

# Book Review

## Review of *Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives*

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Archival work, as the editors write in *Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives*, has taken on new urgency. Increasing awareness of inequity pushes researchers to grapple with colonialism and racism that pervade everyday systems, especially in archives and education. Archival researchers are called to unsettle the givens and assumptions of archival research, many of which work to marginalize the histories of oppressed groups. The contributors to this volume understand “unsettling” as bearing witness or “peeling back the layers of what is constituted as settled so as to be able to witness, (re)orient oneself to, and carefully reckon with wounded/ing and haunted/ing spaces, places, and memories” (4).

This collection aspires to chart a path for new archival research, methods, and methodologies as well as to “(re)imagine and (re)weave futures and worlds” (7). Especially attuned to erasure, gaps, and silences, the fifteen chapters address archives' ability to create connections across the past and present as well as archives' power to oppress. The collection finds relevance mainly to archival researchers and educators in rhetoric and composition, and it provides insightful critiques of as well as new tactics for archival work.

Contributors draw heavily from feminist scholarship as feminist scholars' interests in re-

covering historical voices often involves and dovetails with archival research. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch's key practices of "critical imagination" and "strategic contemplation" from *Feminist Rhetorical Practices* find their way into multiple essays in this collection. In addition to and alongside feminist approaches, contributors draw critically on "decolonial, anticolonial, Indigenous, antiracist, queer, communal, and transnational perspectives, frameworks, and approaches" (8).

The field of archival studies is also prominently featured; the essays in *Unsettling Archival Research* explicitly engage with archival studies, specifically critical archival studies and social justice within archives. Many of the essays in this collection reference archival studies scholars and archivists Michelle Caswell, Anne Gilliland, Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, J. J. Ghaddar, and Marika Cifor. Caswell's 2016 "'The Archive' Is Not an Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies" is especially notable; in this piece, Caswell explains that humanities scholars mainly view "the archive" as "a hypothetical wonderland" while, for archival studies scholars and archivists, "archives—emphasis on the 's'" refer to record collections, stewarding institutions, and physical locations (I use the faux plural "archives" in this review to acknowledge archival studies). Caswell further writes that humanities scholars and archival studies scholars "are largely not taking part in the same conversations, not speaking the same conceptual languages, and not benefiting from each other's insights." Caswell argues that this neglect is gendered and classed due to the archival studies field being "feminized and relegated to the realm of 'mere' service-oriented practice" —a concern which should be especially relevant to feminist scholars in rhetoric and composition.

*Unsettling Archival Research* is divided into three parts, each with five chapters. The first part, *Unsettling Key Concepts*, interrogates key terms in archival work, leading archival researchers to reconsider basic assumptions and ideas taken for granted. These authors disrupt settled ideas about fondness for the past and encourage dissatisfaction with what archives show on the surface in order to think more critically and recognize multiple narratives.

In Chapter 1, "Unsettling the 'Archive Story,'" Jean Bessette examines the complexity and power of archives stories—the histories of archives as well as stories researchers tell alongside their research in efforts to reflexively describe personal archives encounters—which can settle and reinforce colonial archives tropes, such as fetishizing the power of the archives. To unsettle archives stories, Bessette suggests constellating them. Placing archives stories in relation to each other allows for a broader depiction of archives which highlights stories' multiplicity and variations, unsettling tropes.

Following that, Wendy Hayden's "Rescuing the Archive from What?" takes up the idea of "rescue" in the archives, including rhetoric and composition's "rescuing" of the archives for our disciplinary history. Hayden engages with Caswell's concern of how humanities scholars treat

archival studies and considers rhetoric and composition's own relationship to archival studies, noting that rhetoric and composition scholars often acknowledge the work of and collaborate with archivists. Hayden also addresses students' roles in unsettling "rescue" and "rescuer."

Jackie M. James, in "Narratives of Triumph: A Case Study of the Polio Archive," encourages the methodological approach of kairology to unsettle, recover, and amplify erased histories by asking what narratives an archives presents, why certain materials are in an archives, and what counternarratives might exist. As James uses a case study of a polio archives, this essay may be of especial interest to those who study the rhetoric of health and medicine. James also makes comparisons to the COVID-19 pandemic, showing that "by studying haunted histories, we reveal the haunted, entangled present" (49).

Kalyn Prince's "Nostalgia in the Archives: Using Nostalgia as a Tool for Negotiating Ideological Tensions," explains how nostalgia romanticizes the past while excluding certain voices from history. Prince considers two examples of artifacts from the University of Oklahoma's Western History Collections: an oral history interview conducted by a government investigator about Indigenous people of Oklahoma and a radio show by and for an Indigenous community. In making sense of the juxtaposition and discomfort of the records' proximity, Prince advocates for using critical nostalgia which helps researchers determine beneficial and problematic aspects of the past, allowing for a reconsideration of "the kind of home we want to live in, the kind of world we want to see" (64).

In the last chapter of this section, Kathryn Manis and Patty Wilde, in "A Matter of Order: The Power of Provenance in the Mercury Collection of Marion Lamm," unsettle the archival idea of provenance or archival arrangement. While provenance is often thought of as impartial, it is a "necessarily human" and interpretive act (70). The authors illustrate this with a Harvard University collection about mercury poisoning in twentieth-century Ontario that is arranged in a way which prioritizes the collectors and archivists while deemphasizing Indigenous perspectives from the Grassy Narrows and White Dog communities—for whom the mercury crisis is still ongoing. Manis and Wilde end this essay with suggestions and strategies for expanding understandings of provenance.

The collection's second section, *Unsettling Research, Theory, and Methodology*, explores opportunities and pitfalls of archival theory and practices, revealing tensions between what is settled and unsettled at various archival sites. The case studies in this section highlight different kinds of archives—from more-formal sites such as state archives to less-formal spaces such as community archives—and call upon researchers to unsettle usual approaches and try out new ways of tackling archival research.

Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Jessica A. Rose start off this section with “Hidden in Plain Sight: Rescuing the Archives from Disciplinarity.” This essay returns to Caswell’s “‘The ‘Archive’ Is Not an Archives,” and notes that humanities scholars and archivists share similar goals. Gaillet and Rose connect archival studies practices with feminist rhetoricians’ recovery practices and turn to examples of community activism and “everyday archives” as case studies, specifically the AIDS Quilt project and Georgia State University’s Southern Labor Archives materials on Dorothy Bolden, a civil rights activist. Gaillet and Rose encourage stronger collaborations between humanities scholars and archivists to discover hidden archives, create shared pedagogies, and highlight community contributions.

María Paz Carvajal Regidor’s “(En)Countering Archival Silences: Critical Lenses, Relationships, and Informal Archives” brings in critical race theory to allow greater insight into provenance and influence analysis of archival materials. Carvajal Regidor specifically looks at Latinx student writing in a formal, academic archives and an informal archives, both on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus. She notes how the formal archives silenced student voices while the informal archives countered those silences. For example, the formal archives only houses the final drafts of *La Carta*, a student publication, while the informal archives houses drafts in-progress, revealing “decisions, processes, and labor” of the student writers (114). Carvajal Regidor recommends that scholars search beyond formal archives in order to do justice to marginalized communities.

In Chapter 8, “Let Them Speak: Rhetorically Reimagining Prison Voices in the Archives of the Collective,” Sally F. Benson turns to the New Mexico State Archives, exploring archival materials created by people obstructed from speaking for themselves, specifically, a newspaper, *The Enchanted News*, by incarcerated journalists at the Penitentiary of New Mexico from the 1950s to the 1970s. Benson approaches this work from an explicitly feminist historiographer of rhetoric viewpoint, hoping for a more-inclusive view of archives practices. Benson aims to “bear witness to people both historically disenfranchised and quite literally removed from public awareness altogether” (130). Excerpts from the newspaper intersperse the essay, helping give voice to the silenced journalists.

Pamela Takayoshi’s “Bearing Witness to Transient Histories” encourages reparative work in archives by recentering neglected histories and writing histories “in a way that points toward a more equitable and moral future” (149). While not focusing on specific archives, Takayoshi notes the difficulty of learning about nineteenth-century women’s mental health care from women themselves. Using the example of Clarissa Lathrop, a schoolteacher who was locked in an asylum against her will, Takayoshi shows how archival absences can be recuperated through methods of critically imagining social context and strategically contemplating intersectional positionality.

In “The Rhetorical (Im)possibilities of Recovering George Barr: Toward a Decolonial Queer Archival Methodology,” Walker P. Smith builds on Charles E. Morris and K.J. Rawson’s “archival queers” to bring a decolonial-queer approach to archival work. Decolonial and queer theory have been thought of as incompatible as English has been the “dominant mode of queer theorizing” and queer theory has not easily translated to contexts outside of Europe and the US (168). However, through focusing on Barr’s contributions to the Edgar Rice Burroughs’ Archive at the University of Louisville (Burroughs authored the Tarzan and John Carter series), Smith suggests that decolonial and queer theory become compatible once their incompatibilities are recognized and queer histories reject singular, Western narratives.

The last of the three sections, *Unsettling Praxis and Pedagogy: Toward Pluriversality*, addresses archival research in classrooms and the community with especial attention to power and positionality of the multiple identities present in these spaces. As with the previous section, authors explore different kinds of archives, including academic and digital archives. Multiple essays also take up students’ involvement in the archiving process (and not just archival research) as well as courses incorporating archivists. These essays consider how educators can help students prepare for, engage with, and unsettle archival research.

Liz Rohan, in “Archival Imaginings of the Working-Class College Woman: The 1912–1913 Scrapbook of Josephine Gomon, University of Michigan College Student,” discusses a scrapbook she created as a recovery project of a working-class student who might have been otherwise lost to history. Rohan unsettles existing archival materials by “commenting on their value, making them more accessible, and filling the ‘social need’ for stories about working-class students” (207). To shore up gaps in the historical record, Rohan employs strategies of imagination (specifically critical imagination and Gilliland and Caswell’s “archival imaginings”) and creativity. Selections from the scrapbook as well as discussion around incorporating imagination and creativity into the classroom provide inspiration for educators looking to incorporate similar projects into their teaching.

“Decolonizing the Transnational Collection: A Heuristic for Teaching Digital Archival Curation and Participation” by Tarez Samra Graban considers diasporic, transnational, digital archival collections, such as that of Joyce Banda, a former president of the Republic of Malawi. Graban explains how students can be involved in processing and pre-processing archival collections and considers this work in the context of globalizing undergraduates’ course of study. Drawing from feminist historiography work and archival social justice, Graban proposes a set of heuristics for decolonial approaches to curating transnational digital collections, heuristics involving reparative action, tracing instead of stabilizing archival collections, and delinking archives from geopolitical assumptions.

Jennifer Almjeld’s “Archiving as Learning: Digital Archives as Heuristic for Transformative Undergraduate Education” may be of especial interest to *Peitho* readers as the essay describes a

class project of building a feminist rhetorics digital archives in preparation for the 2019 Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference at James Madison University ([a site that still exists](#)). Almjeld discusses how building this archives unsettled student identities through questioning students' positionality as feminist scholars, archivists, and participants inside and outside of the conference community. Almjeld writes the experience was "both a success and a failure" (256), and the explanations of lessons learned will be useful for those interested in similar class projects.

In Chapter 14, "Settling Emerging Scholars in Unsettling Territory: A Case Study of Underrepresented Students Working with Dominant Culture Collections," Rebecca Schneider and Deborah Hollis describe a course they designed at the University of Colorado Boulder in which students interacted with an academic archives. The authors discuss how students from historically underrepresented communities "can be empowered to confront, reveal, and amend the hegemony of academic archives" through assignment design, collection use, and consideration of emotional intelligence (260). These strategies settled students in the archives, allowing them to gain not only the skills but also the confidence to use archives.

The final chapter, "Unsettling Archival Pedagogy" by Amy J. Lueck and Nadia Nasr, theorizes "how we might rethink the goals of archival research in our classroom to make students' limited positionality, discomfort, uncertainty, and other such moments the center of a rhetorical research course in the archives" (285). They discuss challenges of moving toward unsettling moments—such as archival erasure or record embargoes—instead of avoiding or normalizing these moments and how assigning this work values "examining privilege, seeking difference, and bearing witness" (297).

The essays throughout this collection are useful for scholars both new and experienced with archival work. For those unfamiliar with archives, these essays' rhetoric and composition standpoints allow fellow rhetoric and composition scholars to envision connections to their own work and begin stepping into archival work. Additionally, experienced archival researchers may use this collection to rethink, reconsider, and gather new inspiration for the ways their work intersects with archives. The third section, Unsettling Praxis and Pedagogy, is especially relevant to those who wish to incorporate archives into their teaching and desire to unsettle their archival approach.

As someone interested in archives not only from a feminist historiography perspective but from a public history and archival studies perspective, I believe this collection's prevalent engagement with Caswell's work and the push toward working alongside archivists and archival studies is needed. This collection cannot mend all the issues Caswell mentions in "The Archive' Is Not an Archives" but provides a starting point for scholars in rhetoric and composition. Interdisciplinary connections and collaborations with those doing the labor of arranging and providing access to records allows scholars to engage with archives in a more informed and thoughtful manner.

Furthermore, as the editors note in the Introduction, this collection is the beginning of a needed conversation, and topics for future discussion include deeper dives into digital archives, creating archives with communities, increased collaboration with archivists, antiracist archival work, Indigenous archival practices, and more pedagogy-focused approaches. I agree with these topics and believe that greater attention toward community archives holds especial promise for moving forward. The contributors in this collection have shown how archival work can exist in the classroom, and bringing archival work into communities may allow for even greater impact of reparative archives or unsettling colonialism and racism.

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