Archive

Laura Helton

Archive, an etymologist might tell us, is a curious noun, one that changes neither in quantity nor essence when made plural. As it ticks through a sequence of meanings, the *OED* reminds us that each definition operates *sing. & in pl*. An archive, it notes, can connote a place (a “repository for documents”) or a collection (“records so kept”). But so can *an archives*, plural.¹ Both usages, singular and plural, have been called upon by scholars to think through wide-ranging questions of memory, evidence, authority, canon, and classification. And yet, while grammatically proper, that very elasticity has proven nettlesome as the “archival turn” has reworked (and perhaps overworked) the term archive, asking it to do critical labor for an ever-growing number of disciplines.² In fact, debates around archival grammar register a stark conceptual distance between archives (with an *s*) and archive (without)—the latter’s singularity underscored by the frequent use of a definitive article that brands *the* archive as a favorite keyword of the humanities.

For humanists, archives have long served as research sites; that is, repositories that hold objects of study. Archive, in its singular form, has more recently become a subject of humanistic inquiry as well, invoked to theorize historical forms and silences. For some, archives are places; for others they are bodies, traces, sounds, or data. An ever-growing corpus of digital records and environments has prompted a rethinking of divides between material, imaginary, and dispersed archives, as well as the power relationships underlying questions of what we can and should save, and how to represent it. Digital life has also embedded archival functions into personal

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² The sequence of special issues devoted to archive/s outside of the core archival studies journals shows how the term has been taken up by nearly every discipline of the humanities. Since 1999, *History of the Human Sciences, Studies in the Literary Imagination, Visual Resources, Transgender Studies Quarterly, Social Text, History of the Present*, and *French Historical Studies*, among others, have dedicated full issues to the archive.
information habits, from Gmail’s “Archive” command to the “Archive” tab ubiquitous in web design. In short, the term archive has proliferated across humanistic practice. Whereas archival theory once delimited a professional discourse on the appraisal, preservation, and description of records, it has, with the archival turn, taken on metaphorical and “extraterritorial” connotations. Building on a Foucauldian notion of archive as a discursive system that governs the enunciability of statements, scholars across a range of disciplines have invoked the term to denote a particular process—a “structure of record-keeping,” for example—or to make visible assemblages that exceed the coordinates of any one repository—such as an “imperial archive” or an “archive of feelings.” Labeling such imagined assemblages as “an archive” is, as Kate Eichhorn argues, an “authorizing act” that gives analytical coherence to otherwise dislocated orders of meaning.

This archival turn, however, has not fully attended to other discourses, both antecedent and contemporary, that attach to the term archives. Studies of “the archive” often begin with the etymology of *arkheion*—the place from which law emanates—as a brief nod to the history of ancient and modern archives. But they largely bypass the body of knowledge that undergirds the operation of archival institutions since the eighteenth century, and which still shapes how humanistic information is organized. For archivists, archives represent an ongoing life cycle of record creation, retention, reuse, and destruction, and each of these concepts has been the subject of decades of professional debate. Humanities scholars who have adopted archive as a keyword without citing that historiography, Michelle Caswell argues, invoke a “hypothetical wonderland” but fail to acknowledge “the intellectual contribution of archival studies as a field of theory and practice.”

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praxis in its own right.” To what extent is that elision a casualty of the lexical ambiguity that attends interdisciplinarity, and in what ways does it represent an erasure—often gendered, Caswell suggests—of certain types of intellectual figures (the librarian, archivist, cataloger, or records manager) from the history of ideas? The metaphorical *archive*, Caswell says, is not an *archives*, that site where praxis and protocol are negotiated.

As such tensions suggest, while the conceptual openness of the term archive/s has productive qualities, it has also diluted the term’s specificity. To name the keyword’s grammatical politics, one might parse four ways in which it is frequently deployed—as singular and plural, literal and figurative—with contending stakes attending each instance:

- **archive/s, n., in sing. & in pl.:** sources, fonds, or repositories
- **archives, n., pl.:** praxis and theory for managing unique collections
- **archive, n., sing.:** metaphor for encoded records as memory
- **archive, v.:** to store, organize, or preserve, assigning enduring value to objects in anticipation of future (re)use

Can we name, and thus respect, the different traditions of practice and expertise these usages signal, while also maintaining the productive ambiguity of the plural/singular term “archives?” Addressing each of these grammatical propositions, this entry will identify major threads of contemporary archival theory, as well as the core archival principles—provenance, appraisal, arrangement, and description—that undergird any imagining or reimagining of the archive. It argues that if archive is to function as a useful keyword of the humanities, it should do so as a hinge between the metaphorical and material connotations of record-keeping. As a term that signals place, protocol, and theory, archive serves a reminder that the very terms of our

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conceptual engagement with historical presence or absence lean on specific legacies of archival inscription and institutions.

**Archive/s**

Since the professionalization of their discipline in the late nineteenth century, historians have understood archives as a primary research space, their corollary to the scientist’s laboratory or the ethnographer’s field. The question of how archival sources enable and constrain historical writing—by their abundance or paucity, the circumstances of their production, their accessibility or inaccessibility, and the institutions that mediate that access—has thus always been at the center of historians’ work. But for the most part, historians relegated their discussions of archives and archivists to paratext like acknowledgements, footnotes or a “note on sources.” Rarely in historical prose did archives appear explicitly as an analytical object—with the exception of the genre of “archive stories,” such as Arlette Farge’s classic memoir of French judicial archives as a place where the historian revels in her “relationships to the documents and the people they might reveal.” As Natalie Zemon Davis notes in her introduction to Farge’s work, historians have long known how to read “with and against the grain” of archives.

Scholars of the subaltern, especially, have perfected the art of reading against the grain: extracting from documents stories the document-creators did not intend to tell. Ann Stoler, meanwhile, has called for scholars to read along the archival grain: to treat an archival document not as an object from which to extract information, but as itself a narrative about who has the power to archive and why.

10 Natalie Zemon Davis, foreword to *Allure of the Archives*, xi.
This “archival turn” has reversed the historical axiom that archives are sources but rarely subjects. (To call it a “turn” may seem redundant, since historicist work is always already indebted to archives, but it signals a reflexive reexamination of the field’s methodological apparatus.) Recent historical work has recognized that “the making of archives is frequently where knowledge production begins,” not simply where it is stored and retrieved.\(^\text{12}\) Colonial papers, notarial records, scrapbooks, slave ledgers: once understood as ground, collections are now figures in their own right, “elevated to new theoretical status.”\(^\text{13}\) This elevation has made visible the role of archives as sites that “convey authority and set the rules for credibility.” This “archival power,” Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues, is inscribed at four moments of record-keeping: creation, assembly, retrieval, and retrospection.\(^\text{14}\) A growing body of work, especially in postcolonial studies, attends to each of these moments. Stoler mines archival documents, at the point of assembly, as artifacts whose bureaucratic “watermarks” catalog colonialism’s “arts of governance” in the Netherlands Indies.\(^\text{15}\) Kirsten Weld argues that the Guatemalan National Police records had “two distinct archival logics,” the first, at their creation, a Cold War logic of surveillance and “ideological management,” and the second, following the records’ unexpected discovery and retrieval in the aftermath of civil war, a logic of “democratic opening.”\(^\text{16}\) In her work on the colonial archive in India, Anjali Arondekar questions the stakes of retrospection, the final stage of record-keeping.\(^\text{17}\) Recognizing that “archives are untenable without readers,” she argues that what they reveal is structured by our own desires for access and "discovery."


\(^{17}\) Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 20.
It is no accident that these works tell stories of surveillance, for, taken as a whole, the archival turn relies upon a default characterization of archives as a textual site of dominant discourse-making, usually imagined as a repository of the state. Roberto Echevarría, Alice Yaeger Kaplan, and, most famously, Jacques Derrida, ground archival definitions in the etymology of *arkheion*, or *arche*, which refers to a physical dwelling synonymous with authority (the place from which law emanates). Derrida leans on this etymology to underscore how the term archive simultaneously connotes a sequential order, which marks a beginning, and a *jussive* order, which structures what *can* be said. In other words, a Derridean notion of archive is about both origins and commandments: an archive does not simply hold documents, but also sanctifies the story the documents tell. It is perhaps the influence of this twinned emphasis on origin and edict that answers Gabrielle Dean’s question about why the “archival turn” has in fact relied on “the term ‘archive’ all along, with its statist resonances, rather than the term ‘collection,’ which has institutional but also personal resonances.” The turn to archive as a keyword signals a concern with a range of functions, from preservation to classification, that are also central to many informational practices. But the term “archive,” unlike its cognates “collection” or “memory,” does extra epistemological work by encapsulating order and ordinance. (This statist emphasis is also the requisite foil for a theorization of “counter-archives.”) If, in Farge’s account, an archive/s has sensory allure as a place of dust and revelation, in the archival turn it has conceptual allure as a keyword whose connotation is both mnemonic—pertaining to storage and recall—and bureaucratic—performing authority.

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Archives

Such work on archival power draws attention to archival labor, or what Derrida calls the “signature of the archivists.”²² And yet, humanities scholarship of the archival turn—even when engaged with the history of archives in their plural form—remains largely removed from the professional literature of archivists themselves. It often borrows archival studies as a framing device without engaging directly in the historiography of the field. Stoler’s useful formulation “archival genres,” for example, refers to the handiwork of colonial records managers, not to the downstream navigational documents made by archivists (finding aids, container lists, catalog records) or to the body of theory underlying the organization of modern archives.²³ Here, the archival turn, for all its fluency across fields, meets the limits of interdisciplinarity. Archival history is imported as an intervention in the humanities, and, like many imports, finds itself disembodied from its place of production.

In the United States, archival practice as a modern profession began in the late nineteenth century and adopted a core theory from eighteenth-century France, respect des fonds. This principle, by which records are maintained in groups that reflect their original context of assembly, or provenance, fundamentally distinguishes archives from libraries and museums, which organize objects by subject or creator regardless of when and why they were acquired.²⁴ As unique materials generated through the operational life of an organization, records move along a continuum of use, retention, destruction, and preservation. Only some, appraised as having enduring value beyond short-term institutional memory, ever enter an archives.²⁵ Once archived, they remain attached to the creators and organizations that accumulated them. Take, for

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²³ Stoler, Along the Archival Grain, 52.
example, the story of Aima Ship, a Kentucky freedwoman. In 1866, in the aftermath of the Civil War, she corresponded with her daughters, Lethia and Adeline, as the family struggled to reunite after emancipation and to secure wages for their labor. These letters, which capture the mother’s intimate admonitions to “come soon” and “write to your Brother,” are filed at the National Archives in Record Group 105 alongside thousands of other cases handled by the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands.26 In traditional archival terms, they are not the Ships’ family documents per se, but rather evidence of a government agency’s bureaucracy.

The archives profession’s founding theorems, which grew out of governmental and organizational records management, thus dovetail to a certain extent with the archival turn’s emphasis on the juridical-administrative function of archives. But there was always another strand of archival practice, under the moniker “manuscripts” rather than “archives,” that tended to a wider range of materials, including personal, communal, and ecclesiastical papers housed in specialized libraries or historical societies. A series of mid- and late twentieth-century shifts in informational practice brought together these two strands of professional record-keeping, and since that shift, the fundamentals of archival theory have undergone sustained revision.27 Archivists who maintain literary papers, tribal repositories, community records, and ephemera collections, together with the state and federal archivists who began establishing protocols for digital archiving in the 1980s, have rethought core concepts like custodianship, creator, and record in light of a broader sense of what constitutes archives.28 Theorists of a “postcustodial...
archive,” for example, approach archives as praxis rather than place, redefining archival principles to deemphasize extraction and ownership. In a postcustodial model, record creators could maintain physical and legal possession of their materials but work with archival repositories to provide digital access. Others have challenged the definition of creatorship to encompass a “records community” that accounts for how documenters and the documented shape records. This expansive approach also recognizes the co-creatorship of archivists, amanuenses, and users. While the novelist Margaret Atwood’s papers, for example, contain the author’s manuscripts, the collection was constructed by the “filing activities” of her personal assistants who chose what to keep and discard.

This broader view of who creates archives lays bare the ethics of control and access. Indigenous archivists, for example, have challenged intellectual property structures that are the operable vestiges of settler colonialism. Recent archival theory has also fueled experiments with making archives more explicitly collaborative spaces where many kinds of aesthetic or political practices could emerge. To position archives not just as research spaces but also as artistic sites exemplifies Eric Ketelaar’s argument that the “archive is an infinite activation of the record.” If the digital age has refigured the paradigm of archival time by shifting the burden of preservation from future archivists to present-day makers, so, too, has archival theory come to understand production and retrospection—two of Trouillot’s once-discrete moments of archive-

building—as “simultaneous and porous.” In this theory of archival chronology, repositories not only store past narratives but also continuously remake them through “reuse and reinterpretation.” The archivist, once imagined as passive custodian of an original order inscribed in records, is recognized as a contemporary interlocutor, alongside creators and users, who shapes what it means to access the past.

**Archive, the**

If the keyword *archive* in its singular form rarely takes note of these conversations about post-custodianship or reuse in *archives*, it is, in part, because much of the metaphoric turn has concerned records that never were, and could never be, “in custody.” Scholars have been touched by a *mal d’archive*, Derrida would say, but the fever is not site specific. *The* archive, as opposed to an archives, can identify panoramic logics or social poetics that exceed the holdings of a physical place. Thomas Richards, for example, has read across literary texts to locate a British “imperial archive” that “pared the Empire down to file-cabinet size.” Ann Cvetkovich conjures an “archive of feelings” that indexes collective memories of queer trauma and pleasure recorded in ephemeral and experimental cultural productions that often resist preservation. For Cvetkovich, the archive reveals itself not only in curated forms but in “fantasy made material.”

While Richards traces a state memory regime and Cvetkovich attends to modes of counterpublic memory that are, in fact, threats to such regimes, both scholars leverage the term archive to locate the diffuse “generative grammar” of encoded memory writ large—of what Stoler calls a

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“corpus of selective forgettings and collections.”

Once abstracted from materiality, the idea of the archive attends as closely to forgetting as to collecting. Indeed, among the archival turn’s most influential texts are meditations on loss, where the archive is haunted by lives, objects, and affects unnamed, unremembered, or ineffable. These include Trouillot’s foundational reflections on archival silences surrounding the Haitian Revolution and Saidiya Hartman’s lament about the impossibility of narrating slavery’s “unrecoverable past”—both responses to the “founding violence” of archives forged out of “New World black deracination, subjection, and exclusion.” This body of work did not invent the idea of archival absences; archivists have long understood the records they maintain as a “sliver of a sliver,” and community documentarians have sought, in tandem and in tension with archivists, to counter this exclusion by collecting the uncollected. But if the Afro-Puerto Rican bibliophile Arturo Schomburg expressed confidence in the 1920s that he could build an alternative archive, one that would “fill in the missing pages of world history,” contemporary theorists have profoundly resisted the notion that such missing pages can be found. While “it is tempting to fill in the gaps” of the archive, Hartman argues, history’s violence “resides precisely in all the stories that we cannot know and that will never be recovered.” Such critiques recognize that archival encounters “do not simply reconnect us with what we have lost. Instead, they remind us . . . of what we have never possessed in the first place.” The singular archive, then, has gained traction precisely because it conjures the idea of existing repositories as well as that which escapes inventory: the unrecorded. The archive, unlike archives, clearly signifies both erasure and memory.

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45 Ada Ferrer has encouraged scholars to move beyond the trope of silence and instead read archives for “traces of the conflicts between competing histories and their would-be tellers.” “Talk about Haiti: The Archive and the
To be sure, the very terms in which we imagine archival loss are shaped by our sense of preservationist protocols, an imbrication that calls for the archival turn to attend more closely than it has to the theories that undergird archival praxis. And yet, while the dislocation of the archive from archives in their plural form represents a failure to fully enact the possibilities of interdisciplinarity, it has also posed a useful challenge to existing definitions of archives dependent on the fields of history and records management. Derrida’s claim that the archive’s penchant for positivist acquisition obscures its specter of dispossession and destruction has engendered lines of inquiry that begin in that negative space.46 These queries traverse terrain difficult to ask of or within an archival institution: Is there an experimental archival imaginary that never resides in an archive and that cannot be cited as such, though it gives “language to strange and fragmentary pasts”47 If archives make possible certain “systems of statements,” what statements can be made about what one wishes the archive held, but which it cannot?48 As for those materials that are archived, what rises to the level of archival description and what escapes it, or, as Tina Campt has asked, what is the relationship between the “minute” and the “monumental?”49 And what are the narrative (or, in M. NourbeSe Philip’s terms, anti-narrative) possibilities for contending with fragments—“stories caught halfway through”—that a cataloger must bracket as [undated], [unidentified], or [no place]?50 A metaphorical archive, in other words, creates space for reimagining what has been kept or lost beyond the historian's notion of archive as place or the archivist's enactment of provenance and order.

46 Derrida, Archive Fever, 94.
49 Tina Campt, Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender and Memory in the Third Reich (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), 86–89.
50 M. NourbeSe Philip, Zong (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 204; Carolyn Steedman, Dust: The Archive and Cultural History (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 45.
Archive, to

If some scholars have bristled at appropriations of the term archive that seem to stray too far from their referent—used to invoke “nearly every means by which humans . . . leave traces of their existence”51—others have limited its reach by counterposing it to “repertoire,” Diana Taylor’s name for record-keeping forms that exceed the document. Foreshadowed by Luce Giard and Michel de Certeau’s observation that “gestures are the true archives of the city,” Taylor’s repertoire destabilizes archives—so often imagined in terms of written inscriptions—as the privileged locus of memory.52 And yet, while drawing attention to performance as a site of memory, this opposition can too narrowly define archives as that which “reduce gestures and embodied practices to narrative description.”53 Here, then, is an apparent contradiction of the archival turn: once unmoored from the literalness of existing archives, the idea of the archive can either vanish or harden; one moment, the archive is fleeting (any memory trace), and the next moment static (only the document). In a useful reading of Taylor, however, Eichhorn suggests that the physical archive, seemingly the opposite of an embodied archive, is itself shaped by acts—of selection, storage, organization, and classification—that “arguably belong to the repertoire, not the archive.”54 Eichhorn’s argument implies a shift from noun to verb, so that “archive” refers, each time it is deployed, to a specific instantiation of archiving.

Thinking about archival acts as themselves repertoire—or, in Achille Mbembe’s formulation, as a set of “rituals”—pushes against abstractions of the archive that obscure archival labor.55 Such labors, undertaken by collectors, keepers, and sorters, trained and self-taught alike,

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52 de Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, 141.
55 Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits,” in Refiguring the Archive, 19–20. The erasure of archival laborers is often grammatical; see, for example, Mbembe’s repetition of passive voice: “the majority of documents deemed archivable . . . have to be coded and classified. They are then distributed according to the chronological, thematic or geographic criteria. Whatever criteria are used at the time of coding . . . these procedures are simply a matter of creating order” (emphasis added).
may be located within or outside of formal archives and may or may not produce a “record.” In other words, there is no archive, singular, though there are innumerable acts that continuously refigure our idea of it. Encounters with archival forms may take shape as fidelity to archival protocols, efforts to rewrite those protocols, and as lamentation in the face of “research that positions us always on the brink of breakthrough and breakdown.”56 (Zora Neale Hurston made historical records through field recordings and transcriptions and retellings; she also declared, famously, that she would “turn her back on the past.”57 There is less contradiction between those two archival postures—turning her back or turning on the cylinder recorder—than one might assume.)

This view of archival acts, rather than archive as a discipline or metaphor, directs attention to how any record-keeping architecture—an archive, a catalog, a scrapbook, or a collection, whether analog or digital—is a space of “overlapping orders,” some of which follow formal information theories, while others point elsewhere.58 While positioning the modern archives profession as the literal standard-bearer of archival information practice, we can also underscore its proximity to other kinds of extra-institutional archival practice. Visible in these “overlapping orders,” then, are potential kinships—and the forms of reciprocal estrangement kinship can imply—between professional, collective, and personal protocols of arrangement and description.59 Rather than propose the archive as a singular entity, can we foreground how multiple modes of archiving—statist and experimental alike—constitute one another? Sara Grossman’s work on the history of weather data, for example, considers the interplay of archival forms that range from haptic to documentary to “a million media,” and traces how each form,

situated in time, differently narrativizes the same phenomenon. Such work builds on the metaphorical play of the archival turn while also maintaining the specificities of archival locations and moments. Or, in the words of Verne Harris, it traces the way archives “act through many conduits.”

Singular and plural, the keyword archive should evoke for humanities scholars the labor of the archivist, the paper and ephemeral protocols of record-keeping, and our imagined investments in archiving. In other words, archive, like the term information itself, encompasses practice, technology, and form. As the site of a specific information profession and a diffuse set of memory practices, archival studies offers an opportunity to think across the institutional contexts that define the work of scholars, record-keepers, artists, digital preservationists, and curators. Its continued salience as a keyword, however, depends on usages that attend carefully to cross-disciplinary unease, working along the grain of grammatical and citational incommensurability. It remains interesting as a keyword not in spite of its ambiguity, but precisely because it creates tension between those who make archives and those who use them, both notionally and notationally.

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61 Harris, “Archival Sliver,” 65.