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LIS 652  
Review Essay

**Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression**

By Jacques Derrida. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 111 pp.

**“Embracing the Power of Archives”**

By Randall C. Jimerson. *The American Archivist* 69 (Spring/Summer 2006): 19-32.

**“Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory”**

By Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook. *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1-19.

There has, in recent years, been some debate on what relevance Postmodern theory and its criticism has to the archival profession. It seems that some have taken the concerns seriously. SAA has a new ‘Core Values of Archivists’ passed in May of 2011 that answers some of the challenges that have to do with power and issues of silences in the record. Under ‘Diversity’:

Archivists collectively seek to document and preserve the record of the broadest possible range of individuals, socio-economic groups, governance, and corporate entities in society. Archivists embrace the importance of identifying, preserving, and working with communities to actively document those whose voices have been overlooked or marginalized.

And under ‘Selection’:

They [archivists] acknowledge and accept the responsibility of serving as active agents in shaping and interpreting the documentation of the past.<sup>1</sup>

For many in archives though, traditional attitudes to positivist notions of neutrality and objectivity are still firm, along with an unwillingness to acknowledge the inherent power of the archive and in archival practice. There are problems with acknowledging the power in the many choices that are made as well as thinking about the underlying values and dominant ideologies

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<sup>1</sup> SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics, ‘Core Values of Archivists’, (May 2011).  
<http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>

involved in the process of *archivalization*<sup>2</sup> that impact what will be archived. *Archivalization* is what ‘precedes archiving’.<sup>3</sup> These ideas need to be understood in order to have representative archives, to see the silences and gaps in the record and to problematize the metanarratives which have been (and are still being) produced. Who decides what will get archived; what is archivable? Which groups or interests decide what is worthy of remembrance or what may be assigned to oblivion? What are the processes involved in the decision-making and whose interests do these choices serve?

In *Archive Fever*<sup>4</sup>, Derrida begins with the word *archive*, its origin and meaning. It stems from the Greek, *arkhé* which holds two meanings at once, the commencement and the commandment, that is the beginning and the authority, “*in this place* from which *order* is given” (p. 1). This work is a deconstructive exploration of the problem of archives and their inherent power, the production of meaning and shaping of memory. It looks at the power of consignation, the archive as a privileged space and the structure of archives as producing meaning as well as the issue of archival violence, notions of repression/suppression and the silencing of the ‘other’. Derrida is concerned with the future, issues of justice and of responsibility.

The structure of the archive determines what can be archivable content or what can be considered for the archive. Meaning is produced both by the structure itself and through the process of archiving. “The archivization produces as much as it records the event (pp. 17-18).”

Derrida is very concerned by what is left out of the archive, who is left out, those silences which could be the result of unconscious choices or of violent destruction. “There is not one archive fever, one limit or one suffering of memory among others: enlisting the in-finite, archive fever verges on radical evil (p. 20).” He speaks of this violence in terms of the ‘One’; that

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<sup>2</sup> This is a neologism coined by Eric Ketelaar, in “Archivistics Research Saving the Profession”, *The American Archivist* 63, (Fall/Winter 2000): 328. The term is inspired by Derrida’s *Archive Fever* and is defined as “*the conscious or unconscious choice (determined by social and cultural factors) to consider something worth archiving*”.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Ketelaar, “Tacit Narratives: The Meaning of Archives”, *Archival Science* 1, (2001): 133.

<sup>4</sup> This work is expansive. For the most part, in this review I am covering the explicit discussion of the archive and relative ideas for archival work, accept for much of his discussion on memory. The other areas not covered expressly are those related more to psychoanalysis, Jewish thought and history and his critique of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*. This work was from a lecture given at the Freud Museum, “in a ‘House of Freud’, the *arkheion* of which we are the guests, *in which we speak, from which we speak* (p. 20). Its original title was, “The Concept of the Archive: A Freudian Impression”.

totalizing unity which denies the ‘Other’. It is the problem of the metanarrative. Derrida is insisting on a responsibility to the Other, to the history that will be, the future that is to come. On the question of the archive he states: “It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (p. 36).

*Archive Fever* is an important critical work about the power of archives and the violence that can be done with that power. It is in part a condemnation but it is also a call to action. Part of Derrida’s project is in a positive response, within it an ethics of hospitality, of responsibility and of an embrace of what is other. What Derrida is calling for is that archivists use their power in a conscious way, fully realizing the importance of their project to the people of their communities and those outside of it, to the researchers of today and those of tomorrow. The power archives have in shaping memory and history and the future to come demands great responsibility. Derrida is difficult to read, as many writing about him attest, it is worth the effort. Derrida needs to be read and reread.

Although Randall C. Jimerson uses Derrida and Postmodern theory in his work and certainly appreciates its value, he criticizes the difficulty of the language, the ‘jargon’ and the ‘convoluted syntactical gyrations’. He jokes: “As the postmodernist Godfather seems to say: ‘I’ll make you an offer you can’t understand’” (p. 22). It is clear, however, that his project takes some inspiration from Derrida’s, so he ‘understood’ it.

In his article, ‘Embracing the Power of Archives’, Jimerson uses the analogy of a temple, a prison, and a restaurant for different aspects of the archive. The temple stands for the authority and respect accorded to the archive, the prison suggests the ability to control, and the restaurant suggests mediation and interpretation. Using these devices he discusses the processes and procedures which make the archive what it is. “Archives at once protect and preserve records, legitimate and sanctify certain documents while negating and destroying others; and provide access to selected sources while controlling the researchers and conditions under which they may examine the archival record. (p. 20).”

Jimerson insists that there is no neutrality and that archives are places of power. There is danger to retain such beliefs about neutrality as there is bias built into the system; bias towards the dominant ideologies of a culture. These biases may result in silences and gaps in the archival

record. Each part of the process of archiving involves interpretation. It is important to consider this power and the responsibility it requires. “Rather than hide from our power in the realm of history, memory, and the past, I hope that we will embrace the power of archives and use it for the good of humankind (p. 24).” He discusses how the structure and the process of arrangement and description produce meaning as well highlighting the power of interpretation through the research process. There has been too much focus on technique and procedure at the expense of social and cultural issues. “Power carries responsibility. It also raises the stakes of what archivists do and how we perform our roles (p. 29).

“Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory” highlights the power and importance of archives and the place they have in shaping history, memory and identity. In this article, Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook discuss the importance of acknowledging this power: “Power recognized becomes power that can be questioned, made accountable, and opened up to transparent dialogue and enriched understanding (p. 2)”.

There is power in every aspect of archival practice; in choosing what to select and preserve, and therefore in privileging, particular materials over others. Schwartz and Cook discuss the recent attention given to archives from various disciplines and from cultural theorists, mentioning Foucault as well as Derrida. Although there is this interest and discussion of archival power, “the central professional myth”, that of the archivist as a neutral and objective custodian, is nevertheless continued by many in archival practice (p. 5). There are consequences to such a perspective, if there is no acknowledgement of the power archivists have in shaping the record and in generating meaning, then they cannot take responsibility for it.

There is discussion of collective memory and the historical exclusion of particular voices, cultures and histories from the record. Archives are indeterminable sites; they are places of power and that power can be used in many different ways. “Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They can both reflect and constitute power relations (p. 13).” Archivists should search for missing voices, doing research and outreach and try to fill the gaps in their records. Archivists can “welcome and respect the ‘Other’ and try to tell through appraisal and description and outreach as full a story as possible” (pp. 17-18).

*Archive Fever* problematizes the archive and its meaning, its structure, its results and its future. There is within it a framework for a positive archival ethic, incorporating these ideas about archives. In *Archive Fever*, as elsewhere, Derrida plays with language, interrogates it, and challenges our conceptions and preconceived notions about what words mean. He questions the word, and the notion of, 'archive' many times. What is it? What could it mean? What will it be in the future? It is problematic and questionable. It should remain open. It is another positive contribution to archival science and one that has already seen a response in the coining of the term *archivalization*. I think the term should be embraced.

Archivists should acknowledge the problems relating to archivalization and the biases that can result from a belief in neutrality. The claim that archivists are to be objective and apolitical must continue to be refuted. Archivist who make such claims can only do so by denying that the dominant ideology is political and influences their work. Hegemony causes people to perceive particular ideas and ways of being as normal and right; this process is largely invisible. Therefore archivists are always under the influence of various ideologies or theories; there is no neutrality. To insist on 'neutrality' means, ultimately, accepting an archival practice that is biased toward the dominant interests of society. Being considerate of these problems and the power inherent in archiving can help produce more accurate and inclusive archives. Archivists should strive to see, to some extent, outside of their particular time and place and cultural moment, to resist the totalizing metanarratives; to work keeping in mind the future to come. Through deconstruction, the development of a Derridean notion of archival ethics, the archive finds a new commencement and a new commandment, one that is open and unsettled but that is orientated toward a responsibility to justice.

'Archives, Records, and Power' and 'Embracing the Power of the Archive' both respond to *Archive Fever* in many ways. They both present the power of the archive and the importance of acknowledging this power. They both imply a greater responsibility for the archivist and commitment to marginalized peoples left out of the archival record. 'Archives, Records, and Power' is a more involved look at the many issues relating to archival power, the production of meaning, social memory, notions of truth and the need to interrogate metanarratives. I think that for Derrida, this piece, would have been seen as a positive response to *Archive Fever* and to his project in general. 'Embracing the Power of Archives' speaks to fewer of the many issues

articulated in *Archive Fever*, however, Jimerson is still indebted to Postmodern theory. Schwartz and Cook end their article with the idea that we cannot be neutral in these debates either. “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 (p. 19)”.