



## Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory

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**Abstract.** This article serves as the general introduction by the guest editors to the first of two thematic issues of *Archival Science* that will explore the theme, “archives, records, and power.” Archives as institutions and records as documents are generally seen by academic and other users, and by society generally, as passive resources to be exploited for various historical and cultural purposes. Historians since the mid-nineteenth century, in pursuing the new scientific history, needed an archive that was a neutral repositories of facts. Until very recently, archivists obliged by extolling their own professional myth of impartiality, neutrality, and objectivity. Yet archives are established by the powerful to protect or enhance their position in society. Through archives, the past is controlled. Certain stories are privileged and others marginalized. And archivists are an integral part of this story-telling. In the design of record-keeping systems, in the appraisal and selection of a tiny fragment of all possible records to enter the archive, in approaches to subsequent and ever-changing description and preservation of the archive, and in its patterns of communication and use, archivists continually reshape, reinterpret, and reinvent the archive. This represents enormous power over memory and identity, over the fundamental ways in which society seeks evidence of what its core values are and have been, where it has come from, and where it is going. Archives, then, are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed. The power of archives, records, and archivists should no longer remain naturalized or denied, but opened to vital debate and transparent accountability.

**Keywords:** archival theory, archives and power relationships, identity formation, representation and reality, social memory

Archives, records, power: three words which now resonate across a range of academic disciplines and professional pursuits. Individually, these terms are often flashpoints for lively debates on social values, cultural identities, and institutional accountability. Yet, collectively, “archives, records, and power” makes an unlikely troika: what have old, dusty archives, stored away in secure vaults, got to do with power?

Archivists have long been viewed from outside the profession as “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” as those who received records from their creators and passed them on to researchers. Inside the profession, archivists have perceived themselves as neutral, objective, impartial. From both perspectives, archivists and their materials seem to be the very antithesis

of power. Certainly recent writing on cultural institutions has seldom touched upon the powerful impact of archives and records on collective memory and human identity, unlike the role now accorded to human and natural history museums, art galleries, libraries, historical monuments, even zoos. While some writers have begun exploring aspects of “the archive” in a metaphorical or philosophical sense, this is almost always done without even a rudimentary understanding of archives as real institutions, as a real profession (the second oldest!), and as a real discipline with its own set of theories, methodologies, and practices. The world-wide archival professional literature is rarely cited by non-archivists now writing on “the archive.”

Nevertheless, various postmodern reflections in the past two decades have made it manifestly clear that archives – as institutions – wield power over the administrative, legal, and fiscal accountability of governments, corporations, and individuals, and engage in powerful public policy debates around the right to know, freedom of information, protection of privacy, copyright and intellectual property, and protocols for electronic commerce. Archives – as records – wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies. And ultimately, in the pursuit of their professional responsibilities, archivists – as keepers of archives – wield power over those very records central to memory and identity formation through active management of records before they come to archives, their appraisal and selection as archives, and afterwards their constantly evolving description, preservation, and use.

Taken together, the on-going denial by archivists of their power over memory, the failure to explore the many factors that profoundly affect records before they come to the archives, and the continued assumptions by many users of archives that the records presented to them are not problematic, represent a prescription for sterility on both sides of the reference room desk. 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.

This power of the archive – its underlying nature, theoretical assumptions, practical applications, historical evolution, and consequences for users – is the focus of the essays in this first of two special thematic issues of *Archival Science* on “Archives, Records, and Power.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This pair of thematic issues of *Archival Science* (the current volume and its successor) is dedicated with affection to Hugh Taylor, the dean of Canadian archivists. The ideas it explores owe much to his reflections upon media, documentary meaning, technological trans-

### Constructing and deconstructing archives

Archives are social constructs. Their origins lie in the information needs and social values of the rulers, governments, businesses, associations, and individuals who establish and maintain them. Despite changes in the nature of records, the uses for those records, and the need to preserve them, archives, ever since the mnemons of ancient Greece, have been about power – about maintaining power, about the power of the present to control what is, and will be, known about the past, about the power of remembering over forgetting. But, as Maurice Halbwachs reminds us, “no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections.” Archives are a critical element of such social-intellectual frameworks. Remembering (or re-creating) the past through historical research in archival records is not simply “the retrieval of stored information, but the putting together of a claim about past states of affairs by means of a framework of shared cultural understanding.”<sup>2</sup> Archives themselves are part of that claim and therefore shape that understanding.

Whether over ideas or feelings, actions or transactions, the choice of what to record and the decision over what to preserve, and thereby privilege, occur within socially constructed, but now naturalized frameworks that determine the significance of what becomes archives. Within them, the principles and strategies that archivists have adopted over time, and the activities they undertake – especially choosing or appraising what becomes archives and what is destroyed – fundamentally influence the composition and character of archival holdings and, thus, of societal memory. These underlying cultural frameworks are central to understanding the nature of archives as institutions and as places of social memory. Such frameworks also affect archives at the individual level of the creation and on-going survival of a single document: the letter, the photograph, the diary, the home video. Like archives collectively, the individual document is not just a bearer of historical content, but also a reflection of the needs and desires of its creator, the purpose(s) for its creation, the audience(s) viewing the record, the broader legal, technical, organizational, social, and cultural-intellectual contexts in which the creator

formations, the evolution from ancient and medieval orality and mnemonics (archivists as remembrancers) through to archives without walls in a wired networked world, for purposes possibly good (his own bioregional, ecological, spiritual thrusts for the archival memory endeavour) or possibly ill (a mega-worldwide electronic corporate powerbase that could make the controlling 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 mid 1990s, lay the germs of the editors’ postmodernist sensibilities.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser (ed. and trans.), (Chicago, 1941, 1992), ch. 2, “Language and Memory”, p. 43.

and audience operated and in which the document is made meaningful, and the initial intervention and on-going mediation of archivists. The nature of the resulting “archive” thus has serious consequences for administrative accountability, citizen rights, collective memory, and historical knowledge, all of which are shaped – tacitly, subtly, sometimes unconsciously, yet profoundly – by the naturalized, largely invisible, and rarely questioned power of archives.

In recent years, the word “archive” has experienced a resurgence well beyond its popular connotation of dusty basements and old parchments – in cultural studies, the world-wide web, and elsewhere. Cultural theorists, most notably Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, see “the archive” as a central metaphorical construct upon which to fashion their perspectives on human knowledge, memory, and power, and a quest for justice. Drawing upon Foucault and suggesting that information, like power, “does not exist in a vacuum,” Thomas Richards, in *The Imperial Archive*, discusses “the archive” as “a utopian space of comprehensive knowledge . . . not a building, nor even a collection of texts, but the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable,” and seeks to demonstrate how “the imperial archive was a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire.”<sup>3</sup> Focusing on the “microphysics of power” embedded in photographic records produced by medical, educational, sanitary, and engineering departments, John Tagg declares, “Like the state, the camera is never neutral. The representations it produces are highly coded, and the power it wields is never its own.”<sup>4</sup> Control of the archive – variously defined – means control of society and thus control of determining history’s winners and losers. Verne Harris, inspired by Derrida, has shown starkly how this operated under the apartheid regime in South Africa and its captive national archives, and how this naturalized power may be different under post-apartheid conditions.<sup>5</sup>

As anyone who visits web sites knows, in the world of information technology, “archive” is used as a noun to describe a machine-readable location

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London and New York, 1993), pp. 73, 11, 6.

<sup>4</sup> John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst MA, 1988), pp. 63–64. Similarly Rosalind Krauss, Allan Sekula, and others have used “the archive” as a “discursive space” in which photographic records, whether of landscape or the body, are made meaningful. See Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive”, and Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces”, both in Richard Bolton (ed.), *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge MA, 1992), pp. 286–301, 343–388.

<sup>5</sup> See Verne Harris, “Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990–1996”, *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996); and his complementary “Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa”, *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997); as well as his essay in this volume.

for older data (“older” meaning anything from several months to an hour ago); “archive” is also used as a transitive verb for the action of transferring computer data to a place for infrequently used files, for example, to archive data from the hard-drive in the actual computer to back-up tapes or CD-ROM. While cultural theorists and information technologists both embrace the notion of an archive as a store of information, the former conceives of the archive as a source of knowledge and power essential for social and personal identity, the latter views the archive as a neutral, even mechanical, accumulation of information for safe keeping.

The essays in these two issues confront the changing, contested, yet largely unquestioned assumptions underlying the nature and meaning of archives in society. The authors seek with us to demonstrate that the theories, principles, nature, and historical evolution of “archives” as institutions and of “records” as documents – collectively “the archive” – are neither universal across space nor stable across time. The growing literature on social or collective memory suggests the need to look anew at the archive in the light of changes in the production and preservation of documents, in the abundance of documents, in the changing media of record, and in the nature of what is documented or who is doing the documenting, as well as the need to examine the impact of these changes, in turn, on records management and its practices and on archives and its practices.

As scholars – historians, anthropologists, cultural theorists, historical geographers, sociologists, and others – increasingly discover and focus upon context, it is essential to reconsider the relationship between archives and the societies that create and use them. At the heart of that relationship is power. Yet power – power to make records of certain events and ideas and not of others, power to name, label, and order records to meet business, government, or personal needs, power to preserve the record, power to mediate the record, power over access, power over individual rights and freedoms, over collective memory and national identity – is a concept largely absent from the traditional archival perspective. Ironically, at the very time that academic scrutiny across a range of disciplines is trained on the power of the archive in a metaphorical sense, archival practice perpetuates the central professional myth of the past century that the archivist is (or should strive to be) an objective, neutral, passive (if not impotent, then self-restrained) keeper of truth. Indeed, evidence suggests that many users of archives accept this professional self-image without question.

The refusal of the archival profession to acknowledge the power relations embedded in the archival enterprise carries a concomitant abdication of responsibility for the consequences of the exercise of that power, and, in turn,

serious consequences for understanding and carrying out the role of archives in an ever-changing present, or for using archives with subtlety and reflection in a more distant future. In this regard, the blind are leading the blind, in both directions: scholars using archives without realizing the heavy layers of intervention and meaning coded into the records by their creators and by archivists long before any box is opened in the research room, and archivists treating their archives without much sensitivity to the large footprints they are themselves leaving on the archival record. Both scholars and archivists have thus had a vested interest in perceiving (and promoting) the archive as a value-free site of document collection and historical inquiry, rather than a site for the contestation of power, memory, and identity.

### **Extrapolating to archives**

In light of recent critical writing on “the archive” from outside the profession, archivists must give serious consideration to the rich and growing literature which explores the nature of history and evidence; of collective memory and identity formation; the relationship between representation and reality; the organizational cultures and personal needs that influence the creation and maintenance of records; the psychological need to collect and preserve archives; and the impact of our knowledge of the past on our perceptions of the present, and vice versa.

How, in fact, are archives and records situated in relation to the power/knowledge nexus described by Foucault? How are they central to studies which trace the evolution of collective memory or the exteriorization of memory – that is, the ways in which memory is maintained outside the human faculty of memory – from oral to written to printed to visual to electronic memory. Throughout time, new media of record have brought about not only changes in the storage and communication of information, but also changes in concepts of time and space, as well as in our ways of knowing, thinking about, and articulating our relationship to the world around us. Such revolutions in information technology are of interest, not only because they have changed what archives collect, but also because they have changed the role of archives in society. It is not enough to respond to the former; we must also give due consideration to the latter.

In the growing literature on history and memory, the power of archives in society is made explicit in Jacques Le Goff’s discussion of the origins of central political consolidation in the ancient world under a monarch and establishment of the first archives to buttress his control. Patrick Hutton’s overview of the exteriorization of memory from head to artifact shows the

transfer of individual to collective memory as the basis of social cohesion.<sup>6</sup> Medieval archives, Patrick Geary reveals, were collected – and later often weeded and reconstructed – not only to keep evidence of legal and business transactions, but also explicitly to serve historical and sacral/symbolic purposes, but only for those figures and events judged worthy of celebrating, or memorializing, within the context of their time.<sup>7</sup> Records relating to the First World War are now revealed to have been shaped to put the fighting forces in the best possible light and then subjected to significant later alteration in order to make generals appear less culpable for the slaughter on the Western Front for which they shared much responsibility.<sup>8</sup> Looking at those marginalized by the archival enterprise, Gerda Lerner has convincingly traced, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, the systemic exclusion of women from society's memory tools and institutions, including archives.<sup>9</sup> And from yet another perspective, archivists in developing countries are now seriously questioning whether classic archival concepts that emerged from the written culture of European bureaucracies are appropriate for preserving the memories of oral cultures.<sup>10</sup> The engagement of colonial and post colonial studies with the postmodern or "historic turn," as do the articles by Ann Stoler and Jim O'Toole in this issue, suggests that, by treating records and archives as contested sites of power, we can bring new sensibilities to understanding records and archives as dynamic technologies of rule which actually *create* the histories and social realities they ostensibly only *describe*.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory*, Steven Rendall and Elizabeth Claman (trans.), (New York, 1992, originally published 1986); Patrick Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover NH, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994), pp. 86–87, 177, and especially ch. 3, "Archival Memory and the Destruction of the Past" and *passim*; and Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> See Tim Cook, "Documenting War and Forging Reputations: Sir Max Aitken and the Canadian War Records Office in the First World War", *War In History* (accepted and forthcoming); Robert McIntosh, "The Great War, Archives, and Modern Memory", *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998); and Denis Winter, *Haig's Command: A Reassessment* (Harmondsworth, 1991), especially the final section, "Falsifying the Record."

<sup>9</sup> For women and archives, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy* (New York and Oxford, 1993), *passim*, but especially ch. 11, "The Search for Women's History"; see also Anke Voss-Hubbard, "'No Documents – No History': Mary Ritter Beard and the Early History of Women's Archives", *American Archivist* 58 (Winter 1995). See also the sources cited in note 25 below.

<sup>10</sup> For only one of many such writings, see Verne Harris and Sello Hatang, "Archives, Identity and Place: A Dialogue on What It (Might) Mean(s) to be an African Archivist", *ESARBICA Journal* 19 (2000), as well as *inter alia* the articles by Verne Harris and Evelyn Wareham in these two issues of *Archival Science*.

While scholars in the social sciences and humanities, as well as in other heritage vocations, are struggling with questions of representation, truth, and objectivity, archival professionals and users of archives have been slow to recognize the nature of archives as socially constructed institutions, the relationship of archives to notions of memory and truth, the role of archives in the production of knowledge about the past, and, above all, the power of archives and records to shape our notions of history, identity, and memory. The essays in these two issues of *Archival Science* are designed to correct that imbalance. By exposing assumptions about the nature and role of archives that have for too long been naturalized, the essays all encourage a greater awareness of the societal impact and historical consequences of archives in cultural affairs and human understanding.

Parallels between museums and archives are obvious, and instructive. Surely archives and records, like museums and artifacts, “have a long and complex history which shapes what they are today.”<sup>11</sup> Archives, like museums, surely “embody and shape public perceptions of what is valuable and important,” and they “are part of the history and philosophy of knowledge in both the humanities and the sciences, and this history and philosophy is in part also created by them.”<sup>12</sup> Let us then consider how archives reflect and constitute society’s information needs, and the evolving relationship between archives, information, and society. Following the reasoning of Stephen Kern,<sup>13</sup> what, for example, has been the impact on the production, preservation, and use of records and archives since the mid-nineteenth century – a century that also witnessed the establishment, professionalization, and growth of the modern archive – of the rise of general literacy, public education, letter writing, diary keeping, postal services, the telegraph, the telephone, radio, photography, film, and television (and the visual literacy they engender), of democracy, income tax, office systems, computerization,

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Susan Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (Washington, 1992), especially ch. 5, “Museums: the Intellectual Rationale”; and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York, 1995). Joan M. Schwartz notes that there are “important parallels between museums and archives as ‘memory institutions’” in “‘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, and especially the references in note 115.

<sup>12</sup> Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections*, p. 89. For a parallel analysis of archival history, and how past changes in ideas about the archive underpin much thinking, strategy, and practice today, as archives moved from a state-focused to a client- or citizen-focused approach, and thereby found their animating values less in reflecting and serving their sponsor than in society, see Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift”, *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997).

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge MA, 1983).



the women's movement, postmodernity, and a host of other cultural and technological influences?

If we so inquire into the function of archives in society, then we must deal with two intimately related, but separately conceived themes: "knowledge and the shaping of archives" and "archives and the shaping of knowledge."<sup>14</sup> Imbricated in these themes is the exercise of power – power *over* information and power *of* information institutions. Also interwoven throughout is the crisis of representation – the power of records and archives *as* representations and the representation of power *in* records and archives. And the postmodern destabilization of our bedrock concepts of reality, truth, and objectivity has placed both power and representation under close scrutiny. Archives and records are not immune to such scrutiny, and indeed our professional traditions, so dependent on notions of neutrality and objectivity, are unseated when postmodern concerns for situated knowledge, alterity, hybridity, liminality, and plurivocality are raised.

### Archival "science" and archival truth

Just as any effort to demonstrate the "constructedness" of archives necessarily takes issue with the idea of archives as neutral, records as innocent, and archivists as objective, so it must implicitly also confront the notion of "archival science," for views of science have significantly changed in recent decades, calling into question all the supposed neutrality and objectivity of the scientific discipline and endeavour in society. Thus, no longer does the claim that "archives" is a "science" preclude its being a social construct, since even the "scientific" (read objective, neutral, positivist) nature of pure science has itself been demythologized.<sup>15</sup>

As the conceptualization of the nature of science has evolved, "objectivity" has been increasingly understood in terms of "situated knowledge" or "partial perspective"<sup>16</sup> – or context. Yet, while scholars outside

<sup>14</sup> See Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York, 1992); and Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (New York, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> For a critique of "archival science" as term and concept, as used by archivists, see Terry Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts", *Archival Science: International Journal on Recorded Information* 1.1 (2001), especially 11–16. The critique centres on two points: the mixture of "science" and "scientism" to gain professional status and respectability, and the failure to acknowledge the sustained critique of "pure" science since Karl Popper and Thomas Kuhn, let alone by more recent feminist and postmodern scholars.

<sup>16</sup> Archivists might do well to consider Donna Haraway's chapter, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," which begins:

the profession increasingly discover and focus upon context, being ever more careful to state the ground they walk on and recognize their partial perspective, archivists – as keepers of context – have, with a growing number of exceptions, singularly fallen behind in their theorizing about archives and records, and the power relations embedded in them, shunning the shifting, interactive, and dynamic perspectives of postmodern relativity for the more comfortable and passive stance of the detached observer.<sup>17</sup>

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“Academic and activist feminist enquiry has repeatedly tried to come to terms with the question of what *we* might mean by the curious and inescapable term ‘objectivity,’” and concludes that “objectivity is not about dis-engagement.” See Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York, 1991), pp. 183–201.

<sup>17</sup> Archivists in recent years have begun to question, from a broadly “postmodernist” framework, the traditional, neutral, passive, positivist, and “scientific” mindset of their profession. 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). The themes were anticipated in his “Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal”, in Barbara Craig (ed.), *The Canadian Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992); and continued in his “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas”, *Archivaria*, and two interrelated articles: “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts”, *Archival Science*; and “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives”, *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001). Two pioneering postmodern archivists before Cook were also Canadian, Brien Brothman and Richard Brown. Among other works, see by Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice”, *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991); “The Limits of Limits: Derridean Deconstruction and the Archival Institution”, *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993); his probing review of Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, in *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), which was much deepened in his “Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction”, *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999); and “The Past that Archives Keep: Memory, History, and the Preservation of Archival Records”, *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001); and by Richard Brown, “Records Acquisition Strategy and Its Theoretical Foundation: The Case for a Concept of Archival Hermeneutics”, *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–1992); “The Value of ‘Narrativity’ in the Appraisal of Historical Documents: Foundation for a Theory of Archival Hermeneutics”, *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991); and “Death of a Renaissance Record-Keeper: The Murder of Tomasso da Tortona in Ferrara, 1385”, *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997). Other postmodern statements by Canadians include Joan M. Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats”, *Archivaria*; and “‘Records of Simple Truth and Precision’: Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control”, *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000); Preben Mortensen, “The Place of Theory in Archival Practice”, *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999); Tom Nesmith, “Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the ‘Ghosts’ of Archival Theory”, *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999); Bernadine Dodge, “Places Apart: Archives in Dissolving Space and Time”, *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997); Theresa Rowat, “The Records and the Repository as a Cultural Form of Expression”, *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993); Robert McIntosh, “The Great War, Archives, and Modern Memory”, *Archivaria*; Carolyn Heald, “Is There Room for Archives in the Postmodern World?” *American Archivist* 59 (1996); and

Things worthy of memory in society (and archives) have traditionally been surrounded by concepts of truth, authority, order, evidence, and value. But, like “science,” concepts of “truth” and “fact” and “evidence” and “value” now have their own histories.<sup>18</sup> What is the significance for archives whose power is vested in their truth value? Traditional belief states that archives as institutions are guardians of truth; archives as records contain the pristine evidence of past acts and historical fact.<sup>19</sup> But what is the truth about archives themselves? And what are the consequences for history from what goes on inside archival institutions? To answer that requires understanding that

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Lilly Koltun, “The Promise and Threat of Digital Options in an Archival Age”, *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999). Non-Canadian postmodern archival writers include Eric Ketelaar, “Archivalisation and Archiving”, *Archives and Manuscripts* 27 (May 1999); “Looking Through the Record into the Rose Garden”, *Arkhiyyon. Reader in Archival Studies and Documentation*, Israel Archives Association 10–11 (1999); XXVII–XLII, and “Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives”, *Archival Science* 1.2 (2001): 143–155, among other works; and especially Verne Harris, “Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa”, *Archivaria*; “Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990–1996”, *Archivaria*; *Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa*, 2nd edn. (Pretoria, 2000); “A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archive”, in Carolyn Hamilton et al. (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town, 2002); “On (Archival) Odyssey(s)”, *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 2–14; and, with Sello Hatang, “Archives, Identity and Place”, *ESARBICA Journal*, among many other writings; Elizabeth Kaplan, “We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are”, *American Archivist* 63 (Spring/Summer 2000); and Francis X. Blouin Jr., “Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory”, *Archival Issues* 24 (1999). This (partial) list is constantly enlarging with established and new authors, as these two thematic issues of *Archival Science* demonstrate.

<sup>18</sup> Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994); Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, 1998). Brien Brothman’s work cited above, as well as his new article in the second of these two thematic issues of *Archival Science*, exposes very powerfully the constructed and mediated nature of such archival concepts as evidence, order, memory, and value. See also Terry Cook, “Archives, Evidence, and Memory: Thoughts on a Divided Tradition”, *Archival Issues* 22 (1997); and Joan M. Schwartz, “‘Records of Simple Truth and Precision’: Photography, Archives, and the Illusion of Control”, *Archivaria*. On changing notions of “value” in archives over time, and how archivists have sought to preserve evidence and order in archives, see again Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas”, *Archivaria*.

<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the classic articulation is by Hilary Jenkinson, long a senior archivist in Britain’s Public Record Office in the first half of the twentieth century: “The Archivist’s . . . Creed, the Sanctity of Evidence; his Task, the Conservation of every scrap of Evidence attaching to the Documents committed to his charge; his aim to provide, without prejudice or afterthought, for all who wish to know the Means of Knowledge. . . . The good Archivist is perhaps the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces.” For a discussion (with citations) of Jenkinson’s views within their historical context, and his impact, see Cook, “What is Past is Prologue”, 22–26.

archives have their origins in the information needs and social values of the rulers, governments, businesses, and individuals who establish and maintain them. Archives then are not some pristine storehouse of historical documentation that has piled up, but a reflection of and often justification for the society that creates them. With the increasing complexity of society, its means of communication, and its information requirements, not only have record-keeping practices changed among those who create records, but archives as institutions of collective memory have changed as well. Yet perception of those changes has lagged behind, with significant consequences for all who seek to understand the past.

Confronting “the idea that nature is constructed, not discovered – that truth is made, not found,” Donna Haraway argues that:

rational knowledge does not pretend to disengagement: to be from everywhere and so nowhere, to be free from interpretation, from being represented, to be fully self-contained or fully formalizable. Rational knowledge is a process of on-going critical interpretation among ‘fields’ of interpreters and decoders. Rational knowledge is power-sensitive conversation.<sup>20</sup>

The same may be said of archives and records: they cannot pretend to disengagement; they must be subjected to a process of “on-going critical interpretation” among creators, keepers, and users of archives and records; and the relationship between archives, records, and society is a form of “power sensitive conversation.”

Thus, changes in the culture of science have taken place in a broader contemporary, intellectual climate of relativity, which has been evolving for some time. This *philosophical* stream, together with more recent *feminist* and *environmental/ecological* streams, has unfolded alongside major changes in society.<sup>21</sup> Increasing concern for the power/knowledge nexus, as well as for the relationship between representation and reality, history and memory, place and identity, has produced a large and growing literature from which archivists may extrapolate to gain a fuller understanding of the historicity and specificity of the relationship between archival practice and societal needs,

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<sup>20</sup> Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, in her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, p. 196. Here, Haraway makes reference to Katie King, “Canons Without Innocence” (PhD thesis, University of California at Santa Cruz, 1987).

<sup>21</sup> For a stimulating blending of these three streams, see Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York, 1991).

and clearer appreciation of the power relations inherent in the theories and practices of archives, as well as in the nature of records and record keeping.

### **Archives of power, the power of archives**

Archives have always been about power, whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual. Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They both reflect and constitute power relations. They are a product of society's need for information, and the abundance and circulation of documents reflects the importance placed on information in society. They are the basis for and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups, and societies.

Archives have also always been at the intersection of past, present, and future – Margaret Hedstrom's "interfaces." These spaces are the loci of power of the present to control what the future will know of the past. Accordingly, archivists must respond to the challenges of postmodernism and be prepared to respond to both continuity and change in society's concepts of, needs for, and uses of the past, memory, information, knowledge, for ultimately what is at stake is the relevance of archives in society, the power of the record, and the present strength and future vitality of the archival profession.

Archivists wield enormous power, loathe as many archivists are to admit this and reluctant as many academics are to acknowledge this. But the power of archives and records is not stable; it changes in response to many factors, both inside and outside the world of archives, including changes in the nature of the record and its capacity for storing and communicating information, and changes in the nature of record keeping as a practice enabled by technology, molded by organizational culture, and demanded by society. The power of archives and records has also changed over time and across space in response to historical events: religious strife, civil wars, political revolutions, imperial rule, and gender, race, and class upheavals, as well as to geographical circumstance: distance, transportation, and communication. The deep suspicion of metanarratives and universals, which is integral to postmodern inquiry, requires that we consider the historicity and specificity of archives as institutions, as records, and as a profession.

Records are also about power. They are about imposing control and order on transactions, events, people, and societies through the legal, symbolic, structural, and operational power of recorded communication. Their original individual design and format; their subject, nominal, or functional indexing/

classification methodologies; their organization, participation, and place within larger information systems; their use to enhance powerful organizations and individuals in their operational activities and subsequent legal recourse; the use (or non-use, as in oral testimony) of particular recording media; the technical sophistication (and expense) and the concomitant specialized, often elite training (from ancient scribes and medieval monks to modern audio-visual and computer-based media specialists) required for their production and maintenance: all these and other factors – actual and symbolic – mean that some can afford to create and maintain records, and some cannot; that certain voices thus will be heard loudly and some not at all; that certain views and ideas about society will in turn be privileged and others marginalized.

Later in the record's life, a tiny fraction of all those records created are appraised, selected, and memorialized as archives; the vast majority are not. Archival choices about how to describe this archival fragment reinforce certain values and impose emphases and viewing orders for the archive. Archival approaches to making records available (or not) again create filters that influence perceptions of the records and thus of the past. Even professional terms frequently employed before and after the records come to “the (historical) archive” to describe these processes – terms such as “evidence,” “management,” “administration,” “reliability,” “authenticity,” “control,” etc. – are designed to portray a natural, organic process, and reinforce a professional objectivity and neutrality. This linguistic inclination simply masks the exercise of power over memory and identity, and thus makes that power all the more effectively wielded. All these issues – which the authors of the essays in these two thematic issues touch on, at least collectively – involve the exercise of power, or reflect the powerful in society.

Yet, to assert that archives and records are only about power, about imposing control and order, is an incomplete view.<sup>22</sup> We are not suggesting that traditional archivists engage consciously in conspiracy or collusion, let alone that they are power-mad. Human-based systems (including their manifestations in records and archives) are designed to achieve control, order, and regulation for some social phenomenon. However, such systems are most effective when planned and pursued with careful discipline – whereas the history of making and keeping records is as littered with chaos, eccentricity, inconsistency, and downright subversion, as much as it is characterized by jointly agreed order, sequence, and conformity – as essays by Barbara Craig and Ciaran Trace in this issue of *Archival Science* make clear. Furthermore, views heard in archives and through records are not just the dominant, privileged views of the powerful, for the very same “mainstream” records, created

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<sup>22</sup> We are grateful to Lilly Koltun for raising these issues with us.

by the privileged, can be deconstructed by new thinkers “against the grain” to bring out voices which speak in opposition to power, or that insert irony or sarcasm or doubt. This is apart from the unique records that are created and then kept by microcosmic centres of power (i.e., by resisting individuals or groups) pending a future with a more visible, public place for them. And certainly systems of classification may be widespread without thereby imposing one meaning or reflecting a privileged power. While alphabetical sequencing is a Western sequence, and widely present in the Western world, it is also not limited as an agent to those disposing of power. It can enhance the creativity and utility of record-keeping systems of the marginal as much as the mainstream.

These qualifications being granted, however, the power relations embedded in archives and in records are particularly important to recognize at this very point in time. On the one hand, the revolutionary characteristics of computer-generated records, the strategies which archives and archivists are adopting to deal with them, the definitions and rhetoric used to discuss electronic records and later to describe them within archives, and their special and rapidly changing contexts of creation all mean that, unless power is exercised to take corrective action soon, then only certain types of information, and thus only certain people and organizations in society, are going to be privileged in our social memory by this new medium.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, the revolutionary capacity and speed of information technology, to transmit information in all media to geographically, socially, and culturally dispersed audiences, presents archives with the power to make records accessible to a public that is itself empowered by that very access. The electronically augmented power of archives to provide access to the record also amplifies archives’ traditional power to mediate access to the record. Through descriptive practices and system architecture, through selection – at all levels – for on-line access, and through production of virtual exhibitions, archives wield the power over what will be known about what has been preserved.

Power relations in archives are implicated in the obsessive focus on identity, which has characterized intellectual endeavours across disciplines since the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> That discourse has encompassed examinations of the forma-

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<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed critique along these lines, 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; and the essay by Brien Brothman in the second of these two thematic issues.

<sup>24</sup> For a flavour only, see, for example, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983); David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge MA, 1985); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, 1992);

tion and manifestations of national, ethnic, racial, gender, class, and local community identities. Voices in the debate have coalesced around two positions: one viewing the concept of identity in an essentialist manner (identity as “real,” intrinsic to individuals and communities, even biologically based); the other conceiving of identity as a social construct (no less “real” to those who subscribe to or perceive it, but one created culturally, for political, social, and historical reasons).

Whether conscious of it or not, archivists are major players in the business of identity politics. Archivists appraise, collect, and preserve the props with which notions of identity are built. In turn, notions of identity are confirmed and justified as historical documents validate with all their authority as “evidence” the identity stories so built. While relationships between archives and identity occur across disparate historical and cultural contexts, common issues involving the power over the record serve to link the crises of identity experienced by a variety of subaltern groups desiring to construct a viable, authentic, and cohesive identity. Thus, the role of archives and archivists must also be examined against a backdrop of this discourse on identity.

The gendered nature of the archival enterprise over time is a stark example that archives are not (and, indeed, never have been) neutral, objective institutions in society. Archives, since their very origins in the ancient world, have systemically excluded records about or by women from their holdings and, as institutions, have been willing agents in the creation of patriarchy by supporting those in power against the marginalized. As Bonnie Smith has recently shown so convincingly in *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice*, the rise of “professional” history in the nineteenth century (which coincided exactly with the professionalization of archivists – who were trained as such historians) squeezed out the story-telling, the ghostly and psychic, the spiritual and the feminine (and of course all “amateur” women practitioners), in favour of men (exclusively) pursuing a “scientific” and “professional” history within the cloister of the archives and the battleground of the highly competitive university seminar. Such historians (and archivists) ignored in their work the real life in families, farms, factories, and local community, and the stories and experiences of women, among others, in favour of national politics, administration, diplomacy, war, and the experiences of men in power. Such historians (and archivists) also venerated (and justified) their “scientific” methods and conclusions as fact-

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John Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, 1994); and Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver, 1997).



based, objective, neutral, dispassionate — a means to recover the Truth about the past.<sup>25</sup>

Power over the documentary record, and by extension over the collective memory of marginalized members of society — whether women, non-whites, gays and lesbians, children, the under-classes, prisoners, and the non-literate — and indeed over their representation and integration into the metanarratives of history, resides in the decisions that archivists and manuscript curators make in soliciting and appraising collections, the ways in which institutional resources are allotted for procurement and processing of collections, and the priority given to their diffusion through source guides, publication, exhibitions, and web sites. And when the records of such marginalized groups or individuals are considered by mainstream archives, are those of “safer” integrationists and reformers favoured over more radical or segregationist elements? Men over women? Urban over rural? The issue is complex, for sexism (or racism or classism) is sometimes at fault; other times, it is indifference or ignorance. Yet, at all times, archivists must exercise their power to consider historical relevance and a multiplicity of voices without fashionably chasing after the latest priorities on researcher agendas.

This is not an exercise in “political correctness,” for the “marginalized” for some particular functions in society (and in records) may well be right-wing business corporations more than left-wing trade unions, developers more than environmentalists, the centre more than the regions, men more than women, racists more than reformers. The point is for archivists to (re)search thoroughly for the missing voices, for the complexity of the human or organizational functional activities under study during appraisal, description, or outreach activities, so that archives can acquire and reflect multiple voices, and not, by default, only the voices of the powerful. A caution is necessary here. It is important, as Verne Harris has noted, 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>26</sup> Such moral dilemmas should trouble, but not paralyze archivists: they

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<sup>25</sup> See Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History: Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Cambridge MA and London, 1998). In *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (1993), Gerda Lerner devotes an entire chapter to how women have sought to recover their own history by changing the way archives collect and describe records, often by having to sponsor archives themselves. See also her *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York, 1986); Riane Eisler, *The Chalice & The Blade* (San Francisco, 1987); and Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict Between Word and Image* (New York, 1998) for critiques relevant to the patriarchal nature of the archival enterprise across the centuries.

<sup>26</sup> See especially Verne Harris, “Seeing (in) Blindness: South Africa, Archives and Passion for Justice”, draft essay for presentation to New Zealand archivists, August 2001.

can only welcome and respect the “Other,” and try to tell through appraisal and description and outreach as full a story as possible, “using records systems and the sites of records creation as the primary raw materials.” Of course, despite careful research and the “vigorous exercise of reason,” sensitive archivists will always know “that there are other tellings, other stories which they might have chosen instead.”<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

Memory, like history, is rooted in archives. Without archives, memory falters, knowledge of accomplishments fades, pride in a shared past dissipates. Archives counter these losses. Archives contain the evidence of what went before. This is particularly germane in the modern world. With the disappearance of traditional village life and the extended family, memory based on personal, shared story-telling is no longer possible; the archive remains as one foundation of historical understanding. Archives validate our experiences, our perceptions, our narratives, our stories. Archives are our memories. Yet what goes on in the archives remains remarkably unknown. Users of archives (historians and others) and shapers of archives (records creators, records managers, and archivists) add layers of meaning, layers which become naturalized, internalized, and unquestioned.

This lack of questioning is dangerous because it implicitly supports the archival myth of neutrality and objectivity, and thus sanctions the already strong predilection of archives and archivists to document primarily mainstream culture and powerful records creators. It further privileges the official narratives of the state over the private stories of individuals. Its rules of evidence and authenticity favour textual documents, from which such rules were derived, at the expense of other ways of experiencing the present, and thus of viewing the past. Its strong whiffs of positivist and “scientific” values inhibit archivists adopting multiple and ambient ways of seeing and knowing. An original order is thus sought or imposed, rather than allowing for several orders or even disorders to flourish among records in archives. And it hobbles archivists trying to cope with electronic records, where active intervention by archivists in the creation process of records, rather than passive receipt of records created long before and later discarded, is the only hope that today’s history will be able to be written tomorrow.

This pair of thematic issues of *Archival Science*, in the current volume and its successor, is presented, therefore, as a collaborative effort to push the archival profession forward in its thinking about what archives, records, and

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<sup>27</sup> Verne Harris, *Exploring Archives*, p. 45.

archivists do on a philosophical or theoretical level, the power they wield, the impact they have. It is a foray into that exciting intellectual territory where positivist principles meet postmodern theories, where archival “truths” indeed have historical consequences. It explores the “interfaces,” in Margaret Hedstrom’s suggestive metaphor, between archives, records, and power, and the surrounding social and cultural and technological contexts in which they exist. To choose not to engage in these debates is, in fact, a strong choice in favour of the status quo, with all its implications for buttressing mainstream power. In generating discussion and reaction, we hope to force keepers as well as users of archives to confront, head-on, current intellectual concerns about intentionality, instrumentality, representation, and power.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Readers please note: The guest co-editors have standardized spelling and grammar to conform to Canadian-English style; however, authors’ varying footnoting styles have been respected and only made consistent within each article, but not across all the articles.

