

Fall 3-21-2024

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

Michael Harker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Harker, Michael (2024) "Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives," *Community Literacy Journal*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy/vol18/iss1/8>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Community Literacy Journal by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

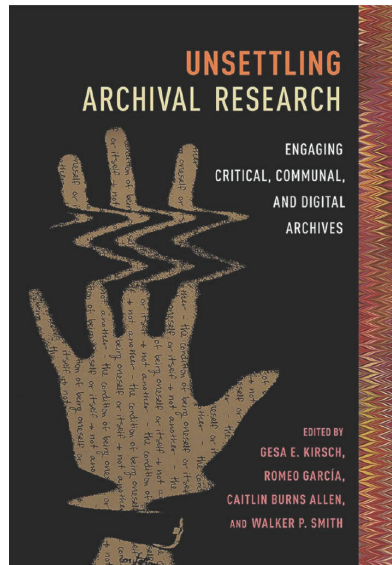
Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives

Edited by Gesa E. Kirsch, Romeo García, Caitlin Burns Allen, and Walker P. Smith. Southern Illinois University Press, 2023, 321 pp.

Reviewed by Michael Harker
Georgia State University

In her foundational work “Autobiography of an Archivist,” Nan Johnson writes: “I stared and stared around the rim of signs, around the wheel of stacks. With astonishment, I realized there was no center to my wheel. All the stacks seemed to be pointing inward to something. What was it?” (295). Johnson’s description of this moment captures the vexing and dynamic nature of archival research. It also reveals her infectious enthusiasm and deep affinity for archival labor, an energy that would inspire and sustain a generation of scholars participating in the archival turn in rhetoric and writing studies. Johnson’s quest to find the center of her unpacked stacks of primary sources will not only culminate in her meticulously documented *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life: 1866–1910*, but it will also pave the way for the development of her research heuristic: The Archival Wheel. In both form and function, Johnson’s Archival Wheel marks a pedagogical and methodological moment with respect to our field’s engagement with archives, one we might understand in terms of a need to identify singular and all-encompassing narratives within archives.

In their new collection, *Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives*, Gesa E. Kirsch, Romeo García, Caitlin Burns Allen, and Walker P. Smith offer a powerful and unsettling dimension to Johnson’s heuristic. Rather than pursuing a definitive, unifying, or centered response to the question “What is it?” as the starting point for meaning-making in archival research and historiography, the editor’s introduction emphasizes instability and purposeful disruption of centering as a foundational principle for contemporary archival studies. “Once more,” the editors note: “*Unsettling Archival Research* means 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). Linked directly with “the current political, environmental, social, and



historical moment” this collection offers welcomed immediacy and bold questions aimed toward destabilizing established archival research conventions. It also reveals a unifying spirit of advocacy and bearing witness in service of the purpose of the collection—to demonstrate how archives serve “as a powerful medium for bearing witness in unsettling ways” (9).

Key to sustaining this collection’s thesis is bringing to bear on prevailing approaches to archival research and historiography the guiding questions, theories, tensions, and methodologies of critical archival studies. The editors and contributors appropriately position Michelle Caswell as a leading voice in contemporary archival research and historiography. Caswell’s persistent calls to acknowledge the intellectual contributions of archival studies appear throughout the collection, serving as a reference point for a collection determined to unsettle archival research. Doing so makes possible additional goals for the collection, including “to present a new vision of archival research—one that invites understanding of small-a archives beyond institutional Archives” (8). As a result, the collection foregrounds engagement with archives broadly defined and encompasses “a wide variety of venues, including institutional and community archives, archival ephemera, case studies, oral histories, and interviews. . .” (11). With such diverse evidentiary practices and an explicit focus on unsettling key concepts, theories, and perspectives, it would be easy for readers to struggle to navigate the text. However, the introduction to the collection provides readers with a clear explanation of the collection’s guiding questions and, perhaps most importantly, acknowledgment of the many rhetoric and writing studies scholars who have provided the language and orientation to engage with archival studies in the first place.

The core focus of part one, “Unsettling Key Concepts,” is to question underlying assumptions that have traditionally guided archival work. The starting point for the collection is remarkable for how effectively it disrupts entrenched and conventional receptions of key terms in archival studies. Here, mainstays of archival studies like “story,” “provenance,” and “rescue,” which have traditionally steered the field, are interrogated and jostled off-center, unsettling the alignment of conventions that have informed rhetoric and writing studies’ engagement with archival studies. In chapter one, “Unsettling the ‘Archive Story,’” Jean Bessette sets the tone for the entire collection by reframing a question implicitly accepted in archival studies: “What’s in a story?” Bessette’s inquiry upends entrenched tropes of archival studies to carve out a space for alternative characterizations. In this instance, her framing of narrative serves as a reminder that “stories within the archive are less directly centered on the archive itself and more reflective of the researcher’s individual experience” (30). Teacher-researchers seeking a rhetorical understanding of narrative in the context of archival research will find this chapter valuable for its direct engagement with the work of James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz. In chapter two, “Rescuing the Archive from What?” Wendy Hayden interrogates the theoretical, thematic, social, and disciplinary underpinnings of “rescuing” as a methodology for archival research. Although Hayden acknowledges the importance of the metaphor of rescuing as an organizing statement for the field as it initially engaged with archives, she notes that

researchers have moved past such conceptions, offering Ann Cvetovich's research as well as Jessica Enoch and Jordynn Jack's scholarship as examples. She questions the tendency of researchers who unintentionally characterize their role as heroic in the research process. The idea of rescuing, Hayden argues, has greater value as a pedagogical orientation for students who benefit from lessons learned critiquing the approach more generally (40).

In chapter three, "Narratives of Triumph: A Case Studies of the Polio Archive," Jackie M. James offers a "project of reparative justice" with the purpose of unsettling "erased histories" (49). Employing "kairology as a methodological approach," James amplifies the stories and materiality of polio narratives that have been overlooked and excluded. She utilizes kairology, focusing on "fitness-to-situation" (50), to explore more nuanced questions beyond merely identifying absent elements within archives. James contends that critical archival researchers must come to terms with the reasons behind the absence of specific aspects of records. A central question of her proposed approach is: "Why are the materials in the archive? What do the physical contents of the collection say about what was valued in this history and what was not?" (50). In chapter four, Kalyn Prince's methodological approach, "critical nostalgia," aims to assist researchers in reconciling ideological tensions that often lead to discomfort in bearing witness to historical records. In "Nostalgia in the Archives: Using Nostalgia as a Tool for Negotiating Ideological Tensions," Prince offers readers a brief but useful interrogation of the term "nostalgia," tracing it back to its Greek roots. Among the most important chapters in the collection, Prince offers readers a more complete understanding of nostalgia that underscores its rhetorical potential, centrality, and complexity as a tool for achieving the shared goal of unsettling archival research (64).

In chapter five, "A Matter of Order: The Power of Provenance in the Mercury Collection of Marion Lamm," Kathryn Manis and Patty Wilde extend established critiques of provenance, "a shibboleth of archival studies," prioritizing how "provenance operates as an episteme coloniality" (67). Amplifying the work of Cushman and García, the authors do not mince words when it comes to what they describe as problems with provenance (68). "Born from a system," the authors write, "that privileges white, weatherly, cisgendered, heterosexual males, provenance prioritizes knowledge produced by the powerful. . ." (70). Teacher-researchers seeking an instructive discussion of how provenance can center some voices and viewpoints while subjugating others" (70) will find Manis and Wilde's discussion of the Mercury Collection of Marion Lamm valuable.

Part two, "Unsettling Research, Theory, and Methodology," addresses tensions frequently encountered in the archival research process. Although the contributors' scopes, methodologies, and evidence differ considerably in this section, a unifying element is the profound influence and adherence to Michelle Caswell's recommendations. In chapter six, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Rescuing the Archives from Disciplinarity," Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Jessica A. Rose present two case studies of community activism, the AIDS Quilt and the community activism of Dorothy Bolden, organizer of the National Domestic Workers Union. More than other contributions in this sec-

tion, this chapter actively embraces and embodies Caswell's call for increased collaboration between humanities scholars and information specialists (85). For instance, Gaillet and Rose draw threads from the Society of American Archivists (SAA) Core Values and Code of Ethics, situating it as a point of reference for preparing the next generation of archival researchers, "especially those," they write, "investigating social justice issues" (84). Teacher-researchers seeking out language and evidence to support establishing pedagogical connections to archival research will appreciate this chapter. Gaillet and Rose conclude that "instruction in archival methodologies, community activism, and archiving practices" is key to developing, establishing, and sustaining the types of coalitions and collaborations that exemplify the spirit of critical archival studies. In line with recommendations from the previous chapter, María Pas Carvajal Regidor's "(En)Countering Archival Silences: Critical Lenses, Relationships, and Informal Archives" argues for the importance of informal archives connected with critical race theory (CRT). For Regidor, informal archives are comprised of materials that "have been collected or left by multiple individuals and not organized or curated in a systematic way" (107). The literacy practices and values of Latinx/Latine students are at stake in bearing witness to trends and the larger socio-historical context of informal archives. Evidence of these values, Regidor argues, is often elided by the research and preservation practices associated with more formal archives (121).

The thematic focus of silence, absence, and the incompleteness of historical records take center stage in the latter portions of part two. The final three chapters in this section actively employ broadened and refigured characterizations of provenance, revealing Caswell's profound influence on the collection more generally. In chapter eight, "Let Them Speak: Rhetorically Reimagining Prison Voices in the Archives of the Collective," Sally F. Benson's engagement with the archives of the Penitentiary of New Mexico leads her to draw an important distinction between silence and absence. "Archival silences," she writes, "represent 'void regions' of unheard stories that haunt our history" (Carter qtd. in Benson 129). Benson's archival research and commitment to ethics demonstrate how incarcerated individuals have been historically neglected, highlighting further the need for critical archival perspectives on prison archives. Such an approach, she contends, serves to acknowledge the rhetorical agency of incarcerated residents/journalists and confront "public misunderstanding of who is in our prisons" (143). In chapter nine, "Bearing Witness to Transient Histories," Pamela Takayoshi embraces most fully the spirit of the collection, investigating the "fragmentary record of mental healthcare" of nineteenth-century women's experiences in American insane asylums. Significant for its lucid and strategic contemplation on "Reconstructing Intersectional Positionality," this chapter connects the priorities of critical archival studies to identity, a term often narrowly understood as representing individual experiences instead of "transpersonal and interpersonal sets of privileges and oppressions" (159). The result of this approach is an exemplary model of bearing witness to archival work that makes legible the invisible forces that beckon critical researchers to reconstruct the transient, incomplete, and uneven histories of marginalized people.

Walker P. Smith's impressive tenth chapter, "The Rhetorical (Im)possibilities of Recovering George Barr: Toward a Decolonial Queer Archival Methodology," throws into relief nuanced lessons of critical archival approaches conveyed in both part one and part two, but not simply for the sake of doing so. Smith's case study of George Barr's artwork upsets the expected outputs of queer historical interpretations by resisting "making legible and reproducible our settled, symmetrical hierarchy of new, newer, and newest versions of queer history" (180). In arguing for a pluriversal relationality aimed toward opposing the "modern/colonial/straight tendencies of all Eurocentric historiography" (169), Smith stands out in this collection for doing the difficult work of critiquing the very tendencies, terms, assumptions, and methods that make unsettling archival studies possible in the first place.

Part three, "Unsettling Praxis and Pedagogy: Toward Pluriversality," will be most useful to teacher-researchers interested in pedagogical applications of the theories and methodologies in classrooms. The approaches vary considerably among authors in this section. However, they have in common a commitment to enacting the priorities of critical archival studies and doing so in a fashion that mirrors the unsettling spirit of the collection. In chapter eleven, "Archival Imaginings of the Working-Class College Woman: The 1912-1913 Scrapbook of Josephine Gomon, University of Michigan College Student," Liz Rohan illustrates how a methodology of remixing might support Gilliland and Caswell's unsettling notion of "archival imaginings" (187), an approach that offers "enhanced understanding" and a more comprehensive historical record in cases where contents are not readily accessible or even missing. Rohan's approach is remarkable for its origins. Inspired by Jody Shipka and Jacqueline Jones Royster, she explains, ". . . my method is inspired by my students' projects in a first-year honors writing course in which I encourage creative writing as a method for scholarly inquiry" (188). Teacher-researchers seeking a detailed model of "archival imagining" that might function as a model for both research and pedagogy will find Rohan's contribution valuable.

In chapter twelve, Tarez Samra Graban's "Decolonizing the Transnational Collection: A Heuristic for Teaching Digital Archival Curation and Participation" offers readers a much-needed heuristic for ethical action in the contexts of transnational archives. Graban delineates a three-stage pedagogical approach in support of capacities meant to unsettle curatorial methods (218), temporality in service of the political diaspora of African women (221), and participation (225). She advocates for the characterization of archives as mobile spaces, "better traced" than "organized," and she offers a precondition for critical work that will appeal to critical archival studies practitioners: we must work to "delink the archive from specific regional expectations or geopolitical assumptions" (230). At stake, for Graban, is advancing the tacit promise of promoting "dialogic agility in decolonizing archival curation" (230). In chapter thirteen, "Archiving as Learning: Digital Archives as Heuristic for Transformative Undergraduate Education," Jennifer Almjeld fulfills a pedagogical promise of her own, presenting an account that will be convincing to readers who may be undecided about integrating archives into their teaching. She describes the creation of an undergraduate seminar, "Feminist Rhetorics," that coincided with the 2019 Femi-

nism and Rhetorics Conference. In this seminar, students not only engaged with archives but also read scholarship to foster the development of “archival literacy” (as proposed by Jessica Enoch and Pamela VanHaitsma). In archiving with Almjeld, students actively created an archive for the conference. Almjeld shares important lessons learned in her conclusion. My favorite lesson, “It’s Worth It,” is a memorable reminder of the importance of critical archival studies in undergraduate education more broadly.

The final two chapters stand out as harbingers of the types of methodologies, research designs, pedagogical approaches, and outcomes that will result from more meaningful engagement with the lessons of this collection. In chapter fourteen, “Settling Emerging Scholars in Unsettling Territory: A Case Study of Underrepresented Students Working with Dominant Culture Collections,” Rebecca Schneider and Deborah Hollis report on a case study documenting a course designed as an active-learning seminar focusing on archival research for students enrolled in the Miramontes Arts and Sciences Program (MASP) at the University of Colorado Boulder. Although the course structure provided undergraduates from underrepresented communities with chances to engage with advanced research methodologies and collaborate with archive staff, cultural differences and institutional and personal biases of archive staff negatively impacted some students’ experiences. Schneider and Hollis thoughtfully frame and acknowledge the emotional stakes, anxiety, and pedagogical potential of these experiences. This chapter will be key to any instructor working with underrepresented communities and archives of dominant culture (276).

In the final chapter, “Unsettling Archival Pedagogy,” Amy J. Lueck and Nadia Nasr reflect on their experience co-teaching a ten-week-long archival research course. The primary goal of this chapter is to center and theorize about unsettling moments students might encounter in performing research, or “students’ limited positionality, discomfort, uncertainty, and other such unsettling moments” in the archival research process. Challenging “standard approaches to archival pedagogy” (285), Lueck and Nasr question the extent to which prevailing approaches account for the various ways “student research experiences are fundamentally implicated in ongoing histories of racism, sexism, and colonialism” (285). They describe how their own tendencies to resolve pedagogical tensions and “smooth the way” for student researchers “inadvertently allowed and even encouraged students to uncritically center themselves (and those like them)” (291). The authors’ reflection invites readers weighing the pedagogical value of archival research to consider important questions:

How could we go further in making silence, gaps, and intractable difference not simply a research inconvenience requiring other sources and source types? What if the limitations of our institutional archives weren’t a liability or deficit in the rhetorical history classroom, but instead a lesson in themselves, spurring students to critical reflection on historical and ongoing inequity within the institution, and their own participation in those structures? What if the assignment was to identify and move *toward* those unsettling moments, those stumbling blocks, and to sit with them, recognizing

their productive potential, rather than seeing them as the thing to avoid or work around? (295)

This collection is remarkable for its approach to addressing vexing, typically unresolved, and enduring social issues by offering lucid *yet* unsettled alternatives to key concepts (part one), methodologies (part two), and clear pedagogical paths and practical applications (part three). Readers of *Community Literacy Journal* will discover that this collection addresses a gap in ongoing discussions surrounding archival research in rhetoric and writing studies. In doing so, it offers new opportunities and perhaps alternatives to the idea of the “The Archival Wheel” as a starting point for meaning-making in archival research. It opens up the possibility of a heuristic with more dimensions—perhaps resembling a sphere with multiple centers—which might more completely acknowledge the haunted/ing complexities (13), wounded/ing spaces (6), and uncomfortable tensions inherent in bearing witness in our most unsettled moment.

Works Cited

- Johnson, Nan. *Gender and Rhetorical Space in American Life: 1866–1910*. Southern Illinois UP, 2002.
- . “Autobiography of an Archivist.” *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition*. Eds. Alexis Ramsey, Wendy Sharer, Barb L’Eplattenier, and Lisa Mastrangelo. Southern Illinois UP, 2010: 290–300.