

2022

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Recommended Citation

Jones, Mason A. (2022) "Selective Memory: Assessing Conventions of Memory in the Archival Literature," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 9 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol9/iss1/1>

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Cover Page Footnote

I would like to graciously thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their review and suggestions. I would also like to acknowledge Robert Riter (The University of Alabama SLIS), whose conversations and support were a crucial part of the research and writing process for this article.

SELECTIVE MEMORY: ASSESSING CONVENTIONS OF MEMORY IN THE ARCHIVAL LITERATURE

Introduction

Within the bulk of the archival literature, there is a necessary preoccupation with memory. Memory is a critical concept, and despite its historic use in decades of archival scholarship, it has recently experienced a series of troubles. Memory, in both archival theory and archival labor, is necessary in framing the archival process and understanding the use of archives by researchers and the public. If scholars should view the archive as an institution of memory (particularly one which produces or preserves various types of memory), it must be understood what we mean when we invoke memory in scholarly discourse. There are various perspectives present in the literature on what constitutes memory, some of which are related and others which are more in contention. Archives, in some respects, engage in the process of memory preservation and the creation of narratives through documentation of historical records. The debate lies primarily in how this work of memory is affected. It is important, then, to critique the usage of memory in the literature and to propose the cooperative building of a directed and inclusive definition for memory as an archival concept. Memory, as it continues to be used in the literature, is the victim of a sliding and unclear definition which impedes its utility as a central concept.

Scholars raise the concern that describing archival work as memory work, either directly or indirectly, removes a critical understanding of subjectivity from the archival materials and instead imposes that subjectivity on the archive itself, ultimately prioritizing the institution of the archive over the narrative of collections to convey their own histories.¹ Memory's definitional function within the archives is necessary in contextualizing archival work and the relationship between archives, archival narratives, and the documents and lived experiences that archives endeavor to *remember*. Jens Brockmeier, in his book *Beyond the Archive: Memory, Narrative, and the Autobiographical Process*, says "what has been challenged in all of these recent developments is the concept of memory as a form of storage, the idea that human memory is to be imagined as an archive of the past. This idea is and always has been at the center of the Western idea of memory, far beyond the specific gestalt given to it by the 19th- and 20th-century memory scientists."² Brockmeier's observation and the subsequent argument echoes some issues surrounding memory and archival work, particularly the ontological and epistemic perspectives of communal and archival memory. It also demonstrates some inherent problems with memory concepts in the field, particularly the focus in the archival literature on Western conceptions of memory. Brockmeier's discussion of the archive serves well as a metaphor for how memory constructs and how failures of memory function.

Answering the problem of memory's function in the archival literature will require scholars to conceive of the archival function of memory in the context of a broader memory studies discipline rather than as a product of disciplinary isolation. The archival scholarship must necessarily adopt and align itself with the emerging field of memory studies. It must therefore

¹ Meyer, "What Lies Below"; Hardbattle, "Healing through Inclusion"; Barros and Wanderley, "Organizational Archives and Historical Narratives"; Tchokothe, "Archiving Collective Memories and (Dis)Owning."

² Brockmeier, *Beyond the Archive*, 4.

be acknowledged both that this current usage exists as a problem within the field, and that emerging concepts outside the field must be considered and even employed to better stake our own claim of memory.

What Role Has Memory Had So Far?

Memory as a function of archival practice is a common theme within the academic literature surrounding archival institutions. Memory is in our institutions or communal initiatives—their structures, their spaces, and their people. Even more so the documents which produce memory of the public, communal, historical, cultural, and individual kind. Its presence is a point of interest in a broader discussion of the work archives do by nature of preserving the past. Alex Byrne frames the pervasiveness of memory well, stating “The memories are visible in the buildings, furnishings and atmosphere of the institutions. They are enshrined in the collections, which embody the intentions of curators as well as the happenstance of collecting opportunity and the interests of collectors. Catalogues and records of acquisition and provenance provide the formal record of those processes, often offering insights into the personalities of the individuals involved.”³ Recent discussions of memory in academic circles have questioned the epistemological framing of archives as inherently “memory work.” Despite this preoccupation with memory work in the archive, memory in the archival literature maintains multiple meanings which seamlessly shift based on usage or context to sufficiently serve a particular purpose.³

While some voices in the archival literature are aiming to offer a more salient methodology and focus regarding the presence of memory as a key part of archival work, other voices in the field offer a more skeptical approach to the topic of memory. Jeanette Bastian, in her article regarding the Homestead Strike, supports the inclusion of memory as an essential force within the field, saying, “Archivists, even more than historians, should study memory not only to consider their own role in the memory process but to recognize the ongoing significance of the materials in their custody.”⁴ Bastian roots this argument by exploring the role of memory within the study of history. In contrast, Andrew Flinn et al. offer a more hesitant approach to memory within the archive, saying “Archives do play a significant role in the processes of memory production—they are often the tools or building-blocks upon which memory is constructed, framed, verified and ultimately accepted.”⁵ Flinn’s perspective is distinguishable from the one Bastian proposes, viewing memory work as the work of those who make use of the archive rather than as archival labor.

Some archival literature makes ample space for approaching memory as a moving target. In the June 2013 issue of *Archival Science*, several scholars discuss the concept of memory in the archival literature and its use in the field at large.⁶ Despite the issue’s singular focus, the topic proved broad enough that the papers ranged widely. In her editorial note, Caroline Brown outlines the condition of memory as a concept among scholars and practitioners. Brown states that “Discussions about archives and memory are not new, nor are contentions about the power

³ Byrne, “Institutional Memory and Memory Institutions,” 260–61.

⁴ Bastian, “Flowers for Homestead,” 119.

⁵ Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives,” 76.

⁶ Cook, “Evidence, Memory, Identity, and Community”; Jacobsen, Punzalan, and Hedstrom. “Invoking ‘Collective Memory’”; Brown, “Memory, Identity and the Archival Paradigm”; Bracha, “Artists and the Film Archive”; Houdek, “The Rhetorical Force of ‘Global Archival Memory.’”

of archives. However, several writers have cautioned that archivists writing about or referring to memory have not fully considered what they mean by the term or have oversimplified or generalized its relationship with archives.⁷ Brown's point acknowledges several larger issues with properly defining (and, by extension, employing) the concept of memory in a way that provides a more precise understanding its function within the archive.

Brown references the work of various archival scholars on the topic, most notably, the key work of Margaret Hedstrom and her discussion of the essential relationship between memory scholarship in archives and related scholarship among historians. Those working on memory to document history have created some of the most foundational work for archival memory. Historians and archivists both deal with similar sites of memory, and many of the best historians accomplish their own process of remembering within an archive.⁸ Hedstrom makes the point that "One can conceive of a complex set of interfaces with the past which constitute permeable boundaries that separate the past from the present and distinguish memory from consciousness, by shaping and controlling the flow of knowledge, meaning, and expression."⁹ Memory functions as a different state of cognition. It is at once the attempt to experience events outside the supposed linearity of time, while also attempting to reconcile such external occurrences with the immediate and experienced present. Entering an archive and accessing the past is as much a psychological experience as it is a material one. This cognitive space for memory, embedded in the material, is a site for both historical insight and historical trauma. A psychological experience of the past also possesses its own duality. Each user of archives brings their own individuated experience to the remembered past.

Hedstrom's observations about this cognitive landscape within the archive, as well as memory's departure from typical notions of consciousness, also highlight the necessary cross-disciplinarity of memory. For the archivist, memory is a psychological experience that connects the individual to the historical and the historical to the contexts in which materials exist in the archive itself. An individual researcher is not only accessing the past through a means that removes real speech and lived experiences but is also accessing the past through the lens of their own historical assumptions of what the past is and what those lived experiences were.¹⁰ Involving historical and social memory as a component of the archive helps to engage a researching public in a more real and lived version of the historical. Hedstrom addresses issues of memory preservation by saying that "Archives form one of the interfaces with the past, along with other formal structures like museums, libraries, and monuments, that interact with less tangible personal and collective memories."¹¹ Hedstrom's work, and by extension Brown's, approach memory as more than a tool to understand other relevant topics of discussion within archives. Hedstrom offers a view of archives that uncontroversially compares archives to libraries and museums but also delves into that comparison deeper by dissecting the function of the archive's unique relationship with memory. In contrast with these approaches, a philosophical current exists within the literature that elevates memory and the preservation of subjective archival and cultural histories through

⁷ Brown, "Memory, Identity and the Archival Paradigm," 7.

⁸ Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 200.

⁹ Hedstrom, "Archives, Memory, and Interfaces with the Past," 27.

¹⁰ Caswell et al., "'To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise'"; Mastley, "Representation of Black History in Archives"; Buchanan and Richardson, "Representation through Documentation"; Peters and Besley, "Digital Archives in the Cloud."

¹¹ Hedstrom, "Archives, Memory, and Interfaces with the Past," 27.

active archival preservation and the deployment of archival narratives.

There is a notable and concerted effort to maintain an attitude of universal objectivity and archival agnosticism regarding the materials being engaged within the archive. In recent decades, archivists have become more open to acknowledging the influences of humanities scholarship, especially history and literary studies, on the archives field.¹² This influence has also changed the archive's relationship with memory. Francis Blouin, in talking about the construction of social memory in the archive, remarks that "When historical debate rested on validity of documents, archivists were safely above the fray. But now notions of social memory call into question the integrity and intellectual foundations of what we do. This is leading to new notions of what the archive is and what it is not."¹³ Historians rely on archival institutions for access to critical primary historical sources, even on more contemporary historical subjects. Academic users access the archives to engage in scholarship but also, whether intentionally or inadvertently, encounter the past and engage in memory acts. Such an encounter is not relegated merely to the work of the academic. Though some specialist users may approach archival materials with developed concepts of memory, academic users engage in similar processes of memory experience as both the non-specialist user of institutional archives and the user of communal archives. Memory's function in the archive is both act and experience. Memory's recent dominance in the archival literature invites such deeper considerations, but it also highlights a need for caution and precision due to memory's importance for such work.

(Re)Constructing Archival Memory

New types of archival objects bring new considerations of what function documents have regarding archival or communal memory. In her work on aboriginal oral histories in British Columbia, Laura Millar discusses the inclusion of oral histories in the archival record, saying "There was much speculation that the nature of archives would be reshaped; that institutions would acquire and preserve more oral traditions (usually captured on tape, despite the general rejection by natives of recording as an acceptable method for documenting traditional knowledge). Archivists also anticipated a demand for greater inclusion of oral, native-oriented methods of information sharing—a world apart from paper-based finding aids and computerized subject indexes."¹⁴ Analyzing the cultural function that oral memory has within the indigenous communities in Canada reveals a specific approach to documenting memory orally through storytelling rather than through the traditional archival record. Her view of archival memory exposes a potential flaw in relying on traditional ideas of documentation and memory for archiving communal histories. Archivists relying on paper documents to properly preserve the histories and cultural identities of the British Columbian First Nations tribes would be representing those tribes in a way that denies an important aspect of their own form of record-keeping. Millar ultimately tracks orality among archivists working with the First Nations people and marks a distinct difference in methodological approach and scholarly outcome when communal memory took academic precedent over traditional views of archival memory. For Millar, the medium is the message.

¹² Alexander, "Excluding Archival Silences: Oral History and Historical Absence," 1–2.

¹³ Blouin, "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," 110.

¹⁴ Millar, "Subject or Object," 331.

The move to what has commonly been referred to as critical archives is an attempt by scholars in the archival field to catch up to the transformative theoretical moments in history and literature from the 1980s. Some scholars have noted this shift in the academic literature, as archivists are “emphasizing the need for an expansive approach to crucial archival notions such as provenance and record-ness, this scholarship has highlighted the critical role of the archivist in shaping archives and the stories that can be gleaned from them. In such scholarship, archives emerge as a contested site of power and silence, of inheritance and disinheritance.”¹⁵ Including diverse memory media in the archival record is a conscious decision, and a necessary one for preserving traditions or histories which focus on orality and experience rather than meticulous written records. Orality operates within its own confines of active memory and active transmission and, as such, is an important and necessary type of documentation to consider in establishing a functional and specific definition of memory.

Archival memory must always be seen as a liberating force. Unconventional memory expressions have at times been discounted, and their value questioned, particularly forms which seem “primitive” to some historians and archivists. Hugh Taylor challenges the historical acceptance of oral history, claiming that “Orality as transmitter yielded grudgingly to the power of the written record and the illusion of human memory, and particularly the ‘collective memory’ in cultural heritage institutions. In one form or another, literacy saw the emergence of the bureaucratic state translating speech into materials and weapons of command and control, into patriarchy and the building of empires.”¹⁶ Taylor points out that the supplanting of oral memory with written memory was traditionally supported by centralized power structures like the state or religious institutions. In some places still today, literacy is a luxury for the wealthy and powerful. Orality offers not only a unique perspective on the function of archival memory but also a necessary reduction in the influence of power structures on the public expression of speech.

Frameworks and Methods

Postmodernism and its impositions on the archive in recent decades has problematized the role of the archivist by critiquing traditional views of that role. Supposed “postmodern” critiques of the archive allege that the curation of history and the act of appraising and preserving portions of history is at its core a political and unneutral act.¹⁷ But the application of postmodern theory in the literature may be a strong indicator of the problematic construction of popular ideas or methods in the literature itself. The same discursive inconsistencies in the literature that occupy memory occupy broader applications of postmodern theory. According to Verne Harris, “A similar labelling of Jacques Derrida (the coiner of the term ‘deconstruction’) ignores his insistent deconstruction of labels, including that of ‘postmodernism’, and his searing critiques of those who adopt the label willingly. Hugh Taylor himself conflates ‘deconstruction’ and ‘postmodernism’—a move of considerable naivety given the fissures and disjunctures I am suggesting. In most disciplines scholars are either eschewing the term ‘postmodernism’ entirely or are insisting on the plural ‘postmodernisms.’”¹⁸ These limited examples, according to Harris,

¹⁵ Ghaddar, “The Spectre in the Archive,” 6.

¹⁶ Taylor, “Some Concluding Thoughts,” 138.

¹⁷ Duff et al., “Social Justice Impact of Archives”; Jimerson, *Archives Power*; Jimerson, “Embracing the Power of Archives”; Huang, “Dwelling on the ‘Anarchival’”; Foote, “To Remember and Forget.”

¹⁸ Harris, “Concerned with the Writings of Others,” 215.

exist in a larger context of misreading or misapplication of critical theoretical concepts in the literature. Harris outlines a problem with the application of “postmodernisms” to our understanding of archives; it is imperative that such criticisms are made of memory and its various and potentially unstable applications.

Memory functions as an extension of the current deployment of critical theoretical frameworks in archival science. These postmodern theories in general, and memory specifically, pose a danger of being cited imprecisely or inaccurately. Engaging memory in such a critical light requires two essential steps. First, establishing a clear meta-analysis of memory in the literature, noting its various contexts, applications, and possible competing or contradictory instances of the term. Second, offering up a definition that is both generally consistent and broadly inclusive to the various instances of memory functions, as I have outlined in my review of some existing applications of memory. A single, more complete definition for our use of memory is necessary to connect to new areas of study, along with a myriad of infrastructure questions which arise alongside new methodological approaches due to advances in both theory and technology. As a field, we should be open to continually interrogating what memory is in an archival context. Such a challenge could only edify us and future studies into diverse memory applications.

One of the most interesting aspects of communal memory is the issue of memory as an impetus for action. Communities who are reliant on internal mythologies or language based on past events can often be the sparks for public action or even acts of oppressive violence or active resistance. Considering this thought in relation to the philosophy of Paul Ricœur, David J. Leichter says that “The excesses of remembering and of forgetting lead to repetition and violently acting out. Those individuals and communities with too much memory lose themselves in the past, obsessing over the details of it and reopening its wounds. Those with too little memory fear being engulfed by the past, instead repressing it and violently act out in structurally similar situations.”¹⁹ Considering the apparent complexities imposed by memory in a philosophical sense, it does the archival field little good to romanticize memory as a thing which is itself a kind of independent and noble goal.

Whether memory is occurring within academic, independent, or communal settings, the institutionalization of memory presents a series of traumas and victories which could each potentially incite moments of violence. The emphasis is placed more so on how the thing is remembered. This is another area where memory work demands active engagement rather than passive curation. Remembering events that are traumatic to a community must be actively considered and discussed within the archive, as those memories are preserved and inevitably contextualized in collections with an archival narrative. This is, of course, not nearly as controversial as it was more than a decade ago. The sociocultural functions of memory are nevertheless a crucial element of memory’s importance to archival scholars.

Within the intersection of trauma studies and memory studies lies another layer of terminological uncertainty. Memory concepts asserted with modifying words, particularly in instances like “cultural memory,” demonstrate a further complication with memory concepts when they are modified with yet another meaning-heavy term. Trond Jacobson, Ricardo Punzalan, and Margaret Hedstrom argue that there are roughly four dominant definitions in English-language

¹⁹ Leichter, “Collective Identity and Collective Memory in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur,” 123.

archival literature for collective memory. Jacobson et al. state that “exploring how records trigger a sense of collective heritage inspired more reflections on how archives as social institutions figure in the propagation of collective consciousness.”²⁰ Comparing these four major discrepancies between usages of “cultural memory” exposes both how the term is used broadly and enables an informed critique of the same. Each definition is essentially in competition with the other, another example of the unfixed and occasionally erratic nature of the concept itself. These definitions, according to Jacobsen et al., are “archives as collective memory and cultural heritage, the role of archives in memory formation and transmission, questions of power and justice in the context of archives and collective memory, and, finally, the ways in which archival collections can provide moments and spaces for finding and making memory.”²¹ Such a metastudy of memory concepts, even focused on such a limited topic, communicates further this issue of incongruity between the varying formations of memory as a critical force of archival practice and use. There persists a further need on the part of the archivist to assign a meaningful utility to memory itself prior to assigning a multiplicity of meanings to “modified memory” concepts, such as those highlighted in more technical metastudies of the literature.

Other scholars who defend the purpose and function of including memory often cite that same fact. Some would even argue that since the term serves multiple functions within the literature, it is perhaps even more valuable as a part of the field, even suggesting that memory as a loosely defined term serves a greater purpose than it would a more concretely defined term. Brown regards this position in her editorial, saying “Archivists, fearful that their collections are unrepresentative and biased and wishing to contribute to the strengthening of identity of the underrepresented or minorities in their communities, direct their efforts to engaging users from these communities and seek to help preserve their memories and sense of identity by collecting and keeping their records.”²² There is a necessary voice which contends that memory is many things, a shifting target that serves its purpose by referring to different things among different scholars. But memory continues to be a major factor in considerations of community archives and has cemented its place in the literature. And because of this place in the literature, many archival scholars are seeking clarity on what memory means to the field, to archives, and to memory scholarship more broadly.

Situating Archival Memory

Defining the work being done within the archive is crucial to ensuring that the research performed using archival materials is contextualized by archival memory. With individuals accessing archival collections for a myriad of reasons, which archivists cannot anticipate, it is the work of archivists to create a space that promotes critical engagement with materials. The role of memory in contextualizing critical engagements is a necessary one to maintain and refine. Archives themselves often create afterlives outside the walls of the institution, in much the same way as their collections are the afterlives of documented histories. Jens Brockmeier’s book *Beyond the Archive* expertly deconstructs the relevance of archival memory and memory in general as it stems from the archive. Brockmeier supports a particular view of memory and narrative in his book, pointing out that “In its long history, literature has laid bare the interplay

²⁰ Jacobsen et al., “Invoking ‘Collective Memory,’” 220.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 240.

²² Brown, “Memory, Identity, and the Archival Paradigm,” 91.

between memory and narrative, creating a prime site for probing the constitution of the narrative mind. There are many ways in which exploring practices of narrative worldmaking can inform, and not just be informed by, the sciences of the mind.”²³ Brockmeier proposes that humanities-related disciplines should be engaged in influencing memory theories as well as being influenced by them, and this must include the archival literature. Archives are a playground of information and collections that profoundly shape the function in which individual, social, and cultural memory exist beyond the life of the creators of memory objects.

Because the scholarship surrounding archival memory exists in such a defined intersection between various scholarly fields, a limited view of memory as merely a function of the relation of archives to historical narrative will inevitably exclude portions of applicable theories of memory, whether philosophical or scientific in nature. Jacobson et al. concluded in their own survey of the literature that “The relationship between collective memory and archives is fertile ground for examination. Greater attention by archivists to research and writing on collective memory outside the archival field and concerted effort to draw attention to the potential contributions archival studies can make, such as publishing in interdisciplinary journals or co-authoring work with non-archivists, could enrich the discourse on collective memory on all sides.”²⁴ The function of collective and communal memory among archivists is one that on the whole requires a continued expansion of potential uses for the term to be effective. As with many tools within the archive, setting a clearer boundary of meaning for the term “memory” may at first seem limiting, but employing memory with an engagement in scholarship beyond the traditional scope of the archive will surely make memory a more impactful and meaningful idea for the archivist to employ in their work.

Conclusions

Memory is, as shown here, a tricky subject to fully capture. Methods vary both within the archive and among adjacent fields. Memory studies, as an emerging field, relies heavily on the influences of neuroscience, psychology, history, philosophy, literature, film, art, and more.²⁵ Overlap between fields and the implicit invitation for interdisciplinarity open fresh lines of study and the development of new methods for conceptualizing the work of the archive. But the definitions and concepts in the archival literature in recent years assume a priority and a purpose of memory without also advocating for a discrete meaning of it for the field. This lack of such a discrete meaning may be to the advantage of scholars, as it leaves room for relating memory functions in the archives to the research performed by memory professionals.

Memory offers a wealth of untapped and unconsidered potentials for archival scholars who are concerned with the function of the archive as a remembering space and a space for remembering. The archive does more than simply store documents of the past. The archive preserves and facilitates remembrance of the past and directly drives the research, knowledge, and application of remembered pasts to present consciousness. Scholarship that engages with memory outside the archival literature can enable the archival field to work more effectively through the lens of a better-articulated memory framework. We should come to understand specifically how the

²³ Brockmeier, *Beyond the Archive*, 99.

²⁴ Jacobson et al., “Invoking ‘Collective Memory,’” 243

²⁵ Dutceac Segesten and Wüstenberg, “Memory Studies.”

archive functions regarding the topic of memory and highlight how the archive itself is perceived both internally and externally. Memory studies will continue to carve out its place as a distinct and impactful cross-disciplinary field. This reality necessitates archival scholars embracing that cross-disciplinarity to effectively negotiate their space within the emerging field. Archives are foundational sites for a variety of memory work and memory experience, but what that means for archives and their users must be articulated in both a precise and inclusive way. Building a space for memory studies explicitly in the literature will be a necessary cooperative project for academics and practitioners to accommodate more robust theories of memory.

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