



Politics of Literature, Politics of the Archive

Tom Chadwick and Pieter Vermeulen 

In a time of instant archiving and ongoing planetary collapse, literature's engagement with the archive no longer automatically has the political purchase it had as late as the end of the twentieth century. If the first half of this double special issue foregrounded how contemporary literature is coming to grips with this new archival landscape, this second half sees it attempt to reimagine political agency at a time when the Earth has become a massive archive of human mismanagement and when the imprints of the past are instantly available in digital data streams and can no longer be heroically recovered.

For a clear instance of how literature's archival work used to accrue moral and political capital until a few decades ago, we can turn to [Toni Morrison's](#) 1987 *Beloved*, her novel based on the story of Margaret Garner, a slave mother who had killed one of her children. The Garner case gained some notoriety in the 1850s, but was largely forgotten by the time Morrison, then working as a senior editor at Random House on a book of essays commemorating Black history, came across a newspaper article in 1973 ([Reinhardt](#) x). It was the very *absence* of the case from public memory that gave Morrison the freedom to “invent [Garner's] life” ([Darling](#) 5), and that enabled *Beloved* to serve as a catalyst for further archival research, which has since come to inform a number of documentary and narrative histories of the case ([Reinhardt](#); [Taylor](#); [Weisenburger](#)). *Beloved* can also take credit for relaunching Garner's story in the public imagination, giving rise to a 1998 film featuring Oprah Winfrey and a 2005 opera for which Morrison herself wrote the libretto.

In 2019, Garner's posthumous vindication was complete: the *New York Times* included Garner in its “Overlooked” series, which features prominent people who, not being white and male, never received obituaries in the paper. This confirmed Morrison's conviction that literature could play a momentous role in reorganizing the archive and realigning public memory. This confidence is on display in her novel's infamous dedication to “Sixty

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Million and More,” which elides Garner’s individual experience with the suffering of all victims of the transatlantic slave trade and assigns them a (by all accounts, inflated) number that clearly echoes (even if it overshadows) the famous “six million” victims of the Holocaust (Mandel 581). The tension between the novel’s archival specificity and the hyperbole of its moral claim to bring the aftermath of the Middle Passage in competition with the memory of the Holocaust is crucial: it makes clear that, not so long ago, literature’s archival work gave it the authority to do significant political work in a media ecology that left sufficient room for acts of retrieval to make a difference.

Contemporary historical fiction operates in a much more frantically saturated media ecology – one in which archival material and moral and political capital alike circulate in very different ways. Colson Whitehead’s 2019 novel *The Nickel Boys* is a case in point. Like *Beloved*, *The Nickel Boys* fictionalizes a painful passage in the history of African American suffering: the story of the Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida, a reform school that had long been plagued by rumors of beatings, torture, and rape when it was finally closed in 2011. One year later, the bodies of over 50 boys were exhumed. The *Tampa Bay Times* began reporting on the scandal, but the story only reached Whitehead “on Twitter” in 2014 (Israel). Retrieval work, it appears, is no longer a heroic literary effort, as literature constitutes but one node in a chain of recovery that starts with archeologists and journalists and that extends until today, as new revelations continue to emerge from multiple sources. The story of the Dozier School reaches Whitehead *pre-retrieved*, and if *The Nickel Boys* manages to amplify the story (not least because it was amplified in its turn by Barack Obama’s endorsement as part of his 2019 summer reading list), the novel itself is not so much filling an archival gap as tapping into a prevailing mood: Whitehead notes that he “was feeling angry” “by the time [he] heard about Dozier” (Kellogg) in the very summer Michael Brown and Eric Garner, two African Americans, were murdered by white policemen. Here also, literature cannot claim a heroic political posture, as it serves as merely one relay station in a saturated media sphere in which stories of African American suffering are never absent and instead possess an almost ambient availability.

Whitehead’s research method also reflects the altered archival landscape. The first three sources he credits in the book’s acknowledgment section are online sources: a newspaper archive, a repository of online testimonies, and a forensic report on the grave sites. Whitehead ended up never visiting the Dozier site, as there are “a lot of photo archives,” and there is Google maps to get a sense of the place (Davies). Crediting the reporting by the *Tampa Bay Times*, Whitehead tells the reader to “[c]heck out the newspaper’s archive for a firsthand look” (209). That googling an online archive counts as

a “firsthand look” tells you all you need to know about the impact of the new media climate on the political work contemporary literature can and cannot do. In today’s mediascape, there is nothing to be heroically retrieved by literature. While this does not make literature politically impotent – such literary relay stations as *The Nickel Boys* not only confer legitimacy on the archival work of journalists, they also, for instance, provide their authors with opportunities to intervene in public debate – it does change the relation between literature, politics, and archive.

This double issue highlights contemporary literary works that confront rather than deny the depletion of political agency in the new archival landscape. It focuses on works that ponder the encroaching equivalence between form and information, between literature and data. Novels that, however reluctantly, choose to inhabit the new archival landscape of compulsive readability, data saturation, and ubiquitous notation are arguably more productive objects of study for sounding the residual political affordances of literature than works that seek refuge from it in now obsolete formal and political templates – a withdrawal that, it is to be feared, amounts to a self-defeating condemnation to archival irrelevance.

For a sense of what a more confident confrontation with the archival landscape may look like, consider [Thomas Pynchon’s](#) 2013 novel *Bleeding Edge*. The novel follows a private fraud investigator named Maxine Tarnow as she explores the activities of a mysterious tech-CEO named Gabriel Ice. With a narrative that moves continuously between the online and offline worlds, *Bleeding Edge* acknowledges how digital technology has seen the archive extend beyond a single bounded location and into everyday life. It also emphasizes how the parameters of the archival landscape have shifted with it: information is ubiquitous in *Bleeding Edge*, always already pre-retrieved. The result, for the novel’s would-be detective, is not emancipation but subjugation: now that it no longer requires retrieval, information has stopped fostering political agency, as it compels characters such as Maxine to submerge themselves in passive and pointless bouts of data-processing.

The loss of political purchase in *Bleeding Edge’s* depiction of the new archival landscape has been noted by several critics who identify a shift in the terms of paranoia within Pynchon’s novel. [Ali Chetwynd](#) posits that *Bleeding Edge* is “post-paranoid”: while paranoia is still present, the entanglement of paranoia discourse within the very technological and digital networks of power it used to be paranoid *about* has normalized and neutered the political potential such discourse previously held (41). The paranoia of the 1960s and 1970s was motivated by the belief that uncovering conspiracies might help dismantle the power structures on which they rested, in much the same way that the retrieval of obscured histories from the archive might derail the forces that had hitherto excluded these histories from public discourse. In *Bleeding Edge*, however, while there is plenty of archiving and paranoia to go around, political agency is conspicuously lacking. As the archive

has shifted from a singular analog location to a diffracted digital network, paranoia has become both more pervasive and less powerful. Writing on *Bleeding Edge* specifically, Mitchum Huehls characterizes the effect of this shift as a process of flattening: where previously the archive *concealed* conspiracies, today the “Internet has laid them bare for all to see” (866), and the result is that paranoia has “moved entirely to the surface” (869). Rather than speaking truth to power, the ubiquity of information in the digital archive has disabled customary protocols of political intervention.

The stakes of the flattening that Huehls identifies in *Bleeding Edge* are also evident in the second key environment that we, in the introduction to the first half of the issue, identified as critical to the altered relationship between literature and the archive: ecology. In novels where we might expect literature’s engagement with the archive to be at its most politically motivated, the terms of the new archival landscape obfuscate rather than facilitate the political action that such novels depict. Nell Zink’s 2014 novel *The Wallcreeper*, for instance, places the relational and existential hang-ups of its expat protagonist, Tiffany, alongside a campaign against a hydroelectric power plant that threatens to decimate a habitat for endangered wildlife. As well as offering a gentle satire of the sometimes hypocritical mechanics behind environmental activism, *The Wallcreeper* also presents a more poignant picture of the debilitating impact the contemporary archive has on political action. To try and raise funds for the campaign, Tiffany’s husband Stephen spends hours writing to potential donors – less a matter of political activism than of laborious data-processing. Tiffany notes how each of Stephen’s missives has to be unique – “because you can’t copy anything anymore without getting caught” – but also swift – “because anyone who didn’t get an answer within fourteen hours would write again with more questions” (103). In *The Wallcreeper*, environmental activism becomes a matter of coming up with “clever new aphorisms” in “a hundred and something” characters (103).

The flattening of political action occasioned by contemporary archival culture is also reflected in the stylistic traits of Zink’s fiction. Nicholas Dames argues that the qualities that make Zink’s writing so attractive to contemporary readers are precisely the “tone of brilliant offhandness” found in good e-mails: “Everything seems as blunt and eccentric and knowing as an email written at white heat: a mode of address that assumes it’ll be understood – and if not, then fuck you” (Dames). If literary fiction has previously suffered from a “tone of wheedling embarrassed earnestness,” the offhand tone of writers such as Zink introduces a different formula: “nothing matters more than what I’m writing you [*sic*], but I know it doesn’t matter much at all.” For Dames, then, Zink’s fiction makes the flattening of agency and the protocols of instantaneous digital communication the basis of its esthetic form. In a mediascape where information is simply there to be processed, novelists can choose to produce a prose that demonstrates their proficiency at that act of processing, as when, in Zink’s novels, “[g]lobal

catastrophes are often recruited as background (or worse, metaphor) to add a patina of significance” (Dames).

If novels such as those by Whitehead, Pynchon, and Zink outline the parameters within which literature and the archive now coexist, they immediately raise questions about how literature and the archive might yet regain a political purpose. For some, the politics of the contemporary archive exists in its capacity to circumvent more stale literary forms and conventions. The conceptual poet [Kenneth Goldsmith](#), for instance, believes the new archival landscape has democratized our relationship with information, rendering more traditional forms of information gathering – through, for instance, literary form – obsolete: “You could say,” he writes, “that in the digital age with its free flow and circulation of cultural artifacts, that the act of acquisition ... has turned many of us into amateur curators and archivists” (91). A similar point is made by [Abigail De Kosnik](#), who argues that “[m]edia users have seized hold of mass culture as an archive, an enormous repository of narratives, characters, worlds, images, graphics, and sounds from which they can extract the raw matter they need for their own creations, their alternatives to or customization of the sources” (4). For Goldsmith and De Kosnik, it is new forms of engagement such as “uncreative writing” (Goldsmith’s term) and fan fiction (De Kosnik’s focus) that update the political mandate of literary writing in an age of data saturation – even if many won’t find such accounts of the literary politics of the archive quite political enough.

The essays in the second half of this special issue approach the question of the archive’s and literature’s contested politics with a more critical and more cautious eye, mindful of the new terms on which political engagement must take place, but not willing to simply jettison literature as outdated and insufficient. Jason Wiens’ essay highlights how two contemporary Canadian poets intervene in colonial archives by mobilizing the appropriative poetics primarily associated with conceptual poets like Goldsmith, but also boasting a longer modernist lineage. If these archives render Indigenous realities almost illegible, these poets’ embrace of digital technologies and of updated forms of literary creativity underline that they never fully manage to erase them. And while the colonial archive cannot be disappeared, the work of Jordan Abel and Rachel Zolf shows how literature can still intervene to alter its parameters of readability. Like Wiens’ intervention, Bieke Willem’s essay on Argentinean author Pola Oloixarac’s novel *Dark Constellations* shows how contemporary literature can marshal national, Indigenous, and experimental archives to find forms to intervene in new ecological and digital landscapes. As Willem shows, Oloixarac’s novel rescrambles the entwined traditions of the jungle novel and the archive novel to dissect the archival mechanisms through which Latin American literature is constituted.

Yvonne Liebermann and Birgit Neumann similarly look beyond the Anglophone metropolis to access literary works that function as a preserve for

nonhuman forces that resist archival order – forces that resist the homogenizing tendencies of globalization and that, for Liebermann and Neumann, count as irreducibly “planetary.” Yvonne Owuor’s *Dust* and Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* are novels from the Global South that stage the human desire to subdue the planet through archival practices, only to encounter a limit that preserves the potential for ontologies in which the human/nonhuman duality is less forbidding – and less out of tune with new ecological and digital archival landscapes that irrevocably entwine the two. In his essay on Hilary Mantel’s 1992 novel *A Place of Greater Safety*, Tom Chadwick shows how this historical novel about the French Revolution – a vital threshold in the development of the modern archive – articulates the archive as a nonhuman agent, a force that can only partially be harnessed by the novel’s revolutionary subjects. Chadwick notes that Mantel’s intimation of archival agency predates the ecological and digital contexts that we foreground in this double special issue: written in the 1970s and published in the 1990s, the novel bears the imprint of the templates of recovered histories and historiographic metafiction, but it also testifies to literature’s capacity for anachronism – for upsetting clean genealogies by pointing beyond them. In this way, it delivers this double special issue’s general argument that the traffic between literature and archive is a two-way process, not a unidirectional trajectory in which technological change preprograms cultural response.

Finally, Liran Razinsky’s essay “The Dream of Absolute Memory” gives another twist to the complex interrelations between technology, archival practice, and literature. Razinsky dissects Microsoft researchers Gordon Bell and Jim Gemmell’s 2009 book *Total Recall*, which project a cheerful vision of a future in which the work of human archiving and memory will be passed on to computers that will guarantee our digital immortality. The essay traces affinities between this Silicon Valley fantasy and the phantasms animating literary autobiographies, only to conclude that many of the paradoxes and impassés besetting these autobiographical projects cast *Total Recall*’s breezy optimism into a much more sinister light. As in Chadwick’s reading of *A Place of Greater Safety*, the fever dream of harnessing the archive to bolster human subjectivity ends up in a self-defeating surrender to nonhuman forces. Cumulatively, what emerges in the contributions to this double special issue is that contemporary literature’s awareness of this threat equips it to continue the time-tested literary project of calibrating the relation between the human and the nonhuman worlds. It is a central contention of this double special issue that some of the most relevant instances of that calibration are currently taking place under the rubric of the archive.

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