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## Literature in the New Archival Landscape

Tom Chadwick and Pieter Vermeulen 

Archiving has become an increasingly ubiquitous part of everyday life. Every e-mail we receive is instantaneously stored in the cloud, and every Google search we begin is autocompleted by an algorithm that draws on the archive of our past searches, clicks, messages, and purchases. The archive, in other words, not only *stores* the present even as it unfolds, it also actively *produces* the present and the future. Such ambient archiving is a far cry from the image we typically associate with archives: that of a stuffy, poorly lit room where our access to written or printed documents is carefully managed and often policed. By becoming part of everyday life, the archive has extended beyond its traditional institutions and users. As much as the shift from analogue to digital modes of registration is crucial in determining the archive's expansion into the wider culture, recent changes to the archive have not only been technological, but also semantic. In the last few decades of the twentieth century, critical theory unmoored the traditional archive from its precise location and set it adrift with metaphorical meanings, making it both a “physical” and an “imaginative” site, a “conceptual space whose boundaries are forever changing” (Voss and Werner 1). The two unavoidable names in this context remain those of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida – even if, as the contributions to these two issues make clear, many other scholars have approached the archive in innovative and imaginative ways. A major part of Foucault's work was based on actual archival research, but he also theorized the archive as something much more encompassing: as the epistemic infrastructure that allows statements to appear as singular events within a wider system of reference. This metaphorical archive, for Foucault, determines the truth value and the import of the statements that it allows. Derrida, for his part, situated the production of the archive in the psychic life of power: torn between a destructive death-drive and a conservational drive linked to the pleasure principle, our “archive fever” manically records the present to salvage it for an insistent future. As

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we will see, this complex temporal dynamic is as much an anticipation of the ubiquity of digital archives in everyday life as it is a belated reflex of earlier developments in actual archival science and practice.

The metaphorical use of the term “archive” by Foucault and Derrida, and by other critical and artistic works in what came to be called “the archival turn” (Manoff; Sheringham), participated in a wide-ranging reconsideration of archival authority, in which the archive was taken to task for its exclusions and complicities with power. These new and renewed engagements with the archive as a site where power is constructed and maintained proved very productive in fields such as *historiography*, where the microhistories of the 1970’s and 1980’s were informed by a more reflexive engagement with the archive (LaCapra 3); *postcolonialism*, which framed colonial archives as part of a process through which imperial rule was exercised (Stoler); and *gender and queer scholarship*, which elaborated counter-archives and recovered minor histories of disenfranchisement on the basis of gender and sexual orientation (Cvetkovich; De Kosnik 131–54).

The move to contest the archive was something that literature did not simply respond to but actively participated in. Indeed, the latter decades of the twentieth century saw literature develop a number of mandates with which to question the archive’s authority. Perhaps the most prominent form is that of the *recovered history*, which capitalizes on literature’s power to reimagine historical narratives built around gaps in the official record or instances where the archive fell silent. The histories of slavery and the Holocaust proved especially conducive to this imaginative retrieval work: think of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), which is organized around the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway slave in the 1850’s that Morrison encountered in “an article in a magazine of the period” (Rothstein), or, in the case of the Holocaust, of Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* (1987) or W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), which both stage self-reflexive archival quests for traces of female figures who disappeared during the Holocaust. The archive also provoked other more specific forms by which literature might readdress the authority of historical documents. Writing in 2001, Suzanne Keene observed a “proliferation” of late-twentieth century novels representing a material encounter with archives by scholarly or amateur characters “who seek information in collections of documents” (1). These encounters take the form of a *romance of the archive*, where characters are able to directly experience the weight and the presence of history. Her paradigmatic case is A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), in which the protagonists’ recovery of an archive of Victorian love and longing spills over into the narrative present. Such archival romance differs markedly from the more skeptical mode embodied in the postmodern genre that Linda Hutcheon influentially named *historiographic metafiction*. Taking on board the postmodern truism that the past is only accessibly through textual mediation, novels like Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* (1983) or Robert Coover’s *The Public Burning* (1977) mobilize postmodern techniques to reveal the “constructed, imposed nature of ... meaning,” showing

that “history itself depends on conventions of narrative, language, and ideology in order to present an account of ‘what really happened’” (Hutcheon 112). If recovered histories leverage the gaps in the archive as part of a politics of memory and archival romances convert these slippages as occasions for feeling, historiographic metafiction dramatizes the archive’s complicities and exclusions.

This double special issue responds to a sense that these mandates have to a large extent lost their purchase in the current archival landscape. Now that instantaneous archiving has infiltrated all parts of life, and now that information assaults us in abundant digital flows that demand to be managed rather than recovered, the archive no longer functions as a heroic site of retrieval (as in recovered histories) or a rarified place of affective truth (as in the historical romance); nor is the diagnosis (which informed historiographic metafiction) that our access to the past (and even the present) is filtered by textual and other intermediaries even remotely remarkable anymore. Cumulatively, the contributions to this double special issue argue that, because archiving has become such an all-pervasive part of everyday life, and because the literary forms it inspired until recently have started to lose their traction, the archive has become a key site where contemporary literature renegotiates its forms and functions. The archive, these essays demonstrate, challenges literature of all genres – poetry, fan fiction, novels, theater – to reflect on how to compete with or participate in omnipresent forms of data management that, as we noted at the outset, also have the power to shape and produce reality itself. The archive, we argue, is a crucial *environment* for the production, the circulation (see Alice Kelly’s essay on femslash fan fiction in this issue), and the critical study of contemporary literature (see Martin Eve’s essay). Before we introduce the five essays in this issue, however, we want to flesh out further the *digital* and the *ecological* dimensions of this archival environment.

Digital culture has had a substantial impact on the functions of the archive. This has been reflected in the wide range of theoretical interpretations of the archive across academic scholarship. Within archival science itself, Terry Cook has argued that the expansion of digital record keeping practices amount to a “paradigm shift” (48). Media theorist Wolfgang Ernst has similarly argued that digital culture has led to a “metamorphosis in the aesthetics of storage” under which the archive has shifted from a site that documents a singular event to a “dynamic” location of ongoing regeneration (95). This more dynamic archive has a deeper footprint across culture at large than the traditional archive. Abigail De Kosnik suggests that digital technology has allowed archives and cultural memory to go “rogue.” Archives, she claims, have moved away from professional institutions and have become increasingly integral to the day-to-day lives of individual amateur archivists. At the same time, under what she terms “remix culture,” users have seized hold of mass culture *as an archive* that can form the basis

or “raw matter” for their own creations (3–4). Gabriella Giannachi argues that the emergence of the digital represents a new stage in archival history under which information and the archive merge so as to become indistinguishable. The instantaneity and accessibility of archives, she argues, “turns all present data into instantly accessible archival entries and, vice versa, facilitates the re-interpretation and re-writing of canonic entries by users” (23). Two concepts are particularly useful for comprehending the impact of the digital on the archive. Michael Shanks argues that archives have come alive within culture and society, defining the archive as an *interface* containing “new mixed realities” and “prosthetic architectures for the production and sharing of archival resources” (Shanks 7). As an interface, the archive functions as a border zone where information can be processed and shared. Giannachi herself, meanwhile, defines the archive as an *apparatus* through which we map the everyday (xv). The archive, she argues, is not only a way to experience the world but also the “frame” through which we interact with it (23).

Defining the archive as an *interface* or an *apparatus* emphasizes the extent to which the archive has become a site of processing rather than preservation. It is important to recognize, however, that the archive has *always* been organized around the principles of preservation and process. While the digital context has specific relevance today, it also reflects the long-standing role of technology in determining the archive’s structure – a role that anticipates Derrida’s statement in *Archive Fever* that “archivable meaning is also and in advance codetermined by the structure that archives” (18). Media technology is integral to this. “Different media systems,” Ernst writes, “from library catalogs to microfilming have influenced the content as well as the understanding of the historical remains of the archive itself” (28). In that sense the archive fever that Derrida diagnoses – and which has become increasingly widespread with the practical changes to the archive ushered in by digital culture – has been a practical challenge for a long time.

Ecology provides a second key environment for the altered relations between literature and archive. The popular notion of the Anthropocene captures the idea that human life has had a decisive impact on the ecological and chemical make-up of the planet, in a way that has increasingly come to threaten the survival of human and nonhuman life forms. This notion affects our contemporary understanding of the archive in at least two ways. First, it defines the global impact of human action in light of the geological traces – radioactive isotopes, non-biodegradable plastics, technofossils – our species *will have left behind* in a distant future, and thus turns the whole planet into a massive archive of human action. At the same time, our increased technological capacities and scientific knowledge compel us to manically *read* the signals this planetary archive is already sending us. Thanks to what Paul Edwards has called the “vast machine” of data models, simulation models,

and reanalysis models (xv), we can read, for instance, global sulfur dioxide emissions and ice core samples as inscriptions of human action, and construct a biography of the species on the basis of archival traces that were, until not too long ago, simply unreadable. The idea that our actions are continuously composing a planetary archive and that the Anthropocene world is “something that is actively shaped and created through acts of human inscription” (Boes and Marshall 64) invites literature to rethink notions such as action, writing, inscription, and responsibility (see especially Mahlu Mertens’s contribution to this issue).

The Anthropocene affects our understanding of the archive in a second way, as it raises the specter of extinction. Imagining what the impact of human life *will have been*, it evokes images of “disanthropic” worlds without us (Garrard) – worlds in which our species will have become a mere fossil. This is already increasingly the fate of many species, as one effect of anthropogenic environmental degradation is that we are now living through the largest extinction event since the Cretaceous-Paleogene extinction event killed the dinosaurs 66 million years ago (Kolbert). It is not certain that the human species will escape the destructive process it has set off, and this means that the present is increasingly lived in anticipation of a future that may not arrive. This is the very dynamic of “an ‘archiving archive’ which structures the present in anticipation of its recollection” that Derrida identified as “archive fever,” understood by Mark Currie as “the frenzied archiving and recording of contemporary social life, which transcribes the present into the past by anticipating memory” (11–12). As such, self-archiving is not only a technological compulsion, it is also often a way of engaging with the threat of ecological collapse.

The five essays in this issue deal with the strategies through which contemporary writers, performers, fans, and professional readers are coming to terms with this new archival landscape. The first three essays take on the novel digital contexts in which literature and the archive operate. Read together, they emphasize that today’s archival environment has not only left its mark on conventional literary forms such as the novel (Bresnan), but has also energized a wider literary culture within academia (Eve) as well as outside of it (Kelly). Mark Bresnan’s essay examines the affordances of contemporary technoculture for the archive by focusing on the work of American writer Jonathan Lethem. Bresnan argues that Lethem delineates both the power and the promise of the archive today. Drawing on Lethem’s own archival experimentation in his 2007 essay “The Ecstasy of Influence,” the essay contrasts that essay’s rapturous immersion in the contemporary archive with the more anxious response to information management reflected in Lethem’s fiction. Zeroing in on his 2009 novel *Chronic City*, Bresnan reads the novel’s more complex rendering of technoculture as encompassing both ecstatic optimism and anxious dread.

While Bresnan's article focuses on the complex rendering of the archive within a recent work of fiction, Martin Paul Eve's contribution steps back to examine what the digital archival environment can offer to literary scholarship. Eve uses a data-driven approach to document the surprisingly substantial differences between two different versions of Jennifer Egan's novel *Emerald City*. In doing so he not only contributes to the scholarly archive by widening our understanding of a little-studied work by an increasingly prominent author, but also demonstrates how the new archival environment powers new forms of literary scholarship. Alice Kelly's essay explores how the digital archival environment has made the still understudied genre of fanfiction increasingly crucial for contemporary literary culture. Kelly turns to the digital fan fiction archive Archive of Our Own (AO3) to examine fan fiction engagements with Patricia Highsmith's 1952 novel *The Price of Salt*, responses which burgeoned following Todd Haynes' film adaptation of the novel as *Carol* in 2015. By reading fan fiction through Abigail Derecho's (now De Kosnik's) notion of the "archontic," Kelly demonstrates that fan fiction invites us to reimagine literary works as an open-ended archive rather than a closed text.

The essays by Mahlu Mertens and Dominic O'Key explore the archival resonances of the current ecological crisis. Both essays emphasize the conceptual challenges the climate crisis presents to received understandings of the archive, be that through the expanded scale of the geological archive (Mertens) or the specter of extinction (O'Key). Both explicitly reflect on the affordances of particular forms (theater and the novel) for helping us negotiate this new archival environment. Mertens's essay challenges ecocriticism's prevalent focus on fiction and poetry to examine strategies fostered within contemporary theater. Through an analysis of the 2016 play *World Without Us*, Mertens argues that, as a form inextricably tied to the presence of the human body, drama offers a way to think through the Anthropocene archive in the here and now, rather than in a faraway future. Dominic O'Key's contribution, finally, considers the way in which Mahasweta Devi's short novel *Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha* not only ponders anthropogenic extinctions of human and nonhuman life, but in doing so takes to task the novel genre's archival drive. O'Key introduces the term "literary de-extinction" to name a mode of writing that textually reanimates extinct beings from the archives of life within the diegetic present tense. For O'Key, Devi's novel moves beyond a melancholy archive fever to open up a new perspective on the nonhuman, one which through literary de-extinction reanimates the present as a site of struggle for multispecies justice. This confrontation between the politics of the archive and the politics of literature anticipates the animating concern of the second issue.

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