means of communication has assisted this archival development, as it validated prior interest among archivists in the study of records and archives. They are now means of communication that increasing numbers of people in various disciplines also think are worth studying. Postmodernism has also encouraged the view that context is virtually boundless. This expansive conception of context draws heavily on cultural and societal dimensions of context. Its rising significance also reflects the postmodern view that finality and certainty are highly elusive because means of communication are limited. (Thus more context is always needed if we are to understand what is possible to know.) These tendencies in the broader academic and intellectual milieu have extended considerably earlier archival notions of context. As a result, it is probably better to say that, rather than a single appropriate context, there are various contextualities which are relevant to archival work.

This expanded notion of contextuality leads to at least two questions: 1) What are its dimensions and characteristics? and 2) How may its features be incorporated into archival work? The answers to these questions will come in part from what is gleaned from study of the history of records and archives, and how archivists conceive of using those gleanings. As this brings archivists to a major turning point in the intellectual history of their profession, it is important to look down the road a bit at where the profession might be heading. The views presented here are preliminary and exploratory, and very much a work in progress.

Despite the renewed importance and profound implications of this rethinking of archival work, it is still in conceptual infancy. And, even more underdeveloped over all, particularly in its most recent postmodern framing, is discussion of how key archival concepts might be rearticulated and archival work might be done (or changed) by incorporating rearticulated concepts and greater knowledge of the history of records and archives into archival thought

and action. It is not necessary here to rehearse postmodernism, as there are many fine works by archivists and others which do so.[1] Rather, it is time to move with those who have begun to work out further the implications of the contextual and postmodern turns. In effect, they are responding to a critique sometimes made of postmodernists. British academic Christopher Butler suggests that "postmodernists are very good critical deconstructors, and terrible constructors."[2] This article is intended as a contribution to the construction of emerging ways of conceiving and doing archival work. Conventional archival concepts and practices are undergoing a profound reassessment, due mainly to deepening awareness of the importance and complexity of the history of human recording and archiving and to the postmodern shift. Thinking through this reorientation is the leading item on the profession's overall intellectual agenda. This article is intended to throw light on the agenda taking shape.

One of the key insights from postmodernism bearing on the reconceptualization of archiving is that it should be seen as an ongoing *process* or action. Postmodernism suggests that records and archiving, as means of communication, are limited by the various influences and factors which shape them, and their limitations then shape what we can know through them. Thus they are the products of open-ended processes of knowing, and participate in processes of knowing as active agents in them. By comparison, traditional conceptions of records and archives reflect more finite analyses which terminate fairly quickly in certain simple actions and statements. Thus, one could pinpoint a record's provenance – once and for all – without much difficulty. One could identify quite readily *the* fonds, a process aided greatly by the fact that, after

1 The following is a sample of this work: Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991); Brothman has authored many contributions since then, the most recent being "Afterglow: Conceptions of Record and Evidence in Archival Discourse," *Archival Science* 2, nos., 3 and 4 (2002); Tom Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999); Terry Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (2000); Verne Harris, *Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa*, 2d ed. (Pretoria, 2000); Terry Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth?: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001); Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmoderism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002); Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2002); and the two double issues of *Archival Science* devoted to postmodernism and archives, edited by Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, as *Archives, Records, and Power* in *Archival Science* 2, nos.1 and 2 (2002) and 2, nos. 3 and 4 (2002). Sue McKemmish summarizes Australian contributions to this discussion by Frank Upward and others in her "Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice," *Archival Science* 1, no. 4 (2001); see also her earlier contibution "Are Records Ever Actual?," in Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott, eds., *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* (Clayton, 1994).

2 Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2002), p. 116.

all, there was only one fonds to find. And one could sum up pretty much all that archivists need to know about archiving in a modest sized manual or two (or the 100 Dutch rules) – which would stand the test of time – as stable and comprehensive as an archives itself.

One could also describe what provenance, or a record, or an archives is in a short line or two. These tended to be dictionary-like definitions, with all the stability and authority that genre implies. They focused attention on what amounts to an inert and often physical thing. For example, a record would usually be described as something fairly self-evident – a simple object such as a memo, letter, photograph, or electronic document – which needed no further explanation. And archives were often defined simply as the records kept permanently in a physical storage place called an archives. These conventional definitions assume a record or an archives do not actually *do* very much, if anything, or have any significant conceptual features. Instead they are just there, and acted upon – readily identified and sent, received, kept, and retrieved by someone, but not acting upon (or influencing) anything much.

With this in mind, I tried reconceptualizing some of the key terms of archival work. My effort stressed that if archivists are to understand records, record-keeping, and archiving better, they need to understand that these things are the result of various processes, or, in effect, histories. And so I said that "A record is an evolving mediation of understanding about some phenomenon – a mediation created by social and technical processes of inscription, transmission, and contextualization." The provenance of a given record or body of records "consists of the social and technical processes of the records' inscription, transmission, contextualization, and interpretation which account for its existence, characteristics, and continuing history." And an archives "is an ongoing mediation of understanding of records (and thus phenomena), or that aspect of record making which shapes this understanding through such functions as records appraisal, processing, and description, and the implementation of processes for making records accessible." I subsequently wrote that "Archiving, as the multifaceted process of making memories by performing remembered or otherwise recorded acts, transmitting such accounts over time and space, organizing, interpreting, forgetting, and even destroying them, produces constructions of some prior activity or condition."[3] I will push this line of inquiry further, as part of the project of reorienting archival work to the more expansive contextuality. Let us begin by looking at the concept of the

3 Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate," pp. 145–46; and Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," p. 26. I add now to these definitions preservation among the listed archival functions – a glaring omission – and emphasize that records and archiving are primarily ongoing *human* processes or activities. Any given archival record, concept, procedure, technology, structure, or function is animated by human interests, behaviour, and culture. To understand records and archives, they should be seen as cultural phenomena.

integrity of a record (or its status as reliable and authentic), as protection of the integrity of the record is a major goal of all archiving actions. In some key respects the traditional objective is reoriented. If, with the postmodernists, we note that communication is always going off the rails, then our task would not simply be to show that a document *is* reliable and authentic in the conventional sense, or, in other words, that is has not gone off the rails through improper inscription or subsequent tampering, and is what its initial inscribers created and meant it to be. Our task would be to try to understand as well as possible that conventional view of integrity, but also to try to show the degree to which the record bears evidence of the varied processes, subsequent to its initial inscription, which have also contributed to its "creation" in a broader sense, or to its existence, as the document it became and the one we *now* have. A record has likely been various things to the many people (across its full history) who have made it, or who have been involved in the social and technical processes of its inscription, transmission, and contextualization which have brought it to us as the object it is. What of these various acts of creation at various points in the record's history is it evidence of and, how reliable and authentic is it as such evidence? The integrity of a record is a function of our understanding of whatever possible evidence of this creation process the record may bear. The conventional notion of authenticity is based on stressing protection of the relationship between the record and its initial inscriber. But since a record is rarely, if ever, going to come down to us unchanged from an initial inscriber, a record is likely to be evidence of a much more varied creation process, which constantly, subtly, and not so subtly, changes it (often by recontextualizing it), and whose impact expands the evidence the record bears.

Turning to archival functions, I suggest the following reconceptualizations of them. ***Appraisal*** by archivists is their action of researching the contextualities of the records (or the history of the records) to provide sufficient contextual meaning to make retention decisions. In contextualizing the records, archivists help create as much as select the archival record for retention. Indeed, appraisal must help create the records in order to select them. Appraisal by archivists, of course, shapes the resulting record even more by selecting only a comparatively few records for survival as archives. Accounting for that archival appraisal decision is now essential to understanding the creation of the record, or the provenance of the record, and the evidence the record now bears.

But appraisal is more than this (in still many ways) conventional view. If archivists are to be more sensitive to the action or *process* of appraisal, and the role of the archivist in that, they need also to be as aware of the other influences that shape the more general appraisal process the records emerge from. Inscribers and pre-archival custodians of records document some things and not others (that is an appraisal decision of sorts) and they choose to destroy

certain records, without knowledge of archives, or offer only certain records to archives, holding back others for other times. At the same time, sponsors of archives give them acquisition mandates which constrain their appraisal work in various ways, and then the sponsors and/or important users of an archives may intervene to prompt and even impose acquisition decisions. These complexities of the appraisal process do not yet figure much in archival thinking about appraisal. Archival appraisal decisions should attempt to take account of these key phases in the history of the records to see whether they should influence what an archives should keep. Archival appraisal should strive to show how the evidence of this longer history (borne by the record we see in the reading room) makes it much more information rich.

Physical ***arrangement*** of records will continue to be a fading feature of archival work, limited mainly to physical processing in preparation for use. As Peter Horsman writes, "conceptual description" has become the priority "rather than physical arrangement."[4] That said, removal of most of the records through appraisal is certainly an invasive physical rearrangement of the records imposed by archives and by others too, as suggested above. Does appraisal, therefore, become reconceptualized in part as arrangement? And how archivists understand the physical arrangement that records have is challenged by postmodernism. The traditional archival concept of ***original order*** retains little meaning in postmodern archives where origins are never final, but the subjects of new histories waiting to be done. When records arrive at an archives, they will have an order of some kind, but it will not likely be the actual *original* order of the records, as documents can be easily and repeatedly moved around prior to archiving them. Can anyone really be in a position to know whether the order of the records on arrival at an archives is *the* original one, or know whether, even in archives, the order has never been changed, either deliberately or by accident, by an archivist or researcher? It seems time to dispense with the traditional concept of original order. That, of course, does not mean that the physical ordering of records is unimportant and to be disrupted thoughtlessly. Perhaps in place of original order, we should speak of the received order of the records, which would refer to the order the records are in when they are received by an archives. That may be more like a snapshot of a moment in time, not *the* original order but a possible approximation of it. But the received order, due to the same factors bedeviling "original order," may not be static either. And if the records are in such disarray when received that they require reorganization by the archives, the order they will be put in will not very likely be the original one either.

The work of arrangement melds into description and involves explaining these various orderings. This hybrid action (and the interventions of the archi-

4 Peter Horsman, "The Last Dance of the Phoenix, or the De-Discovery of the Archival Fonds," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002), p. 17.

vist which help shape the creation process of the record and thus notions of its integrity) can be seen in the electronic realm in Jim Suderman's report on the effort of the Archives of Ontario to identify electronic records series. He discusses an extensive database of Ontario government correspondence files which has no evident internal series subdivisions established by the records' creator. Leaving the files without such series designations obscures their relationships, which they surely had, even if they are no longer readily apparent. Archival concern about protecting evidential value prompts Suderman to consider means of detecting those relationships between files by investigating the creator's business processes. But these, too, are hard to determine. Thus, if series are to be identified, the records will be significantly changed (or transformed) by the process of archival acquisition and arrangement in series. Suderman concludes:

> In the paper environment the stubborn characteristics of the records as physical objects limited the impact of the transformation from an operational environment to an archival one. The impact of that transformation was mitigated further by the familiarity of archivist, records creators, and archival users alike with the paper medium. In the absence of stubborn physicality and a general understanding of the electronic medium, archival electronic series will not be transferred from the originating office. They will be created solely through the archival business processes of appraisal, acquisition, and description.[5]

Turning to the ***fonds*** concept, which has been fundamental to archival thought and practice in many countries, and especially Canada, what can we make of it? Laura Millar and Peter Horsman have argued convincingly that the fonds we talk about in archival theory has never existed as such in archival practice. The fonds Canadian archivists call "the whole of the documents, regardless of form or medium, automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular individual, family, or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities or functions" is actually constructed by archivists from *some* of the records of *certain* creators, not *all* of the records of *all* possible creators.[6] The fonds archivists make are not the fonds they say they are making in their theoretical statements. To say that they are such fonds obscures provenance more than applies it. Does the pure fonds of our theoretical statements exist at all? Should this phantom be replaced with something more substantial? If so, with what?

5 Jim Suderman, "Defining Electronic Series: A Study," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002), p. 46.

6 Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002), p. 4; see also Horsman, "The Last Dance of the Phoenix."

Both Millar and Horsman have pointed to important limits in application of the fonds concept as the expression of provenance. In effect they are saying, despite the best efforts to apply the central archival principle of provenance in the fonds concept, archivists have not done so. First, a fonds is not actually the "whole" of the documents of a creator, but usually a small remnant of them. Second, archivists do not necessarily include in fonds descriptions all records of the remnant in the appropriate fonds. Third, archivists have not been able to agree on a consistent definition of a fonds, or of a fonds creator (to allude to a point Terry Cook has made), and so does the true fonds really exist in that sense either? Thus, should we be excessively concerned about fonds? Or can we describe, as Horsman suggests, a defensible grouping of records, call it a fonds if you will, which resulted from "a series of recordkeeping activities and archival interventions"?[7]; this sounds something like Jim Suderman's approach to electronic records series. Both Millar and Horsman conclude that rather than stressing pursuit of the fonds as the key to the application of provenance, archivists should focus more on applying it in understanding "creator history, records history, and custodial history" (for Millar) and (similarly for Horsman) "through description of functional structures, both internal and external: archival narratives about those multiple relationships of creation and use so that researchers may truly understand records from the past." These are calls for what Eric Ketelaar refers to as the "tacit narratives" behind the records. They appeal for the history of records and archiving to be at the forefront of our work because this provisional remnant of records (*a* fonds of *a* creator) only emerges through our understanding of the history of the process which brought it into existence in the research room.[8]

Reference is not so much about helping people to retrieve records and knowledge that already exist, or are frozen in time, but about assisting users to create them anew, by guiding users to records with contextual descriptions about how records were created (including the archival contribution to their creation) and in learning from researchers their contribution to understanding this contextuality. ***Public programming*** would no longer be only about informing society about the existence of archival records and their possible uses, but also about explaining how recording and archiving actions help make our sense of reality or truth, and about the social and political power of

7 Horsman, "The Last Dance of the Phoenix," p. 23; see also Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era," in Terry Eastwood, ed., *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice* (Ottawa, 1992). Cook suggests that for multiple provenance institutional records, their creators are agencies "that contributed **in any significant way** to the creation of the series in question, or were merely involved in its accumulation and use" (p. 70) (emphasis added).

8 Millar, "The Death of the Fonds," p. 14; Horsman, "The Last Dance of the Phoenix," p. 23; and Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives."

archiving processes. Archivists are about to end their marginal status in society, as the uses of archives proliferate in amazing new ways, but, ironically, if archivists say that they have *the* truth in the records (rather than stress that archives make a contribution to what may be known) they could well end up back on the margins of a sceptical postmodern world.

To enable society to approximate the truth better, public programming ought to include much more work like Richard Cox and David Wallace's *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society* (Westport, CT, 2002) and Verne Harris and company's *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town, 2002). Both these books stress the importance to society of understanding more about the history of records creation and archiving for accountable public and private institutions in a democratic political order. Books are also needed about archives and records like those by museum and gallery curators, librarians, and allied scholars who have written reflective works on the histories of these institutions and their holdings. These publications reach a wide lay audience in order to inform it of the longstanding, complex, and vital roles these institutions have played.[9] We need similar widely accessible work on archives and the human spirit, or the symbolism, emotional dimensions, and self-understandings archives inspire, beyond their more obviously utilitarian roles.

Preservation is not so much about stabilizing a document in an original state or returning a document to an original state, but changing it to permit as much of its physical features and meanings (and thus integrity) to survive as possible. This means documenting the inevitable changes in the documents caused by nature and our efforts to use and keep them.

This rearticulation of archival theory and practice is being made through contributions by many archivists. It is driven by growing awareness that records and archiving have far more important, intricate, and elusive histories than have typically been acknowledged. At the same time, there has been a parallel development of major importance among those who have been leading some of the most significant and prominent expressions of best practice over the last thirty years. These projects include efforts in several countries to devise and implement descriptive standards and assign metadata standards for record-keeping, especially for electronic records. A number of formal systems have been developed or proposed as a result, such as RAD, ISAD (G), CUSTARD, and various national and international records management standards. The Monash University record-keeping metadata research project in Australia, the University of Pittsburgh functional requirements for record-keeping research project, the standard for application of electronic diplomatics devel-

9 For libraries see David M. Levy, *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age* (New York, 2001) and Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World* (New Haven, 2001).

oped by the UBC project and tested by InterPARES, and the international metadata forum that met in 2000 in the Netherlands have contributed in significant and valuable ways to this overall effort.

Recent comments by participants in these efforts emphasize the limits they see in the ability of formal systems to build in the increasingly voluminous and complex features of metadata or context that are needed to describe and control records with integrity as fully as possible. Heather MacNeil, who has extraordinary experience in the development of descriptive standards and standards for electronic records management and archiving, has recently written about "the importance of recognizing and accepting the limits of what we can accomplish" in the area of standard setting. She notes, in particular, in regard to electronic records metadata, that "[if] the recommended standards were to be implemented fully it is likely that the electronic systems in which they sat would collapse under the sheer weight of the metadata." She adds, reflecting a postmodern sensibility, that "[e]ven if we were capable of preserving all the necessary metadata, the records would remain a pale reflection of the reality they purport to represent."[10]

These views are shared by another leading expert in the field, Wendy Duff, who told the 2000 metadata forum that descriptive or metadata schemes vary, and can do so legitimately, in serving the differing needs of their creators. She comments: "Metadata, the new miracle solution to our digital woes, seem objective and universal at first glance. But this sense of objectivity is an illusion." Jean Dryden's report on the attempt to harmonize in the CUSTARD project differing American and Canadian descriptive standards, in relation to international descriptive standards such ISAD (G), allows similar conclusions. In her report on this ambitious effort to extend the reach of a common standard, we can see that standards are far from straightforward reflections of the documentary realities they seek to mirror. She notes that standards are not clear and uncontested statements of the best practice and thinking, but changeable, forged in hard choices and compromises, and, as they cross cultural and political boundaries, the effort to make them has shown just how little is actually known about description, including the value to users of archives of the particular types of contextual knowledge embedded in standards.[11]

Also stressing the need for more understanding of contextual knowledge,

10 See MacNeil's review of Albert Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium* (Chicago, 1999) in *Archival Science* 3, no. 1 (2003), p. 73 and her "Providing Grounds for Trust II: The Findings of the Authenticity Task Force of InterPARES," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002), for her discussion of these insights in relation to the findings of the InterPARES project.

11 Wendy M. Duff, "Evaluating Metadata on a Metalevel," *Archival Science* 1, no. 3 (2001), p. 285; the limits of means of representation is also a theme of her joint article with Verne Harris; "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2, nos. 3 and 4 (2002), p. 284 and her "Archival Description: The

Sue McKemmish lays out the most all encompassing and postmodern approach to determining the metadata to be attached to records throughout the continuum of their existence. Among the various formal efforts to develop such metadata, her and her colleagues' work is especially important and valuable for maintaining that records evolve and that the interventions of record-keepers/archivists contribute to the evolution of records. While granting this overall necessary intellectual scope, McKemmish, like MacNeil and Duff, also feels the need to strike a note of caution:

> By way of qualification, it should be stated that the richness, complexity, diversity, and idiosyncracies of the contexts in which records are created, managed, and used cannot be fully represented in models, systems, standards, and schema, but this does not detract from their significance and strategic importance to practice. ... By attempting to define, to categorise, pin down, and represent records and their contexts of creation, management, and use, descriptive standards and metadata schema can only ever represent a partial view of the dynamic, complex, and multi-dimensional nature of records, and their rich webs of contextual and documentary relationships.[12]

The 2000 metadata forum in Holland drove home this type of observation by concluding that such metadata work is so complex, seemingly open-ended, and impeded by cost and other practical questions (such as, will most creators use it if it is costly and complex?) that it requires further major research initiatives to pursue responses to these problems.[13]

Nearly thirty years of experience with attempts to establish best practices have identified these significant emerging concerns about the limits, objectivity, and practical financial and political possibilities of implementing standardized metadata and descriptive systems more fully. This prompts legitimate concern about the way ahead for professional practice. Whether from postmodern perspectives or more familiar ones, the discussion above shows that in recent years conventional archival theory and practice have been radically critiqued by a wide variety of leading archivists in several countries. Where do archivists go from here, particularly when their most ambitious and

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Never Ending Story," *Archives News/Argiefnuus* 43, no. 4 (June 2001), pp. 141–51. See Jean Dryden, "Cooking the Perfect Custard," *Archival Science* 3, no. 1 (2003). The CUSTARD project did not go forward to implementation, indicating the variability of views of standards. A standard for one community is not necessarily a standard in the eyes of another.

12 McKemmish, "Placing Records Continuum Theory and Practice," p. 354.

13 Margaret Hedstrom, "Recordkeeping Metadata: Presenting Results of a Working Meeting," *Archival Science* 1, no. 3 (2001) and David Wallace, "Archiving Metadata Forum: Report from the Recordkeeping Metadata Working Meeting, June 2000," *Archival Science* 1, no. 3 (2001).

best efforts to improve key areas of archival practice seem to be coming up against major limitations? The response to this question involves far more than a short article can provide, but I want to explore it further (beyond the general outline offered above) by focusing on the area of ***description***, in part because, as reconceived, it would indicate something of the broader changes the critique implies. Description should be seen as the action mediated by archivists of researching and representing the multi-faceted contextuality (or history of records or "archival narrative" about them) which enables records and knowledge to be made through archiving. This view needs to be brought more fully into descriptive systems. There needs to be a creative convergence of existing, older work done on standards with the insights and knowledge the more recent reconceptualization of theory and practice is offering.

Although metadata research should continue to be done, its application may well be limited, as records inscribers may not implement much of it for electronic and other records they create, and archives may also be practically restrained in doing so for their descriptive systems.[14] That said, most formal systems of descriptive standards for archives now lack key components of information about the context of the creation of the records, or do not use them very effectively, if they are there. Most focus on providing a limited amount of contextual information about the persons, administrative structures, and functions prompting the initial inscription of the records, rather than about the related societal, procedural, record-keeping, and organizational culture contexts, or the unexpected and anomalous features of "the way things work" to shape the initial records inscription – to use Elizabeth Yakel's pithy phrase.[15] These formal systems also often do not document much of the subsequent custodial history of the records prior to archiving, the interventions of the archivers, and the uses and impact of the records across time. In other words, these formal systems need to move toward an accounting of the broader history of the records and archiving (or contextualities of records), as

14 Recent Australian and British research on the reception by government institutions in these countries and Africa of recently developed standards for record-keeping (such as ISO 15489 for records management) points to the limits of, and questions about, the efficacy of standards as a strategy for providing contextual information about records. Jackie Bettington concludes from the Australian experience: "At present the contingent nature of recordkeeping renders full standardization and integration of recordkeeping with other business processes within an organization an elusive goal." See her "Standardised Recordkeeping: Reality or Illusion?," *Archives and Manuscripts* 32, no. 2 (November 2004), p. 65. See also, Julie McLeod, "ISO 15489: Helpful, Hype, or Just Not Hot?," *Archives and Manuscripts* 32, no. 2 (November 2004); and Alistair Tough, "Records Management Standards and the Good Governance Agenda in Commonwealth Africa," *Archives and Manuscripts* 32, no. 2 (November 2004).

15 Elizabeth Yakel, "The Way Things Work: Procedures, Processes and Institutional Records," *The American Archivist* 59, no. 4 (Fall 1996).

this information also helps explain why the records exist, what they might be useful evidence of, and how they have been and might be used.[16]

As MacNeil, Duff, and McKemmish wisely note, any such revised formal systems will themselves be unable to convey all the possible contextual or metadata information included in the fullest possible history of the records. Still, the systems in use need to begin to adapt by reflecting the most glaring of those missing basic components of that history. And, as a result of the limits of any future approach taken, something more will be needed. To assist the convergence process, and to feed the existing formal descriptive systems with the additional contextual information that they *are* able to handle without swamping users in it, much more ongoing research into histories of records and archiving is required. Also needed to enhance such systems is something of what Duff and Harris, echoing Millar and Horsman, call "a user-friendly descriptive architecture – or at least interface with it that eloquently represents relationships and contextual information in a clear, understandable fashion."[17] What might this "interface" or Horsman's "archival narratives" look like? What might they do? One approach to thinking about them may be the following. There could be, as a general overlay to any descriptive system, a series of essays on the approach taken to description by the system/archives and the nature of the contextual information found in it, *and* not necessarily found there. When a researcher enters the system, access to these essays would automatically be possible. (Web-based access is assumed, although this approach does not depend on computerization.) A researcher could opt to read the essays. There would be no compulsion to do so. A researcher could always go directly to the descriptions themselves or talk to an archivist, if possible. In this way a researcher would be able to choose the degree of contextual information that seems relevant to him or her, but at the same time be alerted to (and have available) a wider range of contextual information and guidance, should that emerge as more important than initially expected.

These essays would be a guide to thinking about and using the wide range of contextual information about records that could be useful to researchers. The essays would not be the actual descriptions of the records, although there would be some necessary overlap, to enable connections to be made between the essays and the descriptions. There could be an essay on the history of the archives itself, as part of an overall introduction. It could alert researchers to

16 For a critique of the Canadian *Rules for Archival Description* for not adequately accommodating the contextuality of photographic materials, see Joan M. Schwartz, "Coming to Terms with Photographs: Descriptive Standards, Linguistic 'Othering', and the Margins of Archivy," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002). Michelle Light and Tom Hyry have offered some practical steps (in the spirit of converging existing practices with new theoretical insights) to explain archiving decisions to researchers in finding aids. See their "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist*, 65, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2002).

17 Duff and Harris, pp. 284, 274.

the societal and institutional contexts that have shaped the work of the archives over the years and resulted in the formal mandate(s) it has had. This could provide an overview of how this work has been done in different ways, according to different underlying assumptions, with their strengths and weaknesses, as that will alert researchers to the possible implications of the impact of this work on the pursuit and understanding of the records they are interested in. Researchers could be made aware of the significance of archiving decisions (such as in appraisal) to the characteristics of the archives. To follow this one theme, the history of an archives essay could tell the researcher something of the history of appraisal at the archives. It could then indicate that further information on appraisal decisions with specific records can be found in the descriptive system in the actual appraisal reports for the records, and then explain where to find them. The same can be done for preservation reports and other archival work records. (In most cases this approach would be archives specific, but there is no reason why it could not be adapted to regional and national descriptive networks, such as Library and Archives Canada.)

In the area of description, the archival history essay could offer a broad outline of the main types of contextual information relevant to the archives' holdings. This would then set up the remaining essays in this narrative interface with the records. Other essays could provide more detailed introductory overviews of the various types of contextual information about the records in the system that a researcher could find useful. Taken as a whole, they could offer as full a *conception* of the history or contextualities of the records as can be provided, even if we do not actually know all the specific information about that context for the records actually held, and, of course, all of it will never be known. Indeed, it will be useful in certain cases, as Joanna Sassoon has done, to explain in one of the proposed essays why a given body of records no longer exists.[18] This more conceptual approach to description, which relates both what may not yet be known about records in actual custody and what may be known about records not in custody, could be part of the more flexible "liberatory" standard called for by Duff and Harris and thus, unlike typical approaches to descriptive standards that place heavy stress on what *is* known about what *is* in custody.

One aim of the essays is to give a researcher a possible "narrative," or history of the records to take into the search for information in the actual descriptions of the records. That narrative will help locate information, if many of the various possible links between key features of contextual knowledge are provided. Essays could be available on societal contexts, creators, mandates, relevant laws, functions, record-keeping systems and processes, organizational cultures, information technologies and other material features of records, cus-

18 Joanna Sassoon, "Chasing Phantoms in the Archives: The Australia House Photograph Collection," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000).

todial history, types of individual documents to be encountered in various media, how to assess them diplomatically, understand what their ideal form might be, and their evolution, anomalies, and particularities. These essays would not only prepare researchers for using the contextual access points the system may have, such as creator name and functions, they would in effect, help researchers to read an archives – or get behind the documents to the less visible and complex histories that produce and shape the evidence they may bear.[19]

In some respects this would be like bringing much of what archivists often already know and have written about in *Archivaria* and elsewhere, into descriptive systems and other functions. These essays could point to related literature by other scholars as well. A researcher may also contribute to the essays directly by learning about some unknown aspect of context, perhaps alerted to its value by the essays, and share it, perhaps in an annotation to one of the essays, a new essay, and, of course, in an adjusted description, with a footnoted credit to the researcher. The information these essays convey ought not to be outside the bounds of the descriptive system in professional journals, related literature, or personal notes, or be done on the margins of work time, but be integral to it and a high priority.

The essays would direct researchers to the descriptive system for specific information about particular bodies of records. The types of contextual information discussed in the essays might not actually be known for a given creator and its records. (These are the types of limits recognized above.) But some descriptions may have them. In addition to the specific descriptions of particular records that are the heart of a descriptive system, these general introductory essays would still be accompanied by other useful features of descriptive systems, such as subject or thematic guides, file lists, and now, increasingly, digitized documents. The essays may be especially valuable in the digital age when increasingly large numbers of people gain access to digitized records without having access to an archivist who could provide some guiding insights into the contextualities which shape understanding of the records.[20]

Archivists are increasingly aware of the widening range of the contextualities which shape recording and archiving. They are aware of the limits of various theoretical positions and practices that have shaped the familiar

19 See Alan Sekula, "Reading an Archive," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology by Contemporary Artists* (Cambridge and New York, 1987) and JoAnn McCaig, *Reading In: Alice Munro's Archives* (Waterloo, 2002).

20 The short essays which accompany the digitized diary of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King at the Library and Archives of Canada's Web site (archives.ca) are embryonic examples of the work proposed here. These essays discuss the formation of King's diary, its importance in his life (in relation to the larger societal context of the history of diary writing), the custodial and archival history of the diary, and the diary's impact on intellectual and public life in Canada.

approaches to archival work. The way ahead is not entirely clear, but we can be guided by a desire to explore these contextualities through study of the history of records and archives and explore the shape of theoretical positions and professional practices in order to bring the wider contextualities into archival theory and practice. This presents a great and exciting challenge to reopen archives in immensely valuable ways.