

# Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives\*

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**RÉSUMÉ** Les idées post-modernes ont été rejetées comme des absurdités à la mode démontrant l'arrogance incompréhensible des universitaires, mais aussi acclamées comme des concepts libérateurs permettant d'affranchir plusieurs disciplines de contraintes traditionnelles usées. Cet article explore la pertinence de la pensée post-moderne pour la pratique archivistique. Les penseurs post-modernes ont discuté depuis plusieurs décades de sujets proches des préoccupations archivistiques et, plus récemment, ont commencé à aborder directement le concept des "archives" en tant que documents, institutions et fonctions. L'auteur examine dans ce texte les faiblesses et les forces de l'analyse post-moderne, expérimente quelques définitions du post-modernisme dans le contexte archivistique et propose des façons dont les idées post-modernes pourraient changer la pratique quotidienne des archivistes qui travaillent (et vivent) inévitablement dans les conditions de la post-modernité. Les changements proposés se concentrent autour d'une plus grande transparence et responsabilisation des archivistes dans le cadre de leurs fonctions archivistiques ainsi que d'une plus grande sensibilisation de la diversité, l'ambiguïté et aux identités multiples des créateurs de documents, des systèmes d'information et des utilisateurs.

**ABSTRACT** Postmodern ideas have been dismissed as fashionable nonsense demonstrating academia's arrogant incomprehensibility and equally acclaimed as liberating

\* This essay began its life as a plenary address delivered to the Association of Canadian Archivists in Winnipeg on 8 June 2001. Two other plenary addresses to that conference also considered aspects of postmodernism/deconstruction and the archive; these papers were delivered by Verne Harris and Heather MacNeil and appear in revised form elsewhere in this issue of *Archivaria* (all three were developed independently of each other). My own essay has been significantly revised since Winnipeg, although it retains intentionally its general tone as an essay more than a research analysis. For their very helpful comments, under a very tight deadline, which much improved this version of the essay, I wish to thank Sharon Cook, University of Ottawa; Verne Harris, University of Witwatersrand and the South Africa History Archive; and Joan Schwartz, National Archives of Canada, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for *Archivaria*. This article is designed to complement my "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," *Archival Science: International Journal on Recorded Information* 1, no. 1 (2001), pp. 3–24. That article looked at the impact of postmodern ideas on archival theory; the present one focuses more on the societal conditions of postmodernity and how postmodern insights might improve archival practice and professional strategies.

concepts freeing many disciplines from worn-out traditional constraints. This article explores the relevance of postmodern thinking for archival practice. Postmodern thinkers have discussed for several decades topics close to archivists' concerns, and more recently begun to address directly "the archive" itself as record, institution, and function. This essay looks at the weaknesses and strengths of postmodern analysis, assays some definitions of postmodernism in an archival context, and suggests how postmodern insights might change archivists' daily practice as they work (and live) inescapably in conditions of postmodernity. The principal focus of such changes centres around much greater transparency and accountability by archivists for the archival function itself and much greater awareness of the diversity, ambiguity, and multiple identities of records creators, information systems, and archives users.

Postmodern concepts offer possibilities for enriching the practice of archives. Scholars in a wide range of disciplines are looking anew at authorship, media, representation, organizational behaviour, individual and collective memory, cultural institutions, history, and, most recently, at archives themselves as institutions, activities, and records. Postmodernism is, therefore, addressing almost everything an archivist thinks about and touches and, as a result, should command the attention of all archivists. While postmodernism is difficult to define and fraught with controversy, it would be irresponsible not to engage with ideas that are fundamentally affecting society, and society's perception and use of the archive.<sup>1</sup>

This essay seeks to accomplish six things in the following order: it first outlines what critics are saying against postmodernism; it then suggests why postmodernism is important to archivists; it traces how the world has evolved to conditions of postmodernity and how these resonate for archivists; it explains the key concepts of postmodernism; it briefly reviews what postmodernists are saying about archives and records; and it concludes by suggesting some practical implications of postmodernist thinking that might make the archival experience richer for archivists and their clients.

Despite its current popularity, it is easy to mock postmodernism as a self-indulgent academic chimera, irrelevant to the archival, or any other practical, endeavour. The first target is always the relativism of postmodernism. If postmodernists say that everything is relative, that every meaning hides a meaning within an infinite cycle of deconstruction, that nothing can be known with

1 On archivists' general disinclination to assess critically the impact of postmodern ideas for their profession's concepts and practice, see Brien Brothman, "Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction," *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), pp. 64–88. One anonymous reviewer of this manuscript suggested that the profession's reluctance in this regard is reminiscent of the years lost in failing to engage seriously the impact of electronic records for archives. Electronic records are pervasive, yet very few archives have well-developed (or any) programmes to deal with them beyond the experimental stage. The cyber-horse is out of the barn, so to speak, and with it the loss of many archival records. Postmodernism similarly is pervasive, as will be suggested later in this essay. The parallel is instructive and troubling.

complete assurance, that words and images (“text”) are the only reality, then why should archivists not dismiss postmodernism itself as just another relativism – just as untrue, unstable, and relative as everything it criticizes? If postmodernists claim that history is a series of fictions imposed by those in power to augment their political and social position, how can this ever appeal to archivists, a large portion of whose work and clientele is focussed on the past and its evidentiary record of acts and facts? By reducing history to finding examples in the past to support conclusions based on *a priori* critical theory, and elevating the varying narrative typologies of the historian over scientific reconstruction of the past based on evidence, the postmodern historian becomes an interpreter of texts (i.e., records) as semiotic signs of hidden meanings rather than as documentary evidence of past transactions. For this reason, some critics of postmodernism label postmodernist historians as “theory-mongers” guilty “of monumental egotism ... dressed up in the jargon of German philosophy and the imagery of French discourse – [where] metaphors regularly do duty for rational thinking.” The historian’s personalized interpretation of the past becomes more important than the people, places, and events in the past itself. “That doctrine, however dressed up, leads straight to a frivolous nihilism, which allows any historian to say whatever he likes,” including the Holocaust deniers.<sup>2</sup>

With its focus on issues concerning race, class, gender, post-colonialism, and various other marginalized groups (aboriginal people, gays and lesbians, subalterns, etc.), postmodernism is also criticized as being merely a left-wing political ideology dressed up to academic respectability. Neo-Marxist and existentialist students in France won in the university classroom what they could not achieve on the streets of Paris in 1968, a strategy eagerly imitated by baby-boomer New-Leftists who, similarly frustrated in neo-conservative North America, later captured academia here for their anti-establishment message. If this is true, neo-conservative critics assert, such warmed-over Marxism and existential angst should hardly appeal to anyone not sharing those values. Even for some left-wing reformers themselves, the relativism, introspection, and scepticism of postmodernism is “incompatible with feminist (and indeed any radical) politics.”<sup>3</sup> Postmodernism tears down, so goes the conventional thinking, it does not build up. Feminists, among others, have found it more than a

2 See G.R. Elton, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 12–13, 28, 36–37, and passim. For a similar reaction, see Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists* (Paddington, NSW, 1996). A more moderate statement is Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History*, American 2d ed. (London and New York, 1999).

3 See Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London and New York, 1995), p. 97, and passim. For an early, sustained, left-wing critique of postmodernism, see Bryan D. Palmer, *Descent into Discourse: The Reification of Language and the Writing of Social History* (Philadelphia, 1990). For a more recent critique, see Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford, 1996).

little ironic that just as some of these very same marginalized groups, including women, are at last finding their voice, the concept of autonomous authorship should be declared dead. As one feminist writer observed, “How can anyone ask me to say goodbye to ‘emancipatory metanarratives’ when my own emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-and-miss affair?”<sup>4</sup>

In this regard, postmodernism eschews metanarrative, those sweeping interpretations that totalize human experience in some monolithic way, whether it be capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism, the nation state, or the Western “canon” in literature or philosophy – almost anything that reflects the past or present “hegemony” of dead white males. For example, from a postmodernist perspective, Western literature was, until recently, a vehicle for buttressing patriarchy or colonialism; in contrast, postmodernism seeks to emphasize the diversity of human experience by recovering marginalized voices in the face of such hegemony, and hence its emphasis across a whole range of academic disciplines on issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, and locality. Yet critics charge that postmodernism in turn imposes its own totalizing interpretation centred now around the voices of the marginalized. What is postmodern critical or social theory itself other than a methodological metanarrative? That methodology is predicated on a hermeneutic reading of the text that privileges its interpreter’s ideas or “story” over the original participants’ actions or the original authors’ ideas. Hermeneutics “enables the student to impose meaning on his materials instead of extracting meaning and import from them.”<sup>5</sup>

As if all this were not reason enough to distrust postmodernism, its leading advocates often produce thickets of tangled language and impenetrable jargon: arcane German philosophy married to absurd French speculation.<sup>6</sup> When perhaps the leading and certainly the most prolific postmodernist writer, Jacques Derrida, was nominated for an honorary degree at Cambridge, a group of professors from that venerable academy protested this honour, asserting in a

4 Sabine Lovibond, cited in Bertens, *Idea of the Postmodern*, p. 202. This chapter (pp. 185–208, and especially extended note 1, pp. 205–7) addresses postmodernism and feminism, and the problem of political agency.

5 Elton, *Return to Essentials*, p. 30. By contrast, on the benefits of hermeneutics and its application as an archival methodology, especially in macro-appraisal, see Richard Brown, “Records Acquisition Strategy and Its Theoretical Foundation: The Case for a Concept of Archival Hermeneutics,” *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–92), pp. 34–56; and “The Value of ‘Narrativity’ in the Appraisal of Historical Documents: Foundation for a Theory of Archival Hermeneutics,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 152–56.

6 Elton, *Return to Essentials*, p. 28. To make his meaning absolutely clear in a classic diatribe, concerning the postmodern pioneers from philosophers Heidegger and Adorno (he could have added Nietzsche and Gadamer) and literary and cultural theorists Saussure, Barthes, and Derrida (and he might have added Lyotard and Levi-Strauss), and their theoretical transferral to history via Foucault and his many followers, Elton asserts that these leading postmodern thinkers could be fairly characterized thus: “German philosophy and French *esprit* – a dangerous cocktail because while the former may be incomprehensible it looks wise, and the latter demonstrates that the absurd always sounds better in French.”

letter to the London *Times* that his “style defies comprehension” and “where coherent assertions are being made at all, these are either false or trivial ... little more than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship....”<sup>7</sup> A joke goes around the Internet, courtesy of the *Godfather* films:<sup>8</sup>

Q: What do you get if you cross a postmodernist with a Mafia boss?

A: Someone who will make you an offer that *no one* can understand!

Putting a more serious academic gloss on such humour, in a respected scholarly journal in cultural studies, American physicist Alan Sokal published an article in 1996 with the very postmodernist title, “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” an essay filled with postmodern rhetoric and abundant quotations from leading French and American postmodern authors. Upon its publication, he proudly confessed that it was a complete hoax. His fabrication garnered significant media attention, and he subsequently has published a book about the “abuse” of postmodernism, entitled *Fashionable Nonsense*.<sup>9</sup>

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Postmodernism is certainly fashionable in certain quarters, but is it nonsense? Some of the objections to postmodernism have a certain plausibility. Postmodern thinking is difficult to approach with its specialized philosophical writing and complex theoretical arguments. It can be contradictory, filled with paradoxes, ironies, and word play – sometimes (as in Marshall McLuhan’s work) done intentionally from a desire to undermine the very logic of the rationalist language it is critiquing, sometimes merely, it appears, from pedantic academic arrogance. Its historical origins and its more famous practitioners on the surface may appear to be left-of-centre politically, but there are deeper and more diverse roots of postmodernism to Kant, Nietzsche, and Heidegger that cover a much broader ideological spectrum. Philosopher Jurgen Habermas, a commentator himself labelled as a postmodernist and an anti-postmodernist, sees, for example, “neo-conservative” and “young conservative” tendencies among some postmodernists, including Derrida and Foucault.<sup>10</sup>

Many of the critiques of postmodernism reflect a central problem of defini-

7 John D. Caputo, editor and commentator, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York, 1997), pp. 38–39.

8 I thank Heather MacNeil for bringing this to my attention.

9 Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* (New York, 1998). His original article is reprinted as an appendix in the book. For a strong counterattack on the silly dishonesty of Sokal’s work and its complete misunderstanding of Derrida and deconstruction, see Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, pp. 71–81.

10 Bertens, *Idea of the Postmodern*, p. 121.

tion. The first scholarly history of postmodernism, published in 1995, opens with these troubling words: “postmodernism is an exasperating term, and so are postmodern, postmodernist, postmodernity, and whatever else one might come across in the way of derivation. In the avalanche of articles and books that have made use of the term since the late 1950s, postmodernism has been applied at different levels of conceptual abstraction to a wide range of objects and phenomena in what we used to call reality. Postmodernism, then, is several things at once.”<sup>11</sup> This allows its critics to have a field day, but perhaps instead they should try to understand a pervasive mindset in all its diverse complexity. A recent analysis has chapters on the impact of postmodernism on philosophy, critical and cultural theory, politics, feminism, lifestyles, science and technology, architecture, art, cinema, television, literature, and music,<sup>12</sup> and, from other studies, one could add its impact on history, geography, cartography, photography, literature, anthropology, sociology, organizational theory, linguistics, museums, and libraries. “Postmodernism,” then, is a series of postmodernisms, not all of which are mutually compatible. This should come as no surprise: there can be no single postmodernism any more than there is a single definition for modernism, Victorianism, or Marxism that unifies all their advocates, disciplines, media, times, or places. All labels by definition distort, and some postmodernists indeed might, with greater accuracy, be called late-modernists, neo-Marxists, deconstructionists, neo-Idealists, post-structuralists, feminists, post-colonialists, neo-Romantics, and much else. All true perhaps, and yet there is still something called postmodernism that captures popular and academic attention. While its scope and definition can certainly be qualified, its existence cannot be denied. Nevertheless, by being so many things at once, postmodernism remains easy to ridicule and almost impossible to summarize – certainly not in a short overview article.

Despite the intellectual effort involved, archivists should not dismiss postmodernism for four reasons. First, as suggested by its wide-ranging impact in many fields of popular culture, at least in North America and parts of Europe, postmodernism pervades the spirit of the present age. Because archives as records and institutions, to say nothing of records creators, have always reflected the characteristics of their time and place,<sup>13</sup> professional self-knowl-

11 Ibid., p. 3.

12 Stuart Sim, ed., *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* (Cambridge, 1998).

13 For examples of this argument and references to other supporting sources, see Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 17–63, a shorter, less complete version of which is published as “Interaction of Archival Theory and Practice Since the Publication of the Dutch Manual,” *Archivum* (1997). For an analysis of the possible connections between an archival medium (the new Daguerreotype photograph), archival theory and practice (new articulation of *respect des fonds* in Louis Phillippe’s France), and the spirit of an age (scientific and empirical positivism), see Joan M. Schwartz, “‘Records of Simple Truth and Precision’: Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control,” *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000), pp. 1–40. Archival

edge, if nothing else, requires that archivists try to understand this contemporary phenomenon. Second, postmodernism is so pervasive in North American university culture that nearly all new archivists and academic researchers entering archival institutions will have from their undergraduate backgrounds in almost any conceivable field in the humanities or social sciences, and from some graduate archival studies programmes as well, this postmodernist intellectual framework that archivists as a profession should try to understand and accommodate. Third, and as a corollary, by my count of publications alone, some two dozen English-speaking archivists already within the profession are exploring the challenges that postmodernist ideas present to archives, and most prominently and originally in Canada.<sup>14</sup> While not all the writing by

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educator Terry Eastwood has observed that “one must understand the political, economic, social and cultural milieu of any given society to understand its archives,” adding that “the ideas held at any given time about archives are surely but a reflection of wider currents in intellectual history.” Terence M. Eastwood, “Reflections on the Development of Archives in Canada and Australia,” in Sue McKemish and Frank Upward, eds., *Archival Documents: Providing Accountability Through Recordkeeping* (Melbourne, 1993), p. 27. See also Barbara L. Craig, “Outward Visions, Inward Glance: Archives History and Professional Identity,” *Archival Issues: Journal of the Midwest Archives Conference* 17, no. 2 (1992), pp. 113–24.

- 14 The first mention of postmodernism (at least in English) by an archivist in an article title was by Terry Cook, in “Electronic Records, Paper Minds: The Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-Custodial and Post-Modernist Era,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 22 (November 1994), pp. 300–329. The themes were anticipated in his “Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal,” in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 38–70; and continued in his “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas,” *Archivaria*, and “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science*. Two pioneering postmodern archivists before Cook were also Canadian, Brien Brothman and Richard Brown. Among other works, see Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 78–100; “The Limits of Limits: Derridean Deconstruction and the Archival Institution,” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993), pp. 205–20; and his probing review of Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, in *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), which was much deepened in his “Declining Derrida,” *Archivaria*; and Richard Brown, “The Value of ‘Narrativity’ in the Appraisal of Historical Documents,” *Archivaria*, and “Records Acquisition Strategy,” *Archivaria*, and his “Death of a Renaissance Record-Keeper: The Murder of Tomasso da Tortona in Ferrara, 1385,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 1–43. Other postmodern statements by Canadians include Preben Mortensen, “The Place of Theory in Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), pp. 1–26; Tom Nesmith, “Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the ‘Ghosts’ of Archival Theory,” *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), pp. 136–50; Joan Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats,” *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), pp. 40–74, and her “‘Records of Simple Truth and Precision,’” *Archivaria*; Bernadine Dodge, “Places Apart: Archives in Dissolving Space and Time,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 118–31; Theresa Rowat, “The Records and the Repository as a Cultural Form of Expression,” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993), pp. 198–204; Robert McIntosh, “The Great War, Archives, and Modern Memory,” *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998), pp. 1–31; Carolyn Heald, “Is There Room for Archives in the Postmodern World?” *American Archivist* 59 (Winter 1996), pp. 88–101; and Lilly Koltun, “The Promise and Threat of Digital Options in an

these people has been postmodernist, and perhaps not all of them would accept that label, their analyses have all engaged seriously with some postmodernist writers and with the opportunity that postmodernist ideas present to archives. I would hope that readers would not dismiss these colleagues as collectively beguiled by “fashionable nonsense.” Finally, postmodernist writers themselves are now beginning to address archives directly in their writings, as institution, as activity, as records, as recording media, as collective memory, as social phenomenon. When Jacques Derrida, arguably the world’s most famous living philosopher, devotes an entire book, his 1996 *Archive Fever*, to the very *raison d’être* of the archival profession, something significant is happening.<sup>15</sup> In the Derrida aftershock, historians, geographers, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and cultural theorists are right now subjecting the *archival* world to a detailed critique such as it has never before experienced.<sup>16</sup> Their image of the archive – which is quite different from the traditional one the profession has of itself – could well influence general public opinion, shape the outlook of new archivists coming to us, and transform researchers’ and sponsors’ expectations.

The varying insights of postmodernism generally, and of this intensive internal and external critique of the archive, should challenge and provoke

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Options in an Archival Age,” *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), pp. 114–35. Non-Canadian postmodern archivists include Eric Ketelaar, “Archivalisation and Archiving,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 27, no. 1 (May 1999), pp. 54–61 and “Looking Through the Record into the Rose Garden,” *Arkhiyyon. Reader in Archival Studies and Documentation* 10–11 (1999), pp. XXVII–XLII, among others; and Verne Harris, “Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 132–41, his complementary “Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990–96,” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996), pp. 6–27, his *Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa*, 2d ed. (Pretoria, 2000), and with Sello Hatang, “Archives, Identity and Place: A Dialogue on What It (Might) Mean(s) to be an African Archivist,” *ESARBICA Journal* 19 (2000), pp. 45–58, among many other writings; Elizabeth Kaplan, “We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are,” *American Archivist* 63 (Spring/Summer 2000), pp. 126–51; and implicitly at least some of the writings of Americans Margaret Hedstrom, Richard Cox, Fran Blouin, Nancy Bartlett, and James O’Toole, and Australians Frank Upward, Sue McKemmish, and Barbara Reed. Planned publication in the next year of at least two books on archives and the construction of social memory will expand the number of archivists involved in considering the implications of postmodernism for their profession.

15 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago and London, 1996, originally in French in 1995, from a series of 1994 lectures).

16 See, for example, the two thematic issues on “The Archive,” *History of the Human Sciences* 11 (November 1998) and 12 (May 1999), featuring some twenty articles by scholars in many disciplines devoted to analysing the theoretical issues surrounding the archive as social and societal phenomenon. The Sawyer Seminars on “Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory,” hosted by the Bentley Institute at the University of Michigan during the 2000–01 academic year, similarly heard scores of papers and commentaries, many of which will be published, from scholars across numerous disciplines on many aspects of the archive and society.



archivists, sometimes anger and annoy them, always stimulate and sustain them. What it should not do is drive archivists into an insular shell of denial or dismissal. Postmodernism is an opening, not a closing, a chance to welcome a wider discussion about what archivists do and why, rather than remaining defensively inside the archival cloister. This dialogue should be embraced by a profession that for years has complained about being misunderstood. To be better understood, and thus valued, archivists need to bring their unique (and important) perspectives to bear on the common parlance – or “discourse” – of their times. In this way, postmodernism, especially in its deconstruction form, allows the release of tremendous energies by sweeping away that which has been constraining, that with which archivists have lived by habit or professional fiat. Postmodernism in this way can be enormously liberating and constructive (in both meanings of being positive and of building things). Deconstruction is not about destroying in endless relativist critiques, but about constructing, about seeing anew and imagining what is possible when the platitudes and ideologies are removed. It is a mode of inquiry, of reading, of analysis, that generates an energy towards the openness required for genuine innovation and change. It is a mindset that “must always be open-ended, porous, experimental, nonprogrammable, vigilant, self-questioning, self-revising, exposed to their other, inventive of the other.”<sup>17</sup> It is not a politics and practice per se, but does provide poetic inspiration for conceptualizing these anew.<sup>18</sup>

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Despite the difficulty of defining postmodernism, there is a three-word definition offered by one of its pioneering thinkers. “Simplifying to the extreme,” Jean-François Lyotard writes, “I define *postmodern* as *incredulity towards metanarratives*.”<sup>19</sup> There are negative and positive causes of this incredulity, and thus of the conditions of postmodernity and of postmodernism itself.<sup>20</sup>

Negatively, the exposure of the massive propaganda of the world wars, the

17 Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, p. 70. In addition to Verne Harris’s and Brien Brothman’s works cited throughout these notes, Caputo’s book is a fine introductory overview of Derrida’s work and the nature of deconstruction.

18 On politics and poetics in an archival setting, see Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats,” *Archivaria*, passim.

19 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis, 1984, French original 1979), p. xxiv (emphasis added).

20 There are many books that assess the cultural, social, intellectual, and global dimensions of the postmodern condition, or postmodernity. Three that I have found especially useful are David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA, 1990, numerous reprintings); Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York, 1991), pp. 325–413; and Norman Cantor, *The American Century: Varieties of Culture in Modern Times* (New York, 1997), pp. 425–502.

Nazi machine, the Cold War, and Vietnam generated distrust of the broad official narratives of the state centred around patriotism, and bred especial distrust of its key advocates: politicians, journalists, and the media. Their too-often venal habits reinforced distrust as they became known. Big business capitalists and related Madison Avenue advertisers similarly lost their once unchallenged sheen of trustworthy leadership from attacks by left-wing, Third World, and environmental critics, a process that continues in the anti-globalization demonstrations of today. The moral bankruptcy and subsequent political collapse of various Western colonial empires, as well as the Soviet Marxist one, also undermined faith in the previously unquestioned values that had animated these enterprises and their advocates. And the sustained feminist exposure, from the 1960s onward, of the inner workings of patriarchy demonstrated that a major metanarrative of Western culture which centred around male domination was simply an artificial construction to buttress male power. Another central Western narrative which centred around Christianity similarly suffered from its past and sometimes continuing support of the state narratives of war, capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy. Disenchantment with modern science from Hiroshima onward has had similar results for undermining faith in science, and its central mantras of objectivity, neutrality, and rationalism. In short, Lyotard is saying, the values that society has held, the grand myths of Western civilization, the metanarratives that have held sway for decades or centuries, no longer have credibility. How could society have been so fooled for so long? Postmodernism tries, at least in part, to answer that question.

More positively, in terms of explaining the growing incredulity of metanarratives that is at the heart of postmodernism, the globalization of media and commerce, their enabling world-wide communications of computerized networks and telecommunication satellites, the resultant information explosion in the wired world of instant 24/7 work and recreation, and a concomitant information fragmentation into hundreds of channels, thousands of niche markets, and millions of Web pages – all these challenge the very possibility of metanarrative. Because of these revolutionary developments, there is also a growing awareness of other voices, other stories, other narratives, other realities – other than those that traditionally have filled school readers, history books, museums, public monuments, popular media, and archives. To use the North American example, the mainstream white, Anglo-Saxon, male voice was first challenged by ethnic and multicultural voices and peace/anti-war advocates of the 1960s, then by voices of feminist women from the early 1970s onward, then successively by ecologists, gays and lesbians, First Nations, and, increasingly, Third World thinkers. As a result, society has become more aware of what postmodernists called the “Other” – those beyond itself, those whose race, class, gender, or sexual orientation may be different from its own, those who in a globalized community it can no longer ignore when constructing its own identities and composing its own narratives. After a century of Nietzsche,

Freud, Picasso, Jung, and McLuhan, society knows that the rational, linear message of the major metanarratives (whatever their actual content) offers at best only a truncated view of human nature, individually and collectively. Passion, imagination, sexuality, artistic perception, right-brain intuition – the irrational and the subjective – all these are integral to the human soul, and yet all were relatively absent from the left-brain scientific rationalism that animated the Enlightenment-based metanarratives. They are also, one might note, all relatively absent from the holdings of archives, or at least the archival mainstream. Postmodernism attempts to right this imbalance, recognizing the yin and yang of the human spirit, the left and right brain, even if in apparent paradox it also spends much energy unbalancing, deconstructing, unmasking the metanarratives that now block that balancing reconciliation.

Postmodernists seek, in short, to de-naturalize what society unquestionably assumes is natural, what it has for generations, perhaps centuries, accepted as normal, natural, rational, proven – simply the way things are. The postmodernist takes such “natural” phenomena – whether patriarchy, capitalism, the Western canon of great literature, or the working of archives – and declares them to be socially or culturally “constructed,” and thus in need of deconstruction and reformulation to reflect better the diversity of the present time.<sup>21</sup>

John Ralston Saul recently argued that the postmodernist state of mind (which he salutes as particularly Canadian in ethos if not ideology) celebrates ambiguity, tolerance, diversity, and multiple identities;<sup>22</sup> it does so in large part by shattering metanarratives – and the concepts, language, history, and archives upon which they are based. Indeed, he has argued forcefully against ideology, the starkest form of metanarrative:

We suffer from an addictive weakness for large illusions. A weakness for ideology. Power in our civilization is repeatedly tied to the pursuit of all-inclusive truths and utopias.... The unshakeable belief that we are on the trail to truth – and therefore the solution to our problems – prevents us from identifying this obsession as an ideology ...

21 Some of these arguments in this and the preceding paragraph draw on the analysis in Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism,” *Archival Science*. As noted in that essay, there seems little point of citing scores of articles and books that have shaped my understanding of postmodernism. Perhaps enough to say that, in addition to Foucault’s historical methodology and Derrida’s seminal volume, I gained much by an early exposure to the work of the Canadian literary scholar, Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York, 1989) and *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York and London, 1988); to Richard Tarnas’ *Passion of the Western Mind*, and of course to the writings of those archivists (happily growing in number) who have explored rather than ignored postmodernism, as outlined in note 14 above. I should also like to acknowledge probing discussions around postmodernity over the years with Brien Brothman, Rick Brown, Bernadine Dodge, Verne Harris, Candace Loewen, Tom Nesmith, Jean-Stéphen Piché, Joan Schwartz, and Hugh Taylor.

22 John Ralston Saul, “The Inclusive Shape of Complexity,” keynote address to the International Conference on Canadian Studies: “The Canadian Distinctiveness into the XXIst Century,” (University of Ottawa, 18 May 2000), publication forthcoming.

[and induces] passivity before the inevitable – before what is said to be inevitable – a standard reaction to ideology. And passivity is one of ideology's most depressing effects. The citizen is reduced to the state of subject or even of the serf. There is a certain terrifying dignity to the big ideologies. With the stroke of an intellectual argument, the planet is put in its place. Terrifying. Only the bravest or the most foolish of individuals would not become passive before such awe-inspiring Destinies.... To live within ideologies [or metanarratives], with utopian expectations, is to live in no place, to live in limbo. To live nowhere. To live in a void where the illusion of reality is usually created by highly sophisticated rational constructs.... It is ideology that insists upon relentless positivism. That's why it opposes criticism and encourages passivity. I would argue that confronting reality – no matter how negative and depressing the process – is the first step towards coming to terms with it ... exercising my rights as a citizen – my Socratic right – to criticize, to reject conformity, passivity, inevitability.<sup>23</sup>

Saul's "confronting reality" is really about deconstructing metanarratives, opening up possibilities for people seeing themselves, their societies, and their professions anew, free from the dead weight of accepted wisdom and unburdened from passive conformity to traditional ideology.

Postmodernism, therefore, both encourages, through the critical analysis of deconstruction, the fragmentation of the older modernist framework and the ambiguity, openness, and multiple ways of seeing which are essential in the new globalized world. What, then, is postmodernism from an archival perspective? Invoking Lyotard's disclaimer about the risk of extreme simplification, I would characterize archival postmodernism as focussing on the context behind the content; on the power relationships that shape the documentary heritage; and on the document's structure, its resident and subsequent information systems, and its narrative and business-process conventions as being more important than its informational content. Going further, facts in texts cannot be separated from their ongoing and past interpretations, nor author from subject or ever-changing audiences, nor author from the act of authoring, nor authoring from broader societal contexts in which it takes place. Everything in records is shaped, presented, represented, re-presented, symbolized, signified, constructed by the writer, the computer programmer, the photographer, the cartographer, for a set purpose. No text is an innocent by-product of administrative or personal action, but rather a constructed product – although that conscious construction may be so transformed into unconscious patterns of social behaviour, language conventions, organization processes, technological imperatives, and information templates that links to its constructed nature have become quite hidden. The postmodern archivist exposes these deeper contextual realities.

Documents, individually and collectively, are all a form of narration, postmodernists assert, that go well beyond being mere evidence of transactions

23 John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilization* (Concord, 1995), pp. 18, 20, 28, 36–37.

and facts. Documents are shaped to reinforce narrative consistency and conceptual harmony for the author, thereby enhancing position, ego, and power, all the while conforming to acceptable organization norms, rhetorical discourse patterns, and societal expectations. Postmodernists also believe that there is not one narrative in a series or collection of records, but many narratives, many stories, serving many purposes for many audiences, across time and space. Documents are thus dynamic, not static.<sup>24</sup> And the archivist as much as the creator or researcher is one of the narrators.

Some of these generalizations about postmodernism are supported from a growing literature on the history of archives. Studies now reveal that archives were collected – and later weeded, reconstructed, even destroyed – not always to keep the best juridical evidence of legal or business transactions, but to serve historical, sacral, and symbolic purposes – and only for those figures and events judged worthy of celebrating, or memorializing, within the context of their time and place.<sup>25</sup> Given the symbiotic relationship of feminism and postmodernism, the case of how archives have responded to documenting women's role in society is instructive. Feminist scholar Gerda Lerner has demonstrated that patriarchal power lay behind the creation of the first written documents and the first archives in the ancient world. The archival enterprise was then remorselessly and intentionally patriarchal: women were delegitimized by the record-keeping and archival processes and thus absent from the subsequent formation of societal memory, a process that continued well into

24 On this, see Sue McKemmish, "Are Records Ever Actual?" in Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott, eds., *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* (Clayton, 1994). She draws inspiration in her opening epigraph from Derrida, and from my own work on the postcustodial concept of the archival fonds based on "logical or virtual or multiple realities," rather than its traditional base of physical custodianship. See 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), p. 38.

25 For this argument in more detail, with examples and numerous references, see Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas," pp. 18–19. For only a few of many powerful examples across the millennium, see Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994), especially chapter 3: "Archival Memory and the Destruction of the Past"; Richard Brown, "Death of a Renaissance Record-Keeper," *Archivaria*; Robert McIntosh, "The Great War, Archives, and Modern Memory," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998), pp. 1–31; and Verne Harris, "Redefining Archives in South Africa," *Archivaria*; as well as several of the articles in the special issues on "The Archive" in *History of the Human Sciences*. On the symbolic nature of archives, see James O'Toole, "The Symbolic Significance of Archives," *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993), pp. 234–55.

26 Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York and Oxford, 1986), pp. 6–7, 57, 151, 200, and passim; and *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (New York and Oxford, 1993) which details the systemic exclusion of women from history and archives, and beginning in the late nineteenth-century efforts to correct this by creating women's archives (especially chapter 11, "The Search for Women's History"). See also Riane Eisler, *The Chalice & The Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco, 1987), pp. 71–73, 91–93.

this century.<sup>26</sup> Archivists, not surprisingly, have shared the same orientation as their archives. Bonnie Smith has suggested that the rise of “professional” history in the nineteenth century (which coincided with the professionalization of archivists, who were trained as such historians) squeezed out the storytelling, the ghostly and psychic, the spiritual and the feminine (and, of course, all “amateur” women practitioners) that were significantly present in earlier articulations of history, in favour of men who were pursuing a new “scientific” and “professional” history within the archival research room and the competitive university seminar. Such historians and archivists ignored in their work the people’s daily life in families, farms, factories, and communities in favour of politics, institutions, diplomacy, and war. They also venerated their scientific methods as fact-based, neutral, dispassionate – the only means to recover the Truth about the past.<sup>27</sup> Historically, then, there is nothing “natural” about this process of remembering and forgetting, or its professional participants, or the results they produced.

In summary, the archive is now seen increasingly as the site where social memory has been (and is) constructed – usually in support, consciously or unconsciously, of the metanarratives of the powerful, and especially of the state. Archival principles, such as *respect de fonds*, are likewise revealed as historically contingent, not universal or absolute.<sup>28</sup> The record is now perceived as a mere trace of missing universes, as a kind of trick mirror distorting facts and past realities, reflecting the narrative intentions of its author and the receptivity of its contemporary audience as much as its actual informational content. The record thus becomes a cultural signifier, a mediated and ever-changing construction, and not some empty template into which acts and facts are poured. This does not mean that nothing is true, or that everything is adrift in a sea of meaningless relativism. That is a fundamental misreading of postmodernism. It does mean that meaning is *relative* to the context of the creation of the record, that behind the text there are many other texts being concealed, and that mediation by the archivist in setting standards, undertaking appraisal, targeting acquisitions, imposing orders of arrangement, creating logical descriptions, and encouraging certain types of preservation, use, and public programming is critically important in shaping that meaning.

This shaping of meaning by the archivist has at best been observed opaquely inside and outside the archival profession, with the archivist remaining a kind of shrouded, unnoticed, indiscernible being, a ghost in Tom

27 Bonnie Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1998).

28 See especially Mortensen, “The Place of Theory in Archival Practice,” *Archivaria*; Schwartz, “Records of Simple Truth and Precision,” *Archivaria*; and Cook, “What is Past is Prologue,” *Archivaria*.

Nesmith's metaphor.<sup>29</sup> Postmodernism, by contrast, requires a new openness, a new visibility, a willingness to question and be questioned, to count for something and be held accountable. Postmodernism requires archivists to accept, even celebrate, their own historicity, their own role in the historical process of creating archives, and their own biases. Contrary to the anti-postmodernist attacks of traditional historians cited earlier (which, with a couple of word changes, could as easily be traditional archival theorists deriding postmodern thinking), no actor, observer, or writer is ever neutral or disinterested in any documentary process. Neither is the "text" historians and archivists consult (including archival documents) or preserve (i.e., appraise, acquire, describe) a transparent window to some past reality. All human assertions occur (even if subconsciously or unconsciously) within a context of contemporary societal metanarratives where everything is filtered, mediated, or influenced by considerations of language, personal psychology, and power. That being so, the postmodern journey<sup>30</sup> for the archivist is not a circular one within the comforts of the archival cloister reinforcing old certainties, but open-ended, listening for new possibilities and documenting new voices, harnessing the new energies released by seeing past blindnesses for the burden they are.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fine assertions, the reader might think, but what does any of this mean for the practice of the working archivist? Perhaps at first glance, postmodernism and traditional archival activity seem rather compatible. Why the suggestion, then, of a professional rebirth? After all, the postmodern concern with "constructed contexts" of records creation<sup>31</sup> recalls the long-held archival focus on contextuality, on mapping the provenancial interrelationships between the creator and the record, on determining and explaining to users the context behind the text. In fact, archivists' concern for relationships and postmodernists' relativism shared the same quest for relatedness, for contingency, for contextualization.

Yet beyond this initial level of comfort, postmodernism should make archivists uneasy with many of their traditional formulations. Postmodernism questions, by implication earlier and now directly in very recent writing, certain central metanarratives of the archival profession itself. Postmodernism thereby

29 See Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory," *Archivaria*. On the ghost metaphor in Derrida's writing concerning the persistence of the "Other" being ever present, of never being able to fully escape the past, see Stuart Sim, *Derrida and the End of History* (Cambridge, 1999), which is a critical appreciation of Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1993, an American translation and thus the Americanized spelling).

30 See especially the conference keynote address on journey or odyssey, the conference theme, delivered by Verne Harris, which appears in revised form in this issue of *Archivaria*.

31 See Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 122.

encourages a shift away from viewing records as static objects and towards understanding them as dynamic and even virtual concepts; a shift away from looking at records as the passive products of human or administrative activity and towards considering records as active and ever-evolving agents themselves in the formation of human and organizational memory; a shift equally away from seeing the context of records creation resting within stable hierarchical organizations to situating records within fluid networks of workflow and personal functionality. For archivists themselves, the postmodern shift requires moving away from identifying themselves as passive guardians of an inherited legacy to celebrating their role in actively shaping societal memory. Stated another way, postmodern archival discourse would shift from product to process, from structure to function, from archives to archiving, from records to contexts of recording, from “natural” residues or passive by-products of administrative activity to a consciously constructed and actively mediated “archivalisation” of social memory.<sup>32</sup> Such shifts themselves signal a deeper reality consistent with postmodern thinking: archival concepts are themselves not universal truths to be defended in all times and places as a sacred metanarrative but, rather, are constantly evolving, ever mutating as they reflect changes in the nature of records, record-creating organizations, record-keeping systems, record uses, and the wider cultural, legal, technological, social, and philosophical trends in society. Archival ideas formed in one time and place reflect many of these external factors, ideas which are often reconstructed, even rediscovered in another time and place, or reshaped across generations in the same place.<sup>33</sup>

In light of all these changes, what does postmodernism mean in practice for the archivist determined to operate in more expansive, inclusive, welcoming fashion in every archival activity? By way of illustration, let me suggest three of many possible areas for postmodern archival practice: appraisal, description, and archival accountability. Before doing so, however, a cautionary rider is necessary. Deconstruction, as a significant stream of postmodern thinking, “does not aim at *praxis* or theoretical practice but lives in the persistent crisis or unease of the moment of *techne* or crafting.... To act is therefore not to

32 On the latter term from Derrida and its archival implications, see Ketelaar, “Archivalisation and Archiving,” *Archives and Manuscripts*.

33 In the companion piece to this article, I have suggested how postmodern thinking viewed this way might change significantly concepts of provenance, original order, the record, the fonds, the archives, and “archival science.” I will not repeat those observations here. See Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism,” *Archival Science*. From another perspective based on an analysis of the historical evolution of archival ideas, I have suggested similar conclusions: see Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas,” *Archivaria*. For a fine analysis of the nature (and misuse) of theory in an archival context, see Mortensen, “The Place of Theory in Archival Practice,” *Archivaria*. Virtually all the archival thinkers cited in note 14 have also suggested new ways of viewing traditional precepts.



ignore deconstruction, but actively to transgress it without giving it up.”<sup>34</sup> This assertion need not be the contradiction that it first appears. Archivists must, of course, act rather than live in continual questioning, but when they act, they must also never stop questioning. Archivists may transgress deconstruction (i.e., go beyond its limits) when they decide to act in different ways based on such initial questioning, but that action should only generate more questions in a never-ending rebirthing of their craft. Archivists should feel most uneasy at the “moment” when they try to lock their ideas and practice, based on temporary answers to questions, into guidelines, standards, and directives. Unless they continue to pursue, as Saul advocates, ongoing questioning to open up the archive, they will actually betray rather than merely transgress deconstruction.

Turning to appraisal as the first practical example of postmodern archival practice, postmodern appraising archivists would ask who and what they are excluding from archival memorialization, and why, and then build appraisal strategies, methodologies, and criteria to correct the situation. Ascribing appraisal value to records would be based on the contextual narrativity found within the records-creation process rather than on anticipated uses of the records’ subject content. Appraisal would attend as carefully to the marginalized and even silenced voices as it now does to the powerful voices found in official institutional records. This can be done even when appraising the records of powerful entities like the state (in its various levels of government) or business corporations.

The macro-appraisal model developed first to appraise the records of the Government of Canada, for example, finds sanction for archival appraisal value of determining what to keep and what to destroy, not in the dictates of the state, as traditionally, nor in following the latest trends of historical research, as more recently, but in trying to reflect society’s values through a functional analysis of the interaction of citizen with the state. But macro-appraisal is about more than functional analysis, which is what some outside observers have mainly drawn from the Canadian model. Macro-appraisal focuses on governance rather than the structures and functions of government per se. Governance emphasizes the dialogue and interaction of citizens and groups with the state as much as the state’s own policies and procedures; focusses as well on documenting the impact of the state on society, and the functions of society itself; encompasses all media rather than privileging written text; searches for multiple narratives and hot spots of contested discourse between citizen and state, rather than accepting the official policy line; and

34 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London, 1993), p. 121 (from an intriguing chapter entitled “Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiations”). Spivak offers a keen reading of Derrida within feminist and postcolonial studies. Verne Harris kindly brought her work to my attention.

deliberately seeks to give voice to the marginalized, to the “Other,” to losers as well as winners, to the disadvantaged and underprivileged as well as the powerful and articulate, which is accomplished through new ways of looking at case files and electronic data and then choosing the most succinct record in the best medium for documenting these diverse voices. Postmodern appraisal, in short, consciously attempts to document both the functionality of government and its individual programmes that are themselves the creation of citizens in a democracy *and* to document the level of interaction of citizens with the functioning of the state: how they accept, reject, protest, appeal, change, modify, and otherwise influence those functional state programmes, and are in turn influenced by them. Of course, private-sector appraisal decisions would complement this public-sector macro-appraisal within a truly integrated “total archives” framework.<sup>35</sup>

Macro-appraisal is not an exercise in political correctness, or a vestige of the left-wing politics sometimes ascribed to postmodernism. The “marginalized” in macro-appraisal analysis for some particular functions may well be right-wing corporations more than left-wing unions, developers more than environmentalists, the centre more than the regions, men more than women, racists more than reformers. The point is to research thoroughly for the missing voices in the human or organizational functional activities under study during the appraisal process, so that the archives then can acquire in its holdings multiple voices, and not by default only the voices of the powerful. A cautionary note is necessary here. It is important, as Verne Harris notes, not to romanticize the marginalized, or feel elated for saving them from historical oblivion: some do not wish to be “rescued” by mainstream archives and some will feel their naming by archivists as being “marginalized” only further marginalizes them.<sup>36</sup> Such moral dilemmas should trouble, but not paralyze archivists: they can only welcome and respect the “Other,” and try to tell through appraisal as full a story as possible, “using records systems and the sites of records creation as the primary raw materials.” Of course, despite careful appraisal research and the “vigorous exercise of reason,” postmodern archival appraisers know “that there are other tellings, other stories which they might

35 In addition to internal documents at the National Archives of Canada on the theory, strategy, and criteria of macro-appraisal, for the basic concepts and strategic approaches, see Terry Cook, *The Archival Appraisal of Records Containing Personal Information: A RAMP Study With Guidelines* (Paris, 1991); Terry Cook, “Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal,” in *The Archival Imagination*; Terry Cook, “‘Many are called but few are chosen’: Appraisal Guidelines for Sampling and Selecting Case Files,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 25–50; Richard Brown, “Macro-Appraisal Theory and the Context of the Public Records Creator,” *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), pp. 121–72; and Rick Brown, “Records Acquisition Strategy and Its Theoretical Foundation,” *Archivaria*.

36 See especially Verne Harris, “Seeing (in) Blindness: South Africa, Archives and Passion for Justice,” draft essay for presentation to New Zealand archivists, August 2001.

have chosen instead. And their story ... has no ending. For the story has been archived; it is the archive. And there is no closing of the archive. In the words of Jacques Derrida, 'it opens out of the future.'<sup>37</sup> If there are benefits to the Canadian way of diversity, ambiguity, tolerance, and multiple identities that underpin John Ralston Saul's postmodern state, then perhaps the Canadian parallel way of archival remembering through macro-appraisal may speak strongly to archivists in this new century. Those desiring to construct archival memory based on celebrating difference rather than monoliths, multiple rather than mainstream narratives, the personal and local as much as the corporate and official, may find in macro-appraisal some useful perspectives and practical tools for their task.

Taking archival description as the second example of a practical application of postmodernism, archivists would ask what is presented in finding aids as a monolith and what is suppressed, and why, and then act to correct the situation. Archivists would engage openly with their clients and respect their needs, rather than forcing them to accept professional metanarratives of how records should be described. Descriptive architecture based around the fonds would be exploded for complex institutional records-creating settings from its relatively flat, mono-hierarchical, and static fixation on a final creator into much richer, multi-relational, many-to-many contextual linkages. As archivists understand better the complex arrangements of modern records and the organizational (and personal) cultures that produce them, postmodern descriptive systems would move away from the monolithic legacy of past archival theory, from "the old fashioned 'one-thing-one-entry' approach" if they are intent on "satisfying researchers' needs to understand the historical context of records, the activities that generated them, and the information they contain."<sup>38</sup> Thanks to postmodern insights, these contexts and those activities may be far more complex than archivists as a profession have generally admitted. Archivists actually need a deconstruction of the contexts they are trying to describe, remembering that "it is in the nature of deconstruction not just to see the wider context (those traces, or spectres, stretching back into the past in an infinite regress), but also the fluidity, the flexibility, the ultimately uncontrollable nature of the context."<sup>39</sup> Postmodern archivists would link their descriptions very closely to the

37 Verne Harris, *Exploring Archives*, 2d ed. (Pretoria, 2000), p. 45.

38 Terry Eastwood, "Putting the Parts of the Whole Together: Systematic Arrangement of Archives," *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000), pp. 115–16. For earlier advocates of virtual fonds or multiple-provenance description, see Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds in the Post-Custodial Era," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), pp. 24–37; David Bearman, *Archival Methods* (Pittsburgh, 1989), chapters 3, "Arrangement and Description" and 5, "Intelligent Artifices: Structures for Intellectual Control," and "Documenting Documentation," *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), pp. 33–49; and Chris Hurley, "What, If Anything, is a Function?" *Archives and Manuscripts* 21, no. 2 (November 1993), pp. 208–21, "Ambient Functions – Abandoned Children to Zoos," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), pp. 21–39, and "Problems with Provenance," *Archives and Manuscripts* 23, no. 2 (November 1995), pp. 234–59.

39 Sim, *Derrida and the End of History*, p. 50.

appraisal reports that justify why the records, now being described, are in the archives in the first place, and make clear their fragmentary nature as trace survivals of a much larger documentary universe.<sup>40</sup>

Such fluidity of descriptive relationships and transparency of archival processes have not been a hallmark of how descriptive standards have been implemented in Canada, until very recently, with rare exceptions.<sup>41</sup> This was not for any lack of North American advocates of more expansive descriptions.<sup>42</sup> Australian archival theory and practice offered such context-rich, multiple-relationship descriptive architectures decades ago, where multiple creators before and after and parallel to the one “fixed” in the fonds are recognized equally, as are the multiple functions of these varying creating structures, and all these become descriptive elements and, more importantly, retrieval points for researchers.<sup>43</sup> While Australians might well protest that exploring provenance in its many functional-structural contexts simply makes good sense and has nothing to do with postmodernism, the results very much reflect the spirit of postmodernism’s emphasis on multiple ways of seeing, and its view of the archive as dynamic, virtual, and ever evolving. The Australian system is fundamentally description of records creation and record-keeping processes more than description of the recorded product. Postmodern description would similarly reflect all the subtleties of the new functional-structural macro-appraisal practices already mentioned, highlighting in descriptions the complex nature of governance and marginality found (or not found) in the records now being described.

Postmodern description would reflect, in short, sustained contextual research by the archivist into the history of the records and their creator(s), and produce

40 On linking archivists’ contextual knowledge gained by appraisal and description, see Jean-Stéphien Piché, “Doing What’s Possible with What We’ve Got: Using the World Wide Web to Integrate Archival Functions,” *American Archivist* 61 (Spring 1998). This article (based on real prototypes at the National Archives of Canada developed by the author) responded to the kind of “outside the box” thinking advocated by Margaret Hedstrom in her “Descriptive Practices for Electronic Records: Deciding What is Essential and Imagining What is Possible,” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993), pp. 53–63.

41 One such exception is the new descriptive initiative of the Archives of Ontario: see Bob Krawczyk, “Cross Reference Heaven: The Abandonment of the Fonds as the Primary Level of Arrangement for Ontario Government Records,” *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), pp. 131–52. This is patterned on the Australian system. For an introduction, see the articles by Chris Hurley in note 38, as well as his “The Australian (‘Series’) System: An Exposition,” in McKemmish and Piggott, eds., *Records Continuum*. For an exposition of putting such provenancial complexity into descriptive systems, see Sue McKemmish et al., “Describing Records in Context in the Continuum: The Australian Recordkeeping Metadata System,” *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), pp. 3–43.

42 Examples of such “functional” advocates, as cited by Jean-Stéphien Piché (in “Doing What’s Possible with What We’ve Got,” *American Archivist*, p. 122, n. 51), include David Bearman, Margaret Hedstrom, and Helen Samuels in the United States and Tom Nesmith, Heather MacNeil, and Terry Cook in Canada.

43 See notes 38 and 41.

ever-changing descriptions as the records creation and custodial history itself never ends (as at the moment of archival accessioning or of creating a fonds entry). Description is continually reinvented, reconstructed, reborn.<sup>44</sup> Postmodern description focussed in this way on the history of records would reflect much greater nuance of context, which in turn would open up a wealth of content information without needing extensive item-level indexing. And such possibilities of postmodern descriptive practice might well cause some to reflect on the historicity of the archivist: when such context-rich descriptive options were available, why did the archival profession in Canada reject them in favour of a library-cataloguing approach to description? What does this say about the archival profession's own metanarrative for that time and place?

This leads directly into my third example of postmodern archival practice, and perhaps the most important practical lesson: archivists as a profession would be much more self-reflective and transparent about what they do. As concrete examples, I suggest that, for government and institutional records, archivists should consider placing "negative" entries in fonds and series descriptions, showing to researchers thereby all the series, in all media, from all locations, that the archives did *not* acquire from a particular records creator, alongside the ones it did acquire. For private-sector or thematic archives, the question expands to why some creators were chosen and others not; archivists should in such archives create lists of all the possible individuals, groups, and associations falling within the acquisition mandate of their institution, contrasted with the much smaller list of those fonds appraised as archival and actually acquired. For both institutional and personal records creators, the archivist should then explain the following in writing: why that choice was made; which appraisal criteria were used; which concepts of value or significance were choices based on; which methodologies were employed; and which of the archivist's personal values were reflected in decisions taken. If postmodernism draws attention to the marginalized, what could be more marginalized in an archive than the non-archive that archivists have either authorized for destruction or decided at the least not to acquire?

To make these decisions clear to researchers, archivists should link all series descriptions to the original (and now more thorough and inclusive) macro-appraisal reports, recognizing that some long-standing open-ended series may be acquired over several decades based on several different appraisal criteria implemented by several archivists. I believe that appraising archivists should themselves be formally documented and linked to these same appraisal reports and descriptive entries, with a full curriculum vitae placed on accessible files, complemented by autobiographical details of the values they used in appraisal

44 On the centrality of sustained research by archivists in their day-to-day work of appraisal and description, see Terry Cook, "The Imperative of Challenging Absolutes in Graduate Archival Education Programs: Issues for Educators and the Profession," *American Archivist* 63 (Fall/Winter 2000), especially pp. 384–86.

and that they reflected in description. All these new transparencies would be reflected in, or linked to, the formal descriptive tools that the postmodern archivist makes available to their various publics. The profession preaches the merits of accountability through good records to any who will listen; how accountable are archivists willing to be through keeping good records themselves about what *they* do and making these records readily available?

Alas, this kind of transparency of process has not been the archival norm. Researchers only see a predefined and monolithic universe – predefined especially by the archivist. What they see is what they get. They do not see what archivists saw *before* the appraisal decisions were made to give researchers what they get, and they do not understand the underlying assumptions of how archivists have described what they are now seeing in descriptive tools that present the results of that appraisal and subsequent arrangements. On those very few occasions when the lid is lifted slightly on the boiling archival cauldron, as with the Nazi war criminal appraisal and records destruction in Canada, the FBI case file appraisal in the United States, or the current reappraisal of its entire holdings by the National Archives of Australia, it is very clear that even the educated portion of the public and media have very little idea of what archivists do. What little they do learn from these cases, they certainly do not like.

The postmodern archivist seeks to change that. S(he) would accept, indeed, celebrate that “the archive, for deconstruction, is not a quiet retreat for professionals and scholars and craftpersons. It is a crucible of human experience. A battleground for meaning and significance. A babel of stories. A place and a space of complex and ever-shifting power plays. Here you cannot keep your hands clean. Here the very notions of profession and scholarship and craft must be reimagined.”<sup>45</sup> Here, then, is professional rebirth.

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Tom Nesmith suggested long ago that records collectively and individually have a history, before and after crossing the archival threshold.<sup>46</sup> A significant part of that history reflects intervention by the archivist and, behind that, professional assumptions, concepts, and processes – the profession’s own metanarrative. This history of the record is a never-ending, dynamic process, the archives always being reborn, reimagined, reinvented, even for records long in the archive. Bob Dylan once sang that “He not busy being born / Is busy dying,”<sup>47</sup> and so it is for archives, so for records, and so for the postmodern archivist.

45 Harris, “Seeing (in) Blindness: South Africa, Archives and Passion for Justice,” p. 11 (mss).

46 Tom Nesmith, “Archives from the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship,” in Tom Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, NJ and London, 1993), originally published in 1982, where Nesmith presciently defined such archival scholarship as focussing principally on the history of the record in all its rich context across its entire continuum of existence.

47 “It’s Alright, Ma (I’m Only Bleeding),” *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965), words and music by Bob Dylan, copyright by Bob Dylan and Columbia Records, cited under fair dealing provisions.