

9-11-2024

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

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### Recommended Citation

López, Dina (2024) "Review: Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.2060>

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

Edited by Gesa E. Kirsch, Romeo García,  
Caitlin Burns Allen, and Walker P. Smith

MY OLDEST SON, A MAJOR IN THE UNITED STATES SPACE FORCE WITH A MASTER'S degree in space systems engineering, visited my husband and me for Christmas. He noticed the book *Unsettling Archival Research* on the kitchen table and wondered out loud about the meaning of its title. "That sounds scary," he remarked. "Why should archival research be *unsettling*?" Well, he is the child who gifted me a kitchen towel for Christmas one year that reads, "Do one thing every day to scare your family." The towel is decorated with a depiction of a woman wrestling with alligators. My children know me well.

His reaction to the title was appropriate—the very act of unsettling archival research can be, well, unsettling. Researchers do not know what they will find when they begin investigating archives. When I researched school records from a small West Texas town for my dissertation, very little was available for me to read and analyze because many of the records had been destroyed during the school district's consolidation with another, larger school district. Gatekeepers were confused as to why I would even bother with the last two boxes of school records, all that remained of a school district that was in operation for nearly 50 years. And yet the absence of the documents I had hoped to lay eyes on spoke volumes—why destroy some and not others? After talking to some school district administrators and alumni from the original school, I had an image in my mind of boxes of school files dating back to the early 1900s, dumped in the back of an open pickup truck for the official 15-minute transfer from one town to the next, school records flying out of the back of the pickup as it sped down the highway. Notwithstanding the absence of all the missing

student records, the remaining files in those two boxes bear witness to a wounded and haunted history of a town dominated by a narrative that claimed segregation was the best solution for the Mexican and Anglo students. Yes, an unsettling, scary, and sometimes stuck place until it is unsettled, as the essays in *Unsettling Archival Research* suggest.

The book is divided into three parts containing five essays each. Part One, “Unsettling Key Concepts,” unpacks the unsettling of key terms in archival research, such as “story,” “provenance,” and “narrative,” as well as new terms: “constellations,” “rescuing,” and “erasure.” In Part Two, “Unsettling Research, Theory and Methodology,” authors present opportunities for archival theories and methodologies when engaging in queer and GLBTQ archival research, Latinx studies, and erased histories. Part Three, “Unsettling Praxis and Pedagogy,” offers five examples for ways to challenge students in unsettling and decolonizing the archives and their histories through their own writing. The collection of essays is well curated. I struggled a little with a couple of them because the underpinnings of their topics are not in my research forte; however, this indicates one of the book’s strengths: it casts a wide scope on research opportunities in the archives. To borrow from Walker Smith’s quote of Morris and Rawson at the beginning of Chapter 10, we are all potentially archivists—whatever our research discipline may be.

In the first chapter, “Unsettling the ‘Archive Story,’” Jean Bessette asks, “What is in a story?” Even though the archive may reveal what seems to have a beginning, a middle, and an end, she argues instead for recasting *constellations of stories* in the archives. In doing so, the players, places, and knowledge gained from the story are all impacted. The archive itself is a story that is not told in the archive, yet it speaks through what is actually preserved—for example, souvenir postcards of black lynchings, forgotten by racist families and accidentally preserved in their attics—not to be found in the official archives of the South. An analysis of the sanitized official archive is a pedagogical and transforming process for researchers, who may find themselves reflecting on their own positionality in their research.

Wendy Hayden asks researchers to reconsider the notion of *rescuing* the archives in Chapter 2, “Rescuing the Archive from What?” Researchers should claim the archives for rhetoric and composition studies through the development of methods and methodologies that will train students to delink the historically forgotten or marginalized voices from the archives and relink them to positions of power. However, she cautions that students must be trained to understand their “role as rescuer” because of the uncertainty that archives themselves represent. Hayden provides a sample project she assigns to her first-year writing students, in which they explore and critique reading in the archives. The students access blogs on a topic, creating tags of metadata that create connections between the archives and future researchers.

In doing so, they create awareness and assign value to the archives in institutions, communities, social justice, public memory, and pedagogy.

Jackie M. James's case study of the polio archive in Chapter 3, "Narratives of Triumph," highlights a *history of erasure* in the archives that contributes to a false narrative of American triumph. Thus, it obscures the lives of those who do not fit into that story. The familiar story of the polio vaccine is the modern victory, a false binary of the victory over polio. And yet, the methods of treating polio have only rendered the disease treatable, not incurable. Using kairology as method, James approaches the archives by reading for information beyond that which privileges medical and scientific evidence. Looking for actual patient experiences elided by that evidence, he investigated the historical moments of patients who could not afford the iron lung and created their own alternatives by using household items. James's research provides an example of applying "kairological questioning," a process of questioning the archives in the moment, followed by unsettling them as a dynamic series of experiences.

In Chapter 4, "Nostalgia in the Archives," Kalyn Prince attends to the negotiation of ideological tensions in the archives, conceptualizing *nostalgia* not just as a longing for the past but "also as a tool with which to dissect constructions of the past" (pp. 57–58). She suggests that nostalgia is an *enthymeme*, a place where memories of the past are connected to a longing for a possible future. However, in the effort to reconstruct nostalgic longings, certain voices may be left out; in unsettling the nostalgia in the archive, such voices can be heard. She provides as a case study her examination of an investigator's choices to summarize an interview with pioneer Mary Still Morris about her grandparents' experiences during the Trail of Tears. Morris's son served as interpreter during the interview; however, the investigator wrote down only what they considered necessary material from his interpreting. The interpreter's eclipsed version of the narrative created an opportunity for Prince to untangle competing ideological values and ethics from the archive. Thus, she was able to create a space for the lost voices by imagining the past. Reconstruction of nostalgia, then, transforms the archival home into a place that is inclusive of these voices, their memories, and generations-shaped identities.

In the fifth chapter of this section, "A Matter of Order," Kathryn Manis and Patty Wilde examine the power of *provenance* in the Mercury Collection of Marion Lamm. The collection documents the impact of mercury on Barney's Ball Lake Lodge, a vacation lodge for wealthy travelers, which the Lamms closed when Dryden Chemical Company spilled mercury in nearby water supplies. Found in "disarray" at the Lamm home by her daughter Rochelle, the collection was received by Harvard Library in the same condition. It first required organization according to institutional best practices as opposed to Marion Lamm's original ordering that had lacked standard

document mapping. In creating an order for the collection, researchers discovered that the collection privileged documentation regarding the Lamms' losses over documentation of losses experienced by the Grassy Narrows and White Dog Indigenous communities. (These communities continue to suffer the effects of the mercury pollution.) The authors argue that in unsettling the provenance of archives, the researcher must consider all stakeholders in their organization, however little mention they have in the collection.

Although Part Two does not refer directly to the terms in Part One, it is helpful to keep in mind the concept of identifying terms as a necessary component of examining how scholars can unsettle the archives via research, theory, and methodology. In Chapter 6, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Rescuing the Archives from Disciplinarity," Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Jessica A. Rose ask, whose voices get preserved in scholarship of the tensions that arise in archives related to gender studies, LGBTQ studies, and Latinx studies? Shifting the ground beneath these archives turns up new questions and archaeological digs. To cases that suggest new avenues of archival investigation, Gaillet and Rose suggest collaborative archiving as one way to disrupt the surface. Their methods include community projects to develop the AIDS quilt, the Southern Labor Archives, and the activism of Dorothy Bolden and the National Domestic Workers Union. The pedagogical implications of these methods teach students to find archival material in plain sight and to search deeper, interrogate what counts as evidence, and learn who counts as expert.

In Chapter 7, "(En)countering Archival Silences: Critical Lenses, Relationships, and Informal Archives," María Paz Carvajal Regidor offers ways to intersect research of formal and informal archives with critical race theory (CRT). She challenged her students to examine formal and informal archives found in La Casa Cultural Latina at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and publish counternarratives that prioritize marginalized voices in those archives. Therefore, the student-produced writing represents the ways that informal archives have the potential to disrupt the dominant narrative in the archive.

Chapter 8, "Let Them Speak: Rhetorically Reimagining Prison Voices in the Archives of the Collective," presents the archives of a newspaper produced by inmates at the Penitentiary of New Mexico (PEN). Sally F. Benson rhetorically reimagines incarcerated journalists writing a prison newspaper under surveillance at PEN. Although the journalists graduated from the prison college program, some could not look forward to a future outside of the prison, and censorship often kept their work from full publication. The prison newspaper was ended due to the journalists' articles dealing with claims of racism and narratives of power within the prison system, thus, an unsettling of these archives reveals the liminal histories that live in voices who wrote about oppression within the prison walls. Benson also investigated how these

records were digitized and preserved, in what historical contexts, and with whose consent—namely, those formerly incarcerated—a disempowerment of authors who might not wish to have past incarcerations revealed publicly.

Pamela Takayoshi also questions this form of “disempowering” in Chapter 9, “Bearing Witness to Transient Histories.” Record keepers might consider some records unworthy of keeping or preserving; therefore, the history must be reconstructed within a social context that helps us understand what the missing records might have expressed. Takayoshi collected data from historical sources that allowed her to ground her imaginings of 23 women committed to an insane asylum against their will. The women’s memoirs about their experiences were published but later neglected. Wanting to understand the intersecting forces in these transient histories, Takayoshi critically imagined and strategically contemplated what was present and what was absent in the published memoirs neglected by history.

In Chapter 10, “The Rhetorical Impossibilities of Recovering George Barr: Toward a Decolonial Queer Archival Methodology,” Walker P. Smith describes his struggles with arriving at such a methodology, noting that current archives privilege straight positions of power. In his study of artist George Barr, Smith asks how do those who are historicized in the archives identify themselves in the archives. Barr, he argues, hid his gayness in his artwork by depicting it “in plain sight” (p. 174). Smith contends that archival researchers must resist hierarchical classifications of queer narratives and consider them according to the local and embodied times, as he has done in several examples of Barr’s drawings. Thus, quoting Morris and Rawson at the beginning of the chapter, Barr declares, “We are all potentially archival queers” (p. 168).

Part Three, “Unsettling Praxis and Pedagogy: Toward Pluriversality,” is the final section. In Chapter 11, “Archival Imaginings of the Working-Class College Woman,” Liz Rohan thoughtfully examined artifacts from college student Josephine Goman, who attended the University of Michigan. Goman was a working-class college student who kept a record of her experiences as a nighttime telephone operator for the University of Michigan from 1911 to 1913. Rohan applied her own “archival imaginings” to create a scrapbook as a form of “empathy for the underdog” (p. 189), imagining what Goman might have scrapbooked if she had possessed the resources to do so. She then utilized these materials to record an archival history about someone who was marginalized because of her gender. Her study is an example of how students can develop their own scrapbooks of artifacts to record archives that are not complete for other groups who were marginalized because of their gender, class, ethnicity, or race.

In Chapter 12, Tarez Samra Graban argues for a decolonization of the institutional archive with regard to “Decolonizing the Transnational Collection: A Heuristic for Teaching Digital Archive Curation and Participation.” Graban aims to help students

“position themselves as curators of collections” versus being “consumers of archival collections” (p. 213). In her work, she attempts to articulate decolonization of these collections to students via one case study, that of the former president of the Republic of Malawi, Joyce Banda. Graban pedagogically reflects the rhetoricity of the global age via a three-part heuristic: First, seek the organizational trace—look for circles of identification within the archives. Second, commit to growth by gradual buildup or *archival accretion*. In Banda’s case, she traced the evidence in Banda’s digital archive to its relationships to historical and other factors at play. Third, invoke the “participatory condition” (p. 226); in other words, have students consider their own digital literacies, which will impact assumptions and other ways students will interact with the archive. She suggests that the heuristic promotes an ethical approach to transnational archival research.

Jennifer Almjeld likewise presents a pedagogical heuristic in Chapter 13, “Archiving as Learning: Digital Archives as Heuristic for Transformative Undergraduate Education.” Taking advantage of a Feminisms and Rhetorics Conference scheduled to be held at her university, she invited her students to create a conference archive during the semester of the conference. Students experienced the conference archives for the full semester as they created a historical record, determining which artifacts to include and to write about. Her methods included preparation in examining previous archives and considerations of technological advancements such as video and audio materials they chose to include and exclude. Rather than providing a single way to develop an archive, she suggests this process encourages students to acknowledge the ways archives evolve and change. Finally, she argues that a student-created archive not only shapes its identity, it also challenges students to write about something other than themselves. The students in this project learned to acknowledge places of power, imperfections, and the ephemerality of the archive, and most importantly, to explain themselves by stating their goals and limitations in the project.

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 worked with high-achieving first-generation students and students of color in a Miramontes Arts and Sciences Program (MASP) seminar at the University of Colorado Boulder. The seminar taught students to conduct archival research in ways that unsettle the colonial and colonized practices at a PWI (predominantly white institution). Their aim was to help students overcome apprehension, anxieties, and emotional perceptions while researching archives in a predominantly white space as well as provide them with a curriculum in which they could see themselves. In the MASP case study, they suggest practices to address concerns by students who identified as African American, Asian, Indigenous, Latina, Latinx, in relation to their individual encounters with gatekeepers, such as

bystander intervention training for such interactions with librarians as well as open communication with librarians before students begin their research. Classroom successes in the seminar ranged from individual experiences, such as the student whose vocal wonderings to the librarian-archivist resulted in a final project that navigated primary sources, to a group of students who analyzed gender representation in a Chicano movement newspaper. The instructors' previous experiences, knowledge, and skills in addressing student anxiety about exploring archives in a predominantly white space contributed to the students' enthusiasm and self-efficacy in the project.

The fifteenth and final chapter of this section, "Unsettling Archival Pedagogy," is refreshing because it deals with spaces for improvement. Amy Lueck and Nadia Nasr reflect on their experience teaching a course on archives as an opportunity to rethink goals for undergraduate courses in archival research. As instructors, they could have made room for students to reflect on their positionality in the research. In their example, they present a student who was curious about the university's disaffiliation with the Greek system and her subsequent roadblock to finding answers: an embargoed box of artifacts. The authors suggest it is okay to follow the impulse to smooth the way for students because it allows them to reach their goal of producing *something* for the assignment. However, it is also important to assure students that it is okay to be stuck and to struggle a little bit. Doing so allows students to research what interests them and enter into dialogue with the artifacts they have access to, asking them questions and listening rhetorically.

I recall these "stuck" experiences during my graduate studies. In some of them I had to find a way of going around, under, or over a rock, but in other instances the process of asking questions and listening rhetorically to what I had on hand was just as fruitful for my goals, and I am grateful for instructors who allowed me to pivot. This final chapter is a lovely way to end the book, reminding the reader to be mindful of the experience of being unsettled in the process of unsettling the archives.

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