



Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance

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Abstract. This article is the continuation and conclusion of our introduction, as the guest editors, that appeared in the first of these two special issues of *Archival Science*, which together are devoted to the theme, “Archives, Records, and Power.” It argues that, in performing their work, archivists follow a script that has been naturalized by the routine repetition of past practice. They act in ways that they anticipate their various audiences would desire. If archival practice is to be influenced by the postmodern ideas of the authors of the essays in these two volumes, then archivists must see that the script, stage, and audiences have changed. Theory and practice are not opposites, not even polarities, but integrated aspects of the archivist's professional role and responsibility. Transparency of process about the archivist's performance will facilitate this integration, stimulate the building of archival knowledge, and enable present and future generations to hold the profession accountable for its choices in exercising power over the making of modern memory.

Keywords: accountability, archival practice, archival theory, postmodernism, performance

All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players.
Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (1599)

You know someone said that the world's a stage
And each must play a part.
Elvis Presley, “Are You Lonesome Tonight” (1960)

Are archivists “merely” players, implicitly passive and almost invisible, on a vast stage, swept along by the records of a complex world; or are they compelled by forces whereby they “must” play particular roles, where their expectations about themselves and assumptions about their audience command a particular performance? Our opening epigraphs suggest a subtle but important difference: passivity and drift, or compulsion and purpose.¹

¹ This pair of thematic issues of *Archival Science* (the current volume and its predecessor) is dedicated with affection to Hugh Taylor, the dean of Canadian archivists. The ideas that we as editors decided to explore in commissioning these essays owe much to his reflec-

Both centre on the idea of performance. How, then, should the archivist perform in our postmodern world?

In the longer introduction to the first of these two thematic issues devoted to “Archives, Records, and Power,” we argued that archives and records, in their creation and use by their makers and in their appraisal and management by archivists, will always reflect power relationships. Archives, we wrote, “are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed.” By extension, memory is not something found or collected in archives, but something that is made, and continually re-made.² Having set the stage, as it were, for “The Making of Modern Memory,” we now want to look at archivists more directly as performers in the drama of memory-making. How do archivists take the postmodern script, so well articulated by many of the authors in these two issues of *Archival Science*, and act it out in everyday working reality? How, ultimately, might archivists translate postmodern theory to archival practice?

Judith Butler, the acclaimed feminist scholar, has articulated a “theory of performativity,” which has been much discussed over the past decade. For Butler, performative behaviour has at least two major dimensions. She asserts that “the anticipation of an authoritative disclosure of meaning is the means by which the authority is attributed and installed: the anticipation conjures its object . . . an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates.” The anticipated (it may not be the real) audience shapes the performance. And secondly, such “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization . . . as a culturally sustained temporal duration.” What we take to be the “internal essence” of some phenomenon – in Butler’s case, gender; in ours, archiving – is actually “manufactured through a sustained set of acts.” She adds “that

tions upon documentary meaning, technological transformations, media characteristics, the evolution from ancient and medieval mnemonics (archivists as remembrancers in the oral tradition) through to archives without walls in a wired networked world, for purposes possibly good (his own bioregional, ecological, spiritual thrusts for the archival endeavour) or possibly ill (a worldwide corporate power base making the exploitation of humans in the industrial revolution look modest in comparison). In his challenges to archival traditions, practices, and conventions, penned from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, also lay the germs of our postmodernist sensibilities. The best of his essays, together with new reflections by Hugh and critiques by the books’ editors, will soon be available in Terry Cook and Gordon Dodds (eds.), *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor* (forthcoming, early 2003).

² Two recent essays especially address, in a broad, conceptual way, the always-opening narratives within archives, the never-ending history of the record before and after it arrives in an historical archive. See Tom Nesmith, “Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives”, *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 24–41; and Eric Ketelaar, “Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives”, *Archival Science* 1.2 (2001): 131–141. See also Carolyn Hamilton et al. (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town, 2002).

what we take to be an ‘internal’ feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce. . . .”³ From this emerges a kind of “social magic,” to use Butler’s term, where repeated performances become transformed and naturalized into codes of behaviour and belief. By these everyday rituals, any “given culture produces and sustains belief in its own ‘obviousness.’”⁴ What seems obvious then is the script once it has been so naturalized.

Here is the critical connection, then, between theory and practice: the practice of archives is the ritualized implementation of theory, the acting out of the script that archivists have set for themselves. Yet the script acted out daily by “line” archivists is rarely derived from a detailed understanding of archival theory, let alone abstract philosophizing, for it is strongly suspected that few practising archivists read such work. Rather, it is a script formed by the “social magic” of now-unquestioned, “naturalized” norms. These norms are themselves generalized from past performances (practices) that archivists have collectively anticipated, over generations, would confer on them appropriate legitimacy, authority, and approval. By acting in these ways, they hope that their audiences will be appreciative and applaud. Archivists thereby achieve, through such ritualization and repetition, a measure of psychic comfort and status, the assurance that they are valued. These are, in Eric Ketelaar’s evocative phrase, our “tacit narratives,” the stories we tell ourselves almost without realizing that a story has been constructed, the scripts we perform without even acknowledging that a performance is taking place.⁵ These are roles we “must” play, as Elvis Presley put it, for not to do so would undermine our professional identity, our sense of security, our comfort with our internalized scripts. Our scripts have thus become naturalized.

While many changes have occurred in archival concepts since our now standard scripts were written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, based on practices that had evolved to that point, some of the fundamental assumptions of that period remain largely unchallenged within the profession. These old scripts are thus still influential in the daily performance of archival work and therefore in the broader shaping of societal memory.⁶ For example, from the user’s “outside” perspective, that is, from

³ Judith Butler, “Preface (1999)”, in her *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London, 1990; 2nd edn., 1999), pp. xiv–xv. We thank Sharon Anne Cook, University of Ottawa, for bring Butler’s performance theories to our attention.

⁴ Judith Butler, “Performativity’s Social Magic”, in Theodore R. Schatzki and Wolfgang Natter (eds.), *The Social and Political Body* (New York and London), pp. 29–48, quoted at 30.

⁵ See Ketelaar, “Tacit Narratives: The Meaning of Archives”, already cited.

⁶ This might usefully be thought of as the “poetics” rather than the “politics” of archives, and indeed has been. See Joan M. 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): 40–74.

the view of the “audience” for which the archivist performs, archives (as records and as processes) still remain almost “invisible,” an unquestioned and transparent conduit through which researchers approach or receive the past. Documents are viewed as records of “simple truth,”⁷ precise instruments or empty templates, as in the old concepts of diplomatics, which, like acid-free enclosures, are expected to contain and preserve, but not interact with the facts embedded in them by their creators.⁸ While scholarly attention is finally being focused, in very recent years, on the processes of records creation and inscription, and on intentionality and representation, very little notice is still paid by non-archivists to how the record is chosen and shaped, privileged or marginalized, by archivists’ interventions. That process, in Tom Nesmith’s word, remains “fuzzy,” with the archival performance, when it is acknowledged at all, still being viewed opaquely. The archivist/actor remains a shrouded, unnoticed, indiscernible performer, an invisible ghost in Nesmith’s metaphor.⁹

From the archivist’s “inside” perspective, archival records are still seen, ideally, to reflect an “original order” in order to reflect better some reality or “Truth” about the records’ creator. Despite engaging in setting record-keeping standards, appraisal, description, exhibitions, web-site construction, and many other activities that determine the very existence, nature, and perception of archival records, archivists still venerate the myth of being objective or neutral parties linking the mind and activities of the creator,

⁷ The historical notions of this view are explored through the medium of photography, in Joan M. Schwartz “‘Records of Simple Truth and Precision’: Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control”, *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 1–40.

⁸ Luciana Duranti’s *Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science* (Lanham MD and London, 1998), originally a series of six articles in *Archivaria* 28 to 33 (1989–1991), has had an influential, but not uncontroversial, impact on archives. For a flavouring of explicit criticism of this positivist, diplomatics-centred approach, see, in addition to the postmodern analysis generally cited throughout these two issues of *Archival Science*, Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice”, *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 78–100; Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomatics”; Nancy Bartlett, “Diplomatics for Photographic Images: Academic Exoticism?” *American Archivist* 59 (Fall 1996): 486–494; Preben Mortensen, “The Place of Theory in Archival Practice”, *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 1–26; Susan Storch, “Diplomatics: Modern Archival Method or Medieval Artifact”, *American Archivist* 61 (Fall 1998): 365–383; and Terry Cook “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts”, *Archival Science* 1.1 (2001): 3–24.

⁹ Tom Nesmith, “Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the ‘Ghosts’ of Archival Theory”, *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 136–150. On the ghost metaphor in Jacques 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).

through records, to the researchers who interpret the content of records in many disciplines.¹⁰ In this traditional Jenkinsonian script, many archivists still find their professional roots and identity, and upon this script they still base many of their professional performances. They do so, we argued in our first introduction, because our primary audience during the formative years of the profession expected an objective, neutral archive as the basis for the objective, scientific, fact-based history then being written. By anticipating such a result, or object in Butler's term, authority and legitimacy are conveyed to the archival processes that, and the archival performers who, allegedly, produced it. Because these routine practices have thus been valorized and interiorized through "social magic" as badges of professional identity, the resulting archival performance "sustains belief in its own 'obviousness,'" as Butler notes, as something natural, normal, and unquestioned. Archival theory then generalizes and codifies these performances into "universal" concepts/scripts for continuing practice/performance.

Whereas a dwindling number of archivists still defend a "pure" Jenkinsonianism where the archivist would remain a passive guardian of evidence, a neutral custodian never doing appraisal, and a selfless devotee of Truth, Jenkinson's spirit yet remains powerful, and not just in the renewed and understandable concern over "evidence" in our age of transient digital records. For example, many archivists advocating appraisal do so almost apologetically – as a kind of necessity forced on the profession by the proliferation of paper records far too extensive to be kept in their entirety or to allow a "natural" residue of them to form over time. It is only recently that the archivist's interpretive and narrative role in appraisal has been celebrated.

And even if the profession is now less passive, and more "up front" in the life cycle or continuum of record-keeping activities, or in designing new approaches to description, we believe that it does so largely in technical rather than substantial ways. The focus of most archival research over the past decade has been on creating and implementing standards, record-keeping requirements, process templates, and system architectures. It has not been on the substance or even nature of the archival contextual knowledge needed to put inside these empty shells to make them mean anything. By this focus almost exclusively on the technology and mechanics of archival processes, is not there reflected a desire to be the white-coated "scientific" clinician, unsoiled by the messy interpretation that is always endemic to performance? Yet in performance, once these standards and templates and databases are created, the research-based knowledge of the archivist needed to fill these

¹⁰ For the origins of these traditional archival scripts or theories within their historical contexts, see Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift", *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 17–63.

empty boxes will always by definition be subjective, interpretive, narrative. Of course, these allegedly value-free tools – standards, templates, and so on – also impose their own rational, systematic way of seeing on a world of record keeping and records creators that is, in reality, inherently chaotic. Our technical focus might well impress even old Jenkinson; it may not impress our modern audiences. Neither technology nor science is ever neutral, as numerous commentators have pointed out.¹¹ Postmodern archival thinking requires the profession to accept that it cannot escape the subjectivity of performance by claiming the objectivity of systems and standards.

Yet routinized performance/practice, and the beliefs/theories that sustain it, need not, and in fact do not, remain forever unchallenged. While hegemonic and often intolerant, identity-sustaining performance beliefs can be shaken when social contexts become more fluid. When the stage, background props, and lighting are transformed with new technologies, when the social contexts and expectations of the audiences shift with a new era, there is room, as Butler argues, for “transgressive performances” to contest previously unquestioned social and intellectual conventions.¹² This does not

¹¹ One could cite a mountain of books on the impact of technology, technical thinking, and the technological imperative, their focus on information rather than knowledge, and their antipathy to humanist, historical, and substantial thinking. The archivist who advocates most eloquently the importance of the spirit over the letter, the meaning over the technique, is Hugh A. Taylor. See, among others (note 1 above), his “Chip Monks at the Gate: The Impact of Technology on Archives, Libraries and the User”, *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–1992): 173–180; and “The Archivist, the Letter, and the Spirit”, *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 1–16. Two very accessible cultural critics on this subject, who argue that technology is anything but neutral, are Ursula Franklin, *The Real World of Technology* (Toronto, 1990); and Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York, 1993). On how the technical tools we adopt as archivists then redefine us, see Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats”. On the nature of research required for the *substance* and *knowledge* an archivist needs to perform archival work, as opposed to the standards and methodologies through which that substance is displayed, 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): 380–391. For another statement of the need to refocus on the substance and cultural goal of archival work rather than its technique and means, see Mark A. Greene, “The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age”, *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 42–55.

¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. xvii, xxvi, 173–80. In her case, “obvious” assumptions about gender, about such dichotomies as male and female, even about mainstream feminist critiques of patriarchy *versus* matriarchy, have been challenged by drag or cross-dressing performances, by more aggressive homosexuality (“Queer Nation”) within previous heterosexual conventionalities, and by yet more transgressive behaviours in transsexuality, surgical intersexuality, and so on. This does *not* mean that those holding the old assumptions suddenly become gay or transsexual; it does mean that their old “obvious” notions about gender no longer stand up, because the previously silenced and ignored “Other” has, through transgressive performance,

mean that any of these “transgressions” will necessarily become mainstream performances tomorrow, or that every actor comfortable with the old scripts will suddenly turn to transgressive or experimental theatre. It does mean that new intellectual (theoretical) spaces are opened by these transgressive performances. Thereby the authority and legitimacy of past performances are contested, and their obviousness made less obvious, their tacit assumptions more explicit, their comfort level much more uncertain. Then the impossible becomes possible, and old scripts get modified, enlarged, made more inclusive. And the power, consolidated by previously unquestioned performance, loses much of its authority.

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We think that the essays in these two issues of *Archival Science*, along with similar writing cited in the notes of many of the authors, are examples of Butler’s “transgressive performance.” They are contesting the “tacit narratives” that, for too long, have animated archival work, despite new technologies for record making and record keeping; new audiences expecting more nuanced performances by archivists; and new societal ideas about evidence and accountability, representation and reality, history and memory. The broader conditions of postmodernity in which we live, even if one does not accept postmodernism as an animating philosophy, force archivists to play new roles.¹³ The old modern and even pre-modern scripts will no longer do. There is disjuncture between theory and practice. We are players in search of a play.¹⁴

In the first of these two special issues of *Archival Science*, for example, Barbara Craig demonstrates through a case study of the British Treasury, demonstrated forcefully the inadequacy of the old script to account at least for some aspects of gender.

¹³ For a short analysis of the historical conditions of postmodernity, with related cross-references, see Terry Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives”, *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 14–35, especially 22–27.

¹⁴ It is appropriate that these two special issues of *Archival Science* are dedicated to Hume Taylor, for it is Hume, closely followed by David Bearman, who has consistently advocated transgressive behaviour against archival norms. His vision of “total archives,” his broadening of the terms of archival imagination far beyond the usual custodial cloisters and usual media of recording, generated a significant “rediscovery of provenance” and a revitalization of archival studies at many levels. His transgressive performance also created the framework spawning Canada’s leadership internationally in postmodern thinking about archives, by archivists. After viewing Hume’s transgressive performance carefully, no archival audience will ever think of the old scripts in the same way as they did before. For an analysis of David Bearman’s similarly transgressive performance, and its encroachment on the old scripts, see Terry Cook, “The Impact of David Bearman on Modern Archival Thinking: An Essay of Personal Reflection and Critique”, *Archives and Museum Informatics* 11.1 (1997): 15–37.

the core of the government's own internal management, that, despite many models for improved, centralized registries to manage records more efficiently (scientifically), these systems in reality were imperfectly implemented and later gave way by 1950 to localized applications. She concludes that record keeping is as much about social practices and communication dynamics as about "rule-guided systems for information artefacts." Drawing on sociology, Ciaran Trace similarly rejects the positivist assumptions in archival theory and practice which assert that archival documents are "authentic as to procedure and impartial as to creation because they are created as a means for, and as a by-product of, action, and not for the sake of posterity." She illustrates instead that records are very much socially constructed entities created for reasons far from impartial and by procedures often inauthentic and very cognizant of posterity. Jim O'Toole likewise sees records as manifestations of political and social power, often made and used for instrumental purposes to give their creators "the upper hand in certain relationships" and "to enhance subtler forms of symbolic, emotional, and psychological power." Verne Harris for the apartheid regime in South Africa and Ann Stoler for the colonial masters of the Dutch East Indies uncover how those authorities shaped, named, used, and destroyed records to consolidate their power, create their own ruling categories, marginalize the "Other," or escape accountability for their actions. Margaret Hedstrom more broadly explores the theme of the first issue through using the concept of interfaces, which in "modern institutions and technological systems are neither natural nor neutral," but rather are where power is negotiated and exercised.

The essays in the first of these two thematic issues on "Archives, Records, and Power" focused primarily, therefore, on the creation of records by their originators, and their subsequent use (or misuse) by those creators. This is the active phase of the North American records management "life cycle," the French *pré-archivage*, or the three inner dimensions of the Australian record-keeping continuum. Where archivists are involved at all in this work, it is to encourage the record-keeping professionals, who are accountable for managing current records, to do their jobs in such a way that trustworthy records will be available later on for possible archival retention. What is apparent from the essays in the first issue is that the records emerging from the creation process are anything but natural, organic, innocent residues of disinterested administrative transactions. Rather they are value-laden instruments of power. They emerge from organizational cultures and personal psychologies of great complexity, multiple relationships, and many identities. To anticipate that it could be otherwise is for archivists to "conjure" up, in Judith Butler's phrasing, the wrong objects to authenticate, authorize, legitimize. The resulting archival performance will inevitably be filled with

miscues. Archival credibility will suffer. The audience will not be impressed. Irrelevance will loom.

As Hugh Taylor warns in his parting article to his beloved profession, archivists have a tendency to perpetuate “the status quo in the name of neutrality.” That is the profession’s central illusion. It amounts to little more than continuing “to arrange and describe the ship’s logs on the *Titanic* while others rearrange the deck chairs.” Taylor challenges archivists “to avoid an archival fundamentalism which refuses to recognize that new forms of communication, both technically and semiotically, change the meaning of the content.”¹⁵ Our audiences are challenging our performances. Transgressive performances, if we rise to the occasion, will alter the “meaning” of the old scripts. New scripts will then be written to better reflect/guide the new performances.

The transgressive thrust of the essays in the first issue very much continues in this second part of “Archives, Records, and Power.” Most of the second set of authors deal less with the records-creation phase up front and archivists’ perceptions of it, and more with the archival performance itself, with acting out the script of archival theory on the stage of archival practice. The first two essays offer a comparative analysis of the archival performance against other scripts, other audiences, other values, and find the traditional archival staging inadequate. Evelyn Wareham shows how the mainstream, white, European-North American, logocentric, text-based archival performance jars harshly against the still oral, or mixed oral-written, cultures of the peoples of the Pacific Islands. Whatever comfort our “obvious” performance may provide at home, when it is transported to other cultures in its imperial and evangelical mode, the script does not resonate with local audiences, however well it may be performed. Beth Kaplan compares the script (and daily performance) of archives with that of anthropology throughout the twentieth century. Some time ago, anthropology addressed the inherent conflict of the detached *versus* participant observer in ethnographic practice, and the need to document, self-consciously and explicitly, each such participation/performance. Archivists, in her view, still believe they can remain detached. They still believe practice need not be weighed down by theory. While transgressive postmodern challenges can be discomfiting, she hopes they will not lead to professional paralysis or devaluation of past accomplishments. Yet the major error would be if such discomfort leads to denial, or a further retreat into anti-intellectualism. Then practice/performance would continue to suffer.

The next two essays, by Eric Ketelaar and Lilly Koltun, are also a matched pair, addressing this time the actual sites of archival performance: archives buildings, their architectures, and the meanings attached to the physical stages

¹⁵ Taylor, “The Archivist, the Letter, and the Spirit”, 11, 5.

where we perform. Whether viewed as temples that sanctify archives, prisons that exercise control over researchers, or gendered representations of power, archival buildings, often seen as neutral embodiments of the profession's scientific and professional ideals, are actually heavily laden with expressed desires and values.

The final three essays in this issue deal with archival work *per se*. Wendy Duff and Verne Harris deconstruct archival description and descriptive standards as constraining filters of orthodoxy, as ways to reinforce mainstream values and marginalize further weaker voices in records and record-keeping contexts. They advocate turning the focus of description from analysing recorded products to telling stories about the contexts and processes surrounding records. Description is not the mere marshalling of facts or a sterile conduit for pre-established metadata, but rather a value-driven selection of facts by which we construct our own narratives, perpetuate our own scripts, perform our own plays. Richard Cox tackles appraisal by looking directly at archivists' traditional performance, rather than appraisal theory, for this critical function that defines the archival from the non-archival. Cox recommends "the end of collecting" in the way that function has traditionally been performed, often with ad hoc methods and psychological motivations; he believes that appraisal, well done and well documented, self-conscious and culturally contingent, affords archivists the chance to engage in socially relevant theatre once again, whereas "collecting" consigns our scripts to antiquarian backwaters, even if revealing much about the collectors' mentalities. And Brien Brothman challenges head on the central mantra of the old archival performance: the sanctity of "evidence," and the obligatory role of the archivist to preserve evidence. This role has been defined, he asserts, as "the governing purpose of contemporary archival theory and methods." His critique contends that, while "one can put records into evidence; one cannot set out to put evidence into records." Evidence itself, the heart of the unquestioned core of the traditional archival script, is now questioned, exposed as itself socially contingent, an imposition of power by the archivist.

All the authors in "Archives, Records, and Power" – both issues – offer, in different ways and from different perspectives, fine transgressive performances. They open spaces for fresh air and new formulations. They offer an escape from the sterility or irrelevance embedded in the current performance of old scripts. Whether they address the design and operation of record-keeping systems by their creators, the nature of evidence used in authenticating records, the appraisal and then selection of a tiny fragment of all possible records to become archives, the ever-changing stories involved in describing records, the patterns of their on-going communication and use, the physical stages upon which our archival performances take place, and the

comparative stages of other performances in other disciplines, other cultures, other continents – all the authors conclude that archivists continually reshape, reinterpret, and reinvent the archive. Such archival performances represent power over memory and identity, over the fundamental ways in which society seeks documentary clues about where it has come from, and where it may be going. The performance of archivists, the power of archives, should no longer remain naturalized, interiorized, “obvious,” or denied, but opened up to vital debate and transparent accountability. As we asserted in our first introduction, “when power is denied, overlooked, or unchallenged, it is misleading at best and dangerous at worst. Power recognized becomes power that can be questioned, made accountable, and opened to transparent dialogue and enriched understanding.” The essays in this second volume only reinforce that conviction.

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There is a basic dichotomy of archives being, on the one hand, heritage places with documentary records that embody historical memory and humanist culture, and archives being, on the other hand, bureaucratic by-products that encompass administrative evidence and public accountabilities. The former represents aspects of the evolution of archives in the past century, and the transformation of most archivists in training and outlook from being jurists to historians; the latter reflects the powerful legacy of the statist and juridical experience of the archival pioneers. Yet neither tradition sees archives as sites of contested meaning and of societal interpretation, although the dichotomy itself is proof of the contested nature of control of the past. Shapers of archives (records creators, subsequent managers, and generations of archivists) add layers of meaning, yet these layers have become naturalized and internalized, and thus remain unquestioned. Following Butler’s approach, it is hard for the profession, amid such divisions and denials, to invoke a new script, conjure up new meaning, let alone give a satisfactory performance. This brings us back to theory and practice.

These twins – theory and practice – should not be viewed as archival polarities. Without a script, there is no play. Without the performance, the script never comes to life. Greg Dening observes that “‘theory’ and ‘theatre’ come to us out of the same Greek origin – *thea*, sight, viewing; *theoros*, spectator. Theory – a mind-set for viewing; theatre – a space-set for spectating . . .”¹⁶ Theory, then, is the complement to practice, not its opposite. Theory and practice should cross-fertilize each other in the theatre of archives, rather than one being derivative of, or dependent on, the other.

¹⁶ Greg Dening, *Performances* (Chicago, 1996), p. 104.

Nevertheless, there is a healthy scepticism in the archival profession about too much theory, especially when theory, on the one hand, sometimes takes the guise of a formulaic imposition of arcane concepts betraying little cognizance of workplace realities or differences across time and space, and, on the other hand, sometimes deteriorates into a jargon-laden, self-indulgent quagmire of subjectivity and obfuscation. When the actors are performing in real time, under hot lights, on the public stage, then impressing their many audiences is what counts, not endless speculation on why they are doing the work.

But if *only* proceeding pragmatically – to satisfy today’s users or sponsors, but without a defensible core of theoretical consistency – then the archivists/actors (and their employing institutions) are left exposed, in this era of “culture wars,” to severe criticism, even ridicule, and prone to acquiring and preserving for posterity a poorer and less reliable record, one that posterity will understand less well and use less imaginatively. When the practical work needs to be re-conceptualized, as inevitably is the case from time to time, when new factors arise that cause accepted strategies and methodologies to break down, then theory can provide the basic principles for restructuring or re-engineering archival practice; it can focus the justifications necessary to explain why we do what we do to our various audiences; and it can animate a vision necessary to unite the players around a new script and the requirements for a new performance.¹⁷ In vision and focus, there are elements of “seeing” – in Greg Denning’s theatrical sense – a self-consciousness to performance that, as with interacting with any good theatre critic, ultimately makes for better acting and better actors.

How, then, given this framework, does the profession move from post-modern theory to archival practice? Postmodernism requires a new openness, a new visibility, a willingness to question and be questioned, a commitment to self-reflection and accountability. Postmodernism requires archivists to accept their own historicity, to recognize their own role in the process of creating archives, and to reveal their own biases. Postmodernism sees value in stories more than structures, the margins as much as the centres, the diverse and ambiguous as much as the certain and universal. Above all, it asserts that no actor or observer, historian or archivist, is ever neutral or disinterested in any documentary process, nor is any “text” they consult (including archival documents) or preserve (i.e., appraise, acquire, describe, make available) a transparent window to some past reality. All human actions occur (even if subconsciously or unconsciously) within a context of contemporary societal metanarratives where everything is filtered, mediated, or influenced

¹⁷ The arguments in this paragraph reflect a longer analysis in Cook, “‘The Imperative of Challenging Absolutes’ in Graduate Archival Education Programs”.

by considerations of language, personal (or organizational) psychology, and power.

If these generalizations are accepted – and the essays in these two issues of *Archival Science* offer many powerful reasons why they should be – then the principal impact of postmodern theory on archival practice would be to acknowledge the central role of the archivist as mediator and interpreter, as an important shaper of the documentary record of the past that will be passed to the future. The archivist is an actor, not a guardian; a performer, not a custodian. The archival performance should not only be consciously acknowledged, but enthusiastically celebrated. By respecting the diversity, ambiguity, and multiple identities that underpin postmodernism, archivists should self-consciously construct archival memory based on observing differences as much as monoliths, multiple as much as mainstream narratives, the personal and local as much as the corporate and official perspectives. And they should, above all, realize that there is no one answer, no right answer, and therefore accept the responsibility to be self-consciously accountable for documenting their practice with open transparency. For all aspects of the archival performance, from appraisal choices to web-site emphases, from descriptive narratives to record-keeping standards, the archivist should explain in writing why choices were made as they were, using what criteria, based on what concepts of value or significance, employing what methodologies, and reflecting what personal values of the archivist. Postmodern archival theory asks that we acknowledge, in the words of Verne Harris, that “the archive . . . is not a quiet retreat for professionals and scholars and craftspeople. 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.”¹⁸

Thinkers about archives need of course keep their feet on the floor-boards of the archival stage. They need to show that the “postmodernisms” they advocate are not some ivory-tower debate by self-indulgent academics, but a vital, living concern for all archivists in the performance of their daily work. The postmodern script is not something written never to be performed, but rather to be performed continually. While no two performances can (or should) ever be the same, as no two Hamlets are ever the same (even by the same actor), the script for “thinking archives” needs to become a shared dynamic resonating in the daily work of “doing archives.” As Shakespeare said, “The play’s the thing,” the actual acting out of the script. Our immediate

¹⁸ Verne Harris, “Seeing (in) Blindness: South Africa, Archives and Passion for Justice”, draft essay for presentation to New Zealand archivists (August 2001), p. 11 (manuscript pagination).

task, then, is to ask: what script are we following? Our medium term goal must be to translate the postmodern script, advocated in these two issues of *Archival Science*, into archival performance. And our constant duty – to the past and to the future, to the records creators and the records users, and to the records themselves – must be an ongoing critique and transparent accountability of our theory/scripts and thus an honest assessment of our practices/performances.

Archivists continue to perform scripts written in other times and in other places – scripts published by Dom Jean Mabillon in *De Re Diplomatica* in France in 1681; by Muller, Feith, and Fruin in *Handleiding voor het Ordenen en Beschrijven van Archieven* in the Netherlands in 1898; by Hilary Jenkinson in *A Manual of Archive Administration* in England in 1922; by Eugenio Casanova in *Archivistica* in Italy in 1928; by Theodore Schellenberg in the United States first in his *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* in 1956 and then in *The Management of Archives* in 1965. These and other “classic” scripts have shaped archival practice, but the evolution of communication technology and its impact on records and record-keeping, changing concepts of the nature and uses of memory, and shifting notions of authority, evidence, and truth severely undermine the ongoing relevance of these manuals. The very proliferation of manuals over the last century itself demonstrates that archival scripts are neither monolithic nor totalizing; rather, they are part of the “poetics of archives” by which “the nature and function of archives are shaped or reconstituted through social conventions and discursive practices.” Put simply, “what archives keep and what archives do is socially constructed, grounded in time and space.”¹⁹ Archives, to borrow a phrase from Greg Dening, are “spaces privileged for performance” and what postmodern theory now demands is “performance consciousness”²⁰ – a greater sense that in our daily practices, we *are* performing from a script – and a critical re-evaluation of the scripts we are performing.

When we speak of “archival practice,” we are really talking about a set of actions which we perform. In our day-to-day activities of archival practice, we are not simply “practising” in the sense of “rehearsing” or “preparing” for the real thing; rather, archival practice *is* a form of performance; it is the actual doing, an established method, itself the real thing. Greg Dening further elaborates on the audience-performer interaction:

There is something out of our control in a performance. We have to catch an audience’s attention. An audience does not owe us anything, except perhaps a general politeness. True, we sometimes have captive audiences

¹⁹ Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats”, pp. 61, 63–64.

²⁰ Dening, *Performances*, pp. 116, xiv.

who will endure much to be supportive. But performers quickly have to be good readers of an audience's reactions. It is difficult to fool oneself as a performer. We recognise restlessness, boredom, silent disapproval in an audience too easily. We know what we do not achieve in performances. Performance also inevitably involves the whole person, all the senses, all the emotions, memory, a sense of presence, co-ordination of the mind and body. We give our special signatures to performances.²¹

Once we acknowledge "archival practice" as a form of "performance" of archives, we will be better able to become "performance conscious," and then recognize our "special signatures."

And so a final time back to Judith Butler. If "anticipation conjures its object [and] . . . ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates," then an archival profession well versed in the ideas (and obligations) of postmodern discourse will anticipate and then produce a new archival practice so necessary for the conditions of postmodernity in which the world now finds itself. By performing openly and accountably, we will begin to internalize accountability until it becomes the script by which we act. And so, as well, for performances respecting diversity, telling stories, broadening perspectives, refocusing on the research substance of our work. This does not mean that archives are no longer about power. Rather power is shared, power is refocused, power is held accountable. And that will be an archival performance worth seeing.²²

²¹ Ibid., p. 20.

²² Readers please note: As guest co-editors, we have standardized spelling and grammar in all the essays to conform to Canadian-English style; however, authors' varying footnoting styles have been respected in large part, and only made consistent within each article, not across all the articles.

