

## On anarchivism: perpetuating the postmodern turn within archival thought

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*'information* is currency  
But It Is Totally Inexcusable To Fall Victim To Its *Poverty/Piracy In/De flation.*'

Nile Southern, *The Anarchivists of Eco-Dub*

### *Introduction*

Postmodern theorist Jean-François Lyotard expresses concern over a particular 'slackening' or an implicit liberalization that is slowly pervading across disciplines as diverse as art history, philosophy, and politics. Thinkers, he believes, are witnessing the invasion of the postmodern and are accordingly battering down the hatches of the 'uncompleted project of modernism' (72). By extension, one can easily assume that this is occurring across disciplines beyond those that Lyotard mentions explicitly. Accordingly, one may begin to see such ripples within the pond of archives that many of us dip our feet, wade, or completely submerge ourselves in. Heather MacNeil's essay 'Trusting records in a postmodern world' reminds us that postmodernism helps us recognize that key concepts in diplomatics are historical constructs rather than *a priori* truths. Nonetheless, her presentation to the University of Virginia's Supporting Digital Scholarship project was essentially an exposition of diplomatic principles as applied to the realm of electronic records. In this paper, I will primarily discuss Verne Harris' conceptions of the postmodern and their implications for the archival profession. I feel that a postmodern analysis of the archival is important, but we must still go further to create a radical conception of it. There is a large divide between theory and praxis in the archival world; while theory is definitely important, we must often step outside it to solve our problems. Rather than relying on it as a normative basis for archival practice

we should continue to reevaluate and reconstruct our theories *and* practices into an 'anarchivist program.'

*Postmodern troubles in a modern profession*

In his essay, 'Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa,' Verne Harris establishes five points regarding Positivistic constructs within discourse about contemporary South African archives. While his diagnoses specifically concern the South African archival landscape, the first four nonetheless describe some of the assumptions at play in discourse surrounding archives regardless of their geographic location, scope of collecting, or institutional setting. The first of Harris' points surrounds the meaning (and, in my opinion, the use) of the word 'archives'; it is, in some ways, similar to a Platonic form or a Lockean concept in its simplicity and stability. 'Archives,' he writes,

[A]re documents or records, in whatever medium, identified for preservation in archival custody; an archives is the place where such records are preserved or an institution providing such places. The same attributes apply to a host of related words – archive, archivist, record, document, copy, original, and so on (133).

This point is the fundamental concern of Jacques Derrida's work. *Archive Fever* is no exception, wherein he playfully deconstructs the concept of archive(s), writing, and their interconnections. Any text can be an archive, and an 'archive' can exist without 'archives.' Derrida cites Yerushalmi's analysis of the death of Moses to prove his point. If Moses had been murdered in an isolated location, his death would not have been forgotten since the act of concealment itself would leave an archive or trace (66). Technology is one of the primary factors that challenges our reliance on such a hard and fast definition of traditionally immutable archival concepts. Beyond purely technical issues, electronic records have caused archivists such a great deal of trouble since traditional archival concepts do not translate well. Unlike items in a folder or boxes on a

shelf, they may not have a discrete or singular location. Records in relational databases do not fit well with the archival use of the term because their interconnections with other records are one of their most important features. To 'cyberculture,' Brothman writes, there can be indiscrete boundaries between all texts, not just electronic ones; these same texts refer, excerpt, contain, link, and occupy the same nonphysical, virtual space together. Furthermore, the diplomatic requirement of originality loses some of its power in the realm of electronic records since copying is fairly trivial and commonplace.

Harris' second point concerns the nature of archival holdings or records, as they are thought to be the 'organic and innocent product of processes exterior to archivists and reflect ... those processes ... [i.e.,] reality' (133). However, this 'reality' as presented in the records is ultimately unknowable for a number of reasons. The singularity of the event, despite any aspect related to its frequency, is ultimately undiscoverable; its *archivability*, or 'possibility of [its] archiving trace,' removes its uniqueness (100). Furthermore, the creation of the record or act of recording *helps* define the process from which it results. The contents of printed internal memoranda are defined by the internal-memorandum-as-genre; such records arise as the product of conventions that define their creation: their physical layout, the types of information they contain, and so forth. The final and most important response is that if archives, records, and the like reflect, express, or document reality, they cannot do so transparently, speaking by or for themselves. Essentially, anyone who has come in contact with a set of archives or records, including the creator, donor, archivist, and user, alters them and both their past and future interpretations. Therefore, the innocent, passive archivist does not exist; instead, regardless of our awareness of it, we are all archivists-as-activists. In some ways, we may even consider ourselves to have too much power if we were to become

an outsider to our profession. To the public, our processes of appraisal and deaccessioning must be seen hypocritical at the least if we are charged with preserving records through time.

This is obviously connected Harris' assessment of the role of the archivist and archives, the third point in his description of the Positivist foundations of South African archives. While archivists are no longer solely viewed as impartial custodians, archives are still conceptually defined as physical entities of which custody is an integral part. Furthermore, Harris notes that although discourse surrounding the role and responsibility of archives and archivists has changed, it still does not address the role of archivists as participants in the creation of records and the formation of memory. Harris and Terry Cook both address this aspect of the archival postmodern turn with their advocacy of the postcustodial program. In the case of electronic records, recordkeeping systems become increasingly complex over time, in terms of quantity and form of records within them. Tried and true archival practices simply do not work in some cases, and the increasing number of these problems must cause us to look for something beyond a mere stopgap solution. If archivists understand and become involved in records creation processes, we will be more equipped to deal with them than if we were to merely receive their end products.

The fourth point that Harris makes concerns statements regarding a national archives as constituting, containing, or holding the collective memory of a nation. It is important to note that other nations have made similar claims regarding their archives, including Canada, the United States, several African nations, and Singapore. Harris' primary concern regards the inability to preserve every record created within South Africa. In short, there is no way to ensure the preservation of every record based on their both conscious and unconscious destruction by creators, archivists, technological

obsolescence, and time itself. Archives, therefore, simply offer researchers 'a sliver of a sliver of a sliver' of the window into South Africa's past (137). He also briefly mentions a second point that I find of particular interest and importance; the modernistic thought that one archives, the National Archives, can provide the collective memory for a nation completely ignores other repositories such as museums, libraries, as well as individuals. Nonetheless, the phrase collective memory implies that it requires a multitude of remembrances, experiences, and so forth for it to exist. It seems to go against thought that merely *one* repository could hold all the *collective* memory for any group. If one repository was able to hold all records indefinitely (a truly modernistic project in its own right), it still could not hold all of a nation's collective memory even if widespread oral history and collection projects were started. Such projects could augment the memory stored within the repository, but there is no way to capture human experience in an easily consumable format.

*Writing the anarchist cookbook, one recipe at a time: a conclusion on rethinking archival theory and practice*

In 1991, postmodern author Nile Southern published an obscenely limited edition of a novel entitled *The Anarchivists of Eco-Dub: A Wireless Report*. Originally written as a 'screen based narrative,' Southern's work is a futuristic account of a group of 'Anarchivists' that served as the collectors of cultural debris from the era of new media. Eco-Dub, the repository, began because of advances in technology and its corresponding evil, capitalism; the influx and overflow of multimedia called the Anarchivists into action to provide exercise some control (but not too much). Mantis, one of the well known Anarchivists, states that 'the early Anarchivists were seeking real knowledge through an open archive of history ... We felt the absolute need to throw the visual/text bones of the culture on the floor and reel in their pattern.' Accordingly, the

Anarchivists re-arranged and re-presented their media 'streams' by the juxtaposition of images, video, text, and audio. Mantis describes his conception of the role of the Anarchivist:

A term I prefer for what I do now is Trace and Re:Space. When I trace the history/historicity of a person, place, habit, fashion, institution, thought, or idea, I know I am not being definitive in my gathering – that would be a paradox – for the work, by Eco-Dub definition, is never done. You are at best a gardener planting rhizomatic blossoms, the crop eventually blooming by the nanosecond at limitless locations worldwide; an instantly retrievable, malleable harvest, replicating and medicinal.

The 'spacing' part is how the images, texts, sounds, and disappearances, flow together. When I encounter a disappearance or knowledge-gap, and label it so, it is a challenge to relegate it to a two-dimensional absence, rather than a philosophical black hole that absorbs all around it.

While a work of fiction, *The Anarchivists of Eco-Dub* nonetheless provides us with new insight on how to face some of our current archival crises. Unlike our profession, the Anarchivists are more concerned with reexpressing existing content than with its preservation; furthermore, they tend to concentrate on ephemeral materials such as commercials rather than on records of individuals or evidence of business practices. Nonetheless, like the archival profession, they recognize their role as shapers of social memory. However, they go beyond that by actively shaping the records. When they rearrange the records, they do to give them new meaning. Furthermore, when they bring materials together, they recognize two things: that their work is not perfect (that is, it can be rearranged to give a new, possibly 'better' meaning), and that they are simply unable to bring every bit of material together into one place. Accordingly, Eco-Dub is the ultimate postmodern archives. It is decentralized since it has no institutional or governmental affiliation as well as no isolated location; there are individual 'stations' throughout the globe that close and open frequently.

Finally, 'spacing,' as quoted above, is a manner to deal with knowledge gaps. In cases of archival theory, these gaps which occurring when a particular concept is

seemingly inapplicable to a new area often seem insurmountable. Accordingly, there is often a division in how to surmount this gap – does one apply existing concepts with little thought, rethink existing concepts, or abandon the existing ones? In the case of the Anarchivists, it seems as though they try to do what they can for the time being. They find a temporary way to blend the gap in to the continuous stream of data. However, these are seemingly insufficient. In archival discourse, this would be akin to reusing existing theory with little differentiation, such as the use of diplomatics in electronic records. Postmodernism, however, suggests a better approach. Lyotard states that industrial cinema and photography are the best way to document a particular reality ‘when the objective is to stabilize the referent’ (74). Nonetheless, the reality that these techniques document are fairly mundane; to make progress, to develop new ideas, and to set the stage for future practitioners, they must question the rules given to them from their predecessors. If they do not, they are merely perpetuating conformity and reliance on possibly antiquated paradigms. Accordingly, if archivists expect to develop changes in theory, they must not be afraid to challenge them actively.