

*Editors' Note*

# Critical Archival Studies:

An Introduction

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This special issue tackles critical approaches to archives and archival studies. Since the landmark 2002 *Archival Science* special issue on “archives, records, and power” edited by Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, there has been an explosion of efforts to examine the ways in which records and archives serve as tools for both oppression and liberation.<sup>1</sup> This recent scholarship and some community-based archival initiatives critically interrogate the role of archives, records and archival actions and practices in bringing about or impeding social justice, in understanding and coming to terms with past wrongs or permitting continued silences, or in empowering historically or contemporarily marginalized and displaced communities. These efforts employ a range of methods (from grounded theory to action research to discourse analysis) and are informed by several approaches to critical theory, ranging from decolonization to postcolonialism, feminism, queer theory, critical race theory, and deconstructionism. Notable topics in this arena explore the recordkeeping of oppressive regimes, examine evidence of genocide, racism and human rights violations, or trace the dynamics of postcolonialism and uneven distribution of power.<sup>2</sup> By engaging these often painful, complex, and contentious

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<sup>1</sup> Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1-19. See the entire special issue.

<sup>2</sup> See Jeannette Bastian, “Reading Colonial Records through an Archival Lens: The Provenance of Place, Space, and Creation,” *Archival Science* 6, no. 3 (2006): 267–284; Jeannette Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003); Michelle Caswell, “Khmer Rouge Archives: Accountability, Truth, and Memory in Cambodia,” *Archival Science* 10, no. 1 (2010): 25–44; Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014); Kim Christen, “Opening Archives: Respectful Repatriation,” *American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (2011): 185–210; Wendy Duff,

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histories and the role that archives and records have played and continue to play in them, archivists and archival scholars face challenging issues.

Building on and expanding these efforts, this special issue of the *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* presents the work of archivists and archival studies scholars at the forefront of what might we term “critical archival studies.” Frankfurt School theorist Max Horkheimer famously defined critical theory as being explanatory in the sense that it exposes what is wrong with society and identifies the actors enabled to change it, practical in that it proposes attainable goals through which to transform society into a “real democracy,” and normative in that it provides the norms for such criticism.<sup>3</sup> Taking inspiration from this characterization, we broadly define critical archival studies as those approaches that (1) explain what is unjust with the current state of archival research and practice, (2) posit practical goals for how such research and practice can and should change, and/or (3) provide the norms for such critique. In this way, critical archival studies, like critical theory, is emancipatory in nature, with the ultimate goal of transforming archival practice and society writ large. As an academic field and profession, critical archival studies broadens the field’s scope beyond an inward, practice-centered orientation and builds a critical stance regarding the role of archives in the production of knowledge and different types of narratives, as well as identity construction.

Archivists and archival studies scholars have engaged in scholarly endeavors in this vein since Howard Zinn’s provocations in his famed SAA speech, since Helen Samuels and Hans Booms pointed out our current appraisal practices were leaving huge gaps in the record, since Verne Harris deconstructed the ways power and politics are at play in archival endeavors, since Sue McKemmish and Anne Gilliland began talking about communities and autonomy and rights in and to records, since Anthony Dunbar used

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Andrew Flinn, Karen Suurtamm, and David Wallace, “Social Justice Impact of Archives: A Preliminary Investigation,” *Archival Science* 13, no. 4 (2013): 317–348; J.J. Ghaddar, “The Spectre in the Archive: Truth, Reconciliation and Indigenous Archival Memory,” *Archivaria* 82 (2016): 3-26; Eric Ketelaar, “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection.” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 221–38; Sue McKemmish, Livia Iacovino, Eric Ketelaar, Melissa Castan, and Lynette Russell, “Resetting Relationships: Archives and Indigenous Human Rights in Australia” *Archives and Manuscripts* 39, no.1 (2011): 107–144; Sue McKemmish, Shannon Faulkhead, and Lynette Russell, “Distrust in the Archive: Reconciling Records,” *Archival Science* 11, no.3 (2011): 211–239; Ricardo Punzalan and Michelle Caswell, “Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice,” *Library Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2016): 25-42; Mario Ramirez, “Being Assumed Not to Be: A Critique of Whiteness as an Archival Imperative,” *The American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (2015): 339-356; Joel Wurl, “Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles Documenting the Immigrant Experience,” *Archival Issues* 29 (2005): 65-76.

<sup>3</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 250.

critical race theory to talk about counter-narratives and microaggressions in archives.<sup>4</sup> This way of thinking about archives is not new, but naming it “critical archival studies” is. And, as archivists and archival studies scholars are well-aware, naming is a form of legitimating. Naming is power. Naming is a way of demarcating and defining and delineating and harnessing.

We posit that critical theory has much to offer archival studies and that, conversely, archival studies has much to offer critical theory. Theory has an unfairly bad reputation in the archival realm for being obscure, impenetrable, and inapplicable to real-world practice. We wish to make a solid, crystal-clear practical case for the utility of theory. As Terry Cook wrote, “It is important for the profession to remember that the opposite of practical is impractical, not theoretical.”<sup>5</sup> With this issue, we assert that critical humanistic research about records and archives *is* research, research that examines what it means to be human in analytical terms rather than strictly empirical terms.

At its core, critical theory gives us an analysis of power in all its forms that is crucial to understanding the context of record creation, of archival functions, of the formation of archival institutions, of archival outreach and use and advocacy, of who becomes archivists and how and why, and of how we define and teach and practice core concepts. We know that power permeates every aspect of the archival endeavor, that the archive “is the very possibility of politics” to quote Verne Harris, that there is no neutral in archives.<sup>6</sup> Critical theory is crucial for understanding this power -- how it operates, through whom, and why -- and for building new archival practices that liberate human potential rather than oppress it based on categories such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability.

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<sup>4</sup> See Howard Zinn, “Secrecy, Archives and the Public Interest,” *Midwestern Archivist* 2 (1977): 14-26; Helen Willa Samuels, “Who Controls the Past,” *American Archivist* 49 (1986): 109-124; Hans Booms, Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources,” *Archivaria* 24 (1987): 69-107; Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago, IL: Society of American Archivists, 2007); Anne Gilliland and Sue McKemish, “Rights in Records as a Platform for Participative Archiving,” in Richard J. Cox, Alison Langmead and Eleanor Matter, eds., *Archival Research and Education: Selected Papers from the 2014 AERI Conference* (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Press, 2015), 355-385; Anthony Dunbar, “Introducing Critical Race Theory to Archival Discourse: Getting the Conversation Started,” *Archival Science* 6, no. 1 (2006): 109-129.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Cook, “The Imperative of Challenging Absolutes in Graduate Archival Education Programs: A Challenge for Educators and the Profession,” *American Archivist* 6, no. 2 (2000): 390.

<sup>6</sup> Verne Harris, “Archives Politics, and Justice,” In *Political Pressure and the Archival Record*, ed. Margaret Procter, Michael G. Cook, and Caroline Williams (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 175.

Furthermore, we propose that we, as a field, take ownership of and leverage the term “critical archival studies” to make a much-needed intervention into the humanities, which has so often ignored the existence and legitimacy of archival studies as an area of rigorous academic inquiry. The true contribution of archival studies to critical theory is not just to provide a practical application that turns theory into praxis, in which we “apply” feminist theory or queer theory or critical race theory to archives. But rather, the real contribution is one in which we use archival studies *to disrupt* the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the humanities. As archivists and archival studies scholars, we can intervene and trouble and even sabotage some of the key ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical theory. This intervention could simultaneously explain and critique the core tenets of archival studies – notions of record, of provenance, of value, of representation, to name a few – that takes a long view of how potential evidence gets transmitted across space and time. We can disrupt prevailing humanities paradigms by showing how archival studies calls into question fundamental humanities assumptions about how we exist in the world, how we know what we know, and how we transmit that knowledge.

Contributors to this issue include those who engage in research and practice that examine the role of archives in displaced or marginalized communities. Each article presents and examines specific engagement or implementation of methods, ethics, and approaches in archival scholarship and practice. Our intended audiences are practitioners caring for archival collections, archival studies students, and educators seeking ways to study and facilitate difficult and sometimes contentious community-based projects, and all information professionals developing and implementing policies and practices to serve broad audiences and communities.

The first three articles in this compilation exemplify critical work that challenges predominant archival constructs. Authors of these articles uncover the limitations and inadequacies of archival concepts and practices, and in the process, reorient contemporary archival thinking to serve vulnerable populations that have been victims of human rights abuses. Anne Gilliland’s “A Matter of Life or Death: A Critical Examination of the Role of Records and Archives in Supporting the Agency of the Forcibly Displaced” interrogates the role of records and archives in the lives of migrant populations that have been forcibly displaced by genocide and war. Gilliland argues that state archival institutions inadequately serve the immediate needs of refugees and asylum seekers and calls for a radical shift in archival orientation that requires thinking beyond national frameworks and institutional boundaries. Continuing this challenge to broaden and transform our conceptualizations of records and archives, Joanne Evans, Sue McKemmish, and Greg Rolan’s “Critical Approaches to Archiving and Recordkeeping in the Continuum” examine research efforts on orphaned and institutionalized children of Australia. They posit that participatory methods in research and practice, alongside continuum, postcustodial, postcolonial, and post-conflict thinking, are key to critical and transformative archiving and recordkeeping. Similarly, Christian Kelleher’s “Archives

Without Archives: (Re)Locating and (Re)Defining the Archive Through Post-Custodial Praxis” reflects on the ethical challenges faced by the University of Texas Libraries' Human Rights Documentation Initiative and how post-custodial archives theory and praxis democratize and diversify archives by disrupting locations of power and agency. These three contributions all identify the profound limitations of prevailing archival ideas, methods, and practices in multiple geopolitical contexts and human rights regimes. Their critical work underscores the necessary interventions to radically transform the archival field.

The next trio of provocations in this issue expose how power is distributed in the archives across racial fault lines. Tonia Sutherland’s thoughtful piece, “Archival Amnesty: In Search of Black American Transitional and Restorative Justice,” explores how archivists have let white supremacists off the hook by failing to document the long history of lynching in the U.S. Such documentation is critical, Sutherland argues, for efforts to establish fact and advocate for reparations if we are to begin to heal as a society moving forward. In their article, “Power to the People: Documenting Police Violence in Cleveland,” Stacie M. Williams and Jarrett Drake draw on their own work helping to create the People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, an autonomous and participatory human rights archive documenting racialized state violence in the American Midwest. Their reflection underscores the importance of critical theory in disrupting dominant modes of practice and demonstrates how to forge a critical archival praxis that thrives rather than withers under critique. A complement to these powerful pieces, Eunsong Angela Kim’s article, “Appraising Newness: Whiteness, Neoliberalism, and the Building of the Archive for New Poetry,” uncovers the ways in which whiteness-- though usually unnamed-- has determined the archival value of literary collections. Through the lens of critical race theory and a critique of neoliberalism, Kim brilliantly traces the financial and racial equations that add up to the silencing of artists of color in the historical record. All three articles reveal how the toxicity of white supremacy has permeated the archival endeavor, from standard appraisal practices that hide behind a myth of neutrality and undervalue records created by people of color, to dominant descriptive practices that mask racial inequalities and, in some cases, constitute racial microaggressions, and to narrow racist conceptions of who uses archives and why. Yet all three articles also point to the liberatory potential of critique, offering a way out of such systems through deliberate action.

Recognizing that theory and practice is a false binary, and that theoretical and political assumptions will always underlie the work of archives and archivists, this issue features three pieces that draw upon critical theory, postcolonial, feminist, and queer lenses to offer new readings and frameworks to guide archival theory and praxis. In “Insisting Derrida: Cixous, Deconstruction, and the Work of the Archive,” Verne Harris pays homage to renowned French critical theorists Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida by revisiting their respective works *Manhattan: Letters from Prehistory* and *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive* and reading them in

conjunction and against each other to tease out the characteristics that enable archives to subvert prevailing power relations, or the “omnipotence-other.” While Harris draws upon the same theorists most often referenced within the archival turn of humanities based scholarship, Harris’ analysis of “the archive” distinguishes itself from the majority of the humanities scholarship in its recognition of “the archive” as not solely an oppressive, monolithic, and hegemonic force, but also a liberatory one that holds the possibility for agency through archivists’ creative and courageous engagement with “archive banditry.” With “Critical Feminism in the Archives” Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood continue to trace the intellectual and theoretical lineages that served as precursor and contributor to critical archival studies and propose a critical feminist intervention in archives that understands feminism as “an intersectional political philosophy committed to the dismantling of heteronormative, capitalist, racist patriarchy.” This intervention “could mean a fundamental re-organization of archival institutions themselves” because it compels archives to question their values and how they define and govern themselves in order to “imagine and work to build possible worlds in the present and future.” Jamie Lee’s “A Queer/ed Archival Methodology: Archival Bodies as Nomadic Subjects,” picks up a thread highlighted in the Harris piece - archival meaning is constantly shifting - as well as the concept of *stories so far* to propose a “Queer/ed Archival Methodology” (Q/M). Q/M is a set of principles and questions that archives and archivists can use to guide their work to re-center queer and other marginalized communities’ experiences, within archival work and the archival record, even and especially when these experiences are conflicting, contradictory and constantly in motion. Like the critical feminist intervention proposed by Cifor and Wood, Lee posits that Q/M will profoundly reshape how we conceptualize archives and inspire radical possibilities and openings for social justice.

As a group of critically engaged scholars, practitioners and researchers, we hope that these articles provoke critical reflection and action and inspire new conversations and forms of practice. Let us use our expertise in these areas to identify injustices, to figure out how to change them, and then enact those changes. Let us use critical archival studies to liberate, interrogate, and usher in a “real democracy,” where power is distributed more equitably, where white supremacy and patriarchy and heteronormativity and other forms of oppression are named and challenged, where different worlds and different ways of being in those worlds are acknowledged and imagined and enacted. Let us activate a critical archival studies.

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