

7/6/21 4pm

Brutal Hands and the Shaping of Historical Memory: How Digital History Can De-Archive Material for Increased Access and Responsible Stewardship

Slide 1:

First, I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for including our project for discussion and to allowing us the chance to provide some context for our project's goals, vision, and intellectual framework. In this presentation I will discuss the ways in which digital projects, such as *Slavery, Law, and Power* can enhance the work of archivists, documentary editors, and historians by allowing greater and more equitable access to material. Whether inadvertently or by design, many crucial documents in the development of the Atlantic and global slave trades remain hidden and unanalysed in physical forms thereby obscuring new connections and re-workings. Our goal, in part, as my colleagues have noted, is the re-establishing of lost connections to ideas, documents, and people; thereby restoring archival values and methods through digital history practices.

Slide 2:

In Arlette Farge's classic work *The Allure of the Archives*, she discusses the notion of the "brutal" hand of the archivist collecting, storing, and classifying the material in their care.¹ Farge is discussing the utilitarian nature of the archive as a storage facility for access to the past, but acknowledging that no organizing structure can be neutral. We can expand this notion of the "brutal" into a more provocative usage if we are considering the archivist's hand as an additional force preserving but also obscuring history through the acquisitions, descriptions, collocations, and retention practices. Hierarchies and institutional biases

¹ Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 3.

privilege access to certain stories over others which can create an obscuring effect despite the best efforts and intentions of archivists. Additionally, the confines of the archival box or folder can belie important nuances of history swept aside to privilege alternate narratives. As Anthony Grafton discussed in his excellent work outlining the history of the footnote, archives display a cultural anxiety reflecting how a society is to be remembered and a fear of being forgotten.² But as Aleida Assmann reminds us, “remembering is basically a reconstructive process; it always starts in the present.”³ The act of storing and remembering is one of creation, in other words and this observation stems from Friedrich George Jünger’s *Gedächtnis und Erinnerung* in which he describes the two German words for memory which distinguish knowledge from experience. This is of course too large of a topic to fully cover as the bibliography is deep and complex, but taking from John Locke, a central figure in the *Slavery, Law, & Power* project, in his “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” memory is a personified and exercised activity of creation and both more fickle than words in print, yet also more enduring through repetition.⁴ Indeed, as Natalie Zemon Davis has written, the stories we find in the archives are those crafted by their creator and remembered in a collective historical memory.⁵ Importantly, these stories that we collect and imbue with importance are set within particular frameworks of memory and, as Hayden White would explain, emplotted to fit cultural assumptions, norms, and tropes.⁶ Maurice Halbwachs’s work on collective memory, too, addresses the notions of collection as a symbol reflecting the values of the collecting society in an unconscious way that builds a framework of

² Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

³ Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Arts of Memory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 19.

⁴ John Locke, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” in Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead (eds.) *Theories of Memory: A Reader*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 76-77.

⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 3.

⁶ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

meaning even when the facts of the fleeting and largely intangible moment have passed.⁷

Finally, it is worth understanding that this constructed past carries with it the privilege of hegemony and that, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, “historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences...,” a bundle conditioned by the society which privileges the narrative of the ascendent society and the emplotted tropes which reflect the symbols, shibboleths, and shared histories of a culture.⁸

As historians, these notions of fallible memories and the multiplicity of stories do not seem controversial at all, and indeed, is one of the disciplinary tools we bring to our project that blends history, digital humanities, scholarly editing, and archives. Within the traditional archival literature, however, there is a lot less acknowledgement of the faulty nature of documents to truly reflect the moment. As Kathleen Roe wrote “archival records are identified and maintained because they have permanent value for an incalculable number and range of users.”⁹

Slide 3

Most critically, as the ISAD *General International Standard Archival Description* states, “the general purpose of archival description is to identify and explain the context and content of archival material in order to promote accessibility.”¹⁰ As Kathleen Roe describes it, this process of description is, however, a personal one in which the archivist works to arrange and identify the records or documents and establish an “intellectual pattern” in the material which will be demonstrated in the physical organization. This intellectual pattern reflects the brutal hand discussed above in that the selection and determination of the story

⁷ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 50-51.

⁸ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, p. 26-47.

⁹ Kathleen Roe, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), xiii.

¹⁰ Ibid, 6.

contained, and its importance is reliant to the larger societal framework and shared stories and figures discussed above. Our project is cognizant of this pattern and strives to disrupt it not only by bringing into one location materials from different locales, archives, peoples, and times, but by utilizing the benefits of digital tools that allow for new insights and perspectives to amend or add to the contextualizing frameworks.

Slide 4

Similarly, as James O'Toole and Richard Cox discuss in *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*, the archivist's mission is one of preservation and maintenance in service of the client or organization. Saving, in other words, what is deemed worth saving by the values of these stakeholders.¹¹ Critically important to these notions is the sense that an archivist must, in some sense, have a window into the future value and future use of material. The classic example would be the preservation of meeting minutes; the dry minutia of bureaucratic operations which, in the moment serve as a record of accountability, but can serve as a primary record of a company's dealings over a period of time later imbued with importance: this example has an obvious analogue to this project where the quotidian accounting schema and dealings in human beings once seen as commodities provide a window into an industry and the enabling government and business apparatuses furthering its development. It is clear from the writings of people like Margaret Cross Norton or Sir Hilary Jenkinson there is no conscious effort to hide the stories of others within the archives and that the mission of the archivist is to create a reasonable pathway towards the information while still maintaining access rights to protect the material from physical harm and to protect, where appropriate, the privacy of those whose information is stored within.¹² This dual role of the archivist as guard

¹¹ James O'Toole and Richard Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), xiii.

¹² Thornton W. Mitchell (ed.), *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Management*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1975). And Roger H. Ellis and Peter Walne (eds.), *The Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2003).

and facilitator has been an point of contention within the recent literature sparking profession-wide debates over articles such as Frank Boles' "To Everything There is a Season" in which he take a stance against those wanting equitable changes to archival practice to reflect untold or lesser told stories and to create a greater context for understanding the larger debates about individual documents, records, etc.¹³ To Boles, the historical record is sacrosanct and the role of the archivist is satisfactorily proscribed as a steward of historical meaning, not as an agent within it. Boles' work was a reaction to work like that of Lae'l Hughes-Watkins in her article "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive" in which she outlines the notions of archival privilege and the favouring of aggrandizing narratives which diminish or erase the stories of others; especially within a racist framework.¹⁴

These debates and anxieties are present in the more critical archive tradition. In fact, in the classic textbook *American Archival Studies* contributing authors discuss the nature of archives as an institution of memory in addition to practical notions of practice. Kenneth Foote, for example discusses the role of the archivist as a conduit of cultural memory and a memorial site for triumphs and tragedies in our collective memory which are more enduring than the biochemical processes of our brains.¹⁵ This is of course similar to notions discussed by both Jay Winter and by Judith Pollmann in their works on the memorializing of space and the subsequent creation of cultural memory as a result.¹⁶ James O'Toole, too, wrote about the

¹³ Frank J. Boles. "To Everything There is a Season," *The American Archivist*, 82 (2), 2019. See also this explainer from The Society of American Archivists by Christopher Lee, <https://offtherecord.archivists.org/2019/09/11/editors-comments-about-brown-bag-lunch-article-controversy-at-saa-annual-meeting-listening-and-learning/>

¹⁴ Lae'l Huges-Watkins, "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogeneous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*, 5 (6), 2018.

¹⁵ Kenneth E. Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," in Randall Jimerson (ed.) *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992), 29-46.

¹⁶ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Judith Pollmann, *Memory in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

importance of the archivist in the development of cultural memory and pleaded the case that the archivist held both a “symbolic” role as well as a practical one. This notion is crucially important as it acknowledges the act of archiving—and in a similar fashion, scholarly editing—as one of power due to the archivist’s nearly outsized, yet silent role in the creation of the historical record by selecting what we choose to remember (or include in the volume, in the case of scholarly editing).¹⁷ Finally, Helen Samuels supports these general notions as she pointedly challenges the presumption that archivists have the experience, training, or cultural knowledge and sensitivities to make such powerful judgements about the creation of the historical record from the vastly expansive set of possibly historically relevant material.¹⁸

Later theorists will also question the homogeneity of the archive profession and question if the lack of diversity has led to a whitewashing of history due to an implicit bias and a favouritism towards certain aggrandizing narratives. Our project explicitly tries to problematize those narratives: even in the absence of explicit narratives voices that are silent in the archives, we will seek to recall their presence, and encourage others to think how sources created by the powerful include references to others.

Slide 5

These notions also play into the evolving sense of curatorial work as museum sites become places of exploration and discussion in addition to storehouses of cultural heritage. More to the point, as museums explore, for example, *whose* cultural heritage to emphasize, the same can be said about archives, histories, and our methods of representation and collection. In Jean-Paul Martinon’s new work *Curating as Ethics*, he discusses the way in which digital curation differs from more traditional forms of curation. Specifically, Martinon

¹⁷ James M. O’Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” in Randall Jimerson (ed.) *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992), 47-72.

¹⁸ Helen Willa Samuels, “Who Controls the Past,” in Randall Jimerson (ed.) *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice*, (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1992), 193-210.

discusses how the more recent focus on “content” has changed the nature of the wider appreciation of individual items both for the better and the worse. Anyone can be a curator, he discusses, as the nature of what is worth curating has abruptly changed. That said, through the new mediums available through digital curation, limiting facets –most importantly economic barriers—become less of a rigid barrier to access and display.¹⁹

Slide 6

Decentering the museum experience and attempting to redefine the collections has been an imperative for a relatively long period dating to at least the writings and debates spurring the so-called New Museology movement represented most vividly in Peter Vergo’s edited work collecting essays on the movements away from traditional practice.²⁰ For a project like *Slavery, Law, & Power*, these movements towards further equity in the archives and museum spaces have paved the way for digital projects to curate and explore new stories through the remixing and remediating long-held collections in a way that illustrate the deep connective tissues between documents severed through geography and the selective brutal hand of archivists and curators over the centuries. Picking up the baton from these forerunners, our project reaches beyond individual institutions’ own collections to bring together collections from multiple institutions on multiple continents.

Slide 7

There is no one definition of digital humanities (DH) that will serve all uses. There are even parody Twitter bot accounts which tweet definitions at regular intervals culled from the expanding DH literature. It is clear, however that digital humanities projects open wider avenues to encourage a greater thoroughfare of voices, stories, and perspectives. Importantly, the practices of DH have, from nearly the start, emphasized access and immediacy as at least

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Martinon, *Curating as Ethics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

²⁰ Peter Vergo (ed.), *The New Museology*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1989).

part of their primary objective. Text mining projects, for example, have sought to bring ideas, words, and connections from obscurity and into a measurable and quantifiable perspective. Scholars such as Franco Moretti have written extensively on the benefits of “distance reading” —that is the mirror of close reading and claustrophobic analysis of an individual text— in order to understand the connections between text in a corpora as opposed to the singular focus on an individual work. Obviously, to textual scholars, the value is inherent in both approaches; and the multiple dissenting voices that argue against the use of these methods can often make convincing arguments.²¹ But the variety of utility and options that DH allows for can make large scope projects such as our own flexible and relevant for multiple users, broadening the reach of materials and creating new connections and understandings.

Slide 8

As some DH scholars, such as Susan Wittig, have noted even as far back as 1977, the digital elements within a humanities project offer what she described as a “limited conceptual framework” due to the traditional humanities, too, being limited in scope and aim.²² Wittig was specifically discussing computer applications addressing new modes of materiality and textual and literary analysis, but similar questions can arise with digital history as well. This is the tension inherent in the development of the digital humanities as despite the greater depths that we are able to sound, we are still at the mercy of what has been collected. Joanna Drucker highlights these tensions in her discussion of the development of the digital humanities over time. As she indicates, the more the DH field has progressed, the further it can seem to differ from traditional humanities scholarship. Drucker points out, however, that

²¹ Such as those seen in the Chronicle of Higher Education like Nan Z. Da, “The Digital Humanities Debacle: Computational Methods Repeatedly Come up Short.” *The Chronicle Of Higher Education* March, 2019 and Timothy Brennan, “The Digital-Humanities Bust: After a Decade of Investment and Hype, What Has the Field Accomplished? Not Much.” *The Chronicle Of Higher Education* October, 2017.

²² Susan Wittig, “The Computer and the Concept of Text,” *Computers and the Humanities* 11 (4), 1977: 211–15.

the consistent focus on a theoretical approach to practice and the practitioner's willingness to engage with difficult questions regarding research biases and the problems inherent with the records being researched will ensure the humanistic mission of this work and keep scholars grounded in traditional values of their fields.²³ Additionally, Willard McCarty's essay "A Telescope for the Mind," investigates these questions through the development of DH literature. For a project like *Slavery, Law, & Power*, McCarty's work points to the real power of digital scholarship as the use of computational technology allows for new observations to be made through a reimagining of the source in multiple ways.²⁴

Slide 9

Digital tools allow us to strip essential elements from the document and change the context in which they are analysed. These elements, then, can also be viewed *in corpora*, *in vitro*, or *in situ* as easily as they can be read traditionally. The digital allows us to recreate something that no longer exists: a memory space representative of people of the past. Through a digital space we can connect ideas obvious to peoples of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries and recreate these ideological epistemologies that stand out from the noise of time and the words collected in our historical record when the correct lens and magnification is utilized.

Slide 10

Digital humanities allow us to see beyond our storehouses of information in ways akin to a telescope, to push beyond what is obvious to our limited views, and to see the connective elements, too, through intense magnification in ways similar to a microscope. As a lens, then, digital tools provide a new way of seeing what can be obscured.

²³ Joanna Drucker, "Humanistic Theory and Digital Scholarship," In Matthew Gold (ed.) *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, 85–96, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 85-95.

²⁴ Willard McCarty, "A Telescope for the Mind?," in Matthew Gold (ed.) *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 113-123.

Slide 11

As is clear from these definitions, a project focused on the digital display and scholarly transcription of historical documents fits within what could be considered an older framework for digital projects. What this indicates to us, however, is a recognition of the vitality of traditional historical methods and a recognition of the scale and scope needed to more fully explore the complex and entangled histories that lie scattered across multiple archives and collections. The *Slavery, Law, & Power* project aims to respond to the theories and critiques that have pushed collecting fields (archival, scholarly editing, museums, historians) to work against their disciplinary tendencies that reify silencing particular voices and privileging or aggrandizing others. Embracing digital tools and broad thematic focus, rather than narrow or contained parameters, our project creates a model that is enduring and permits ongoing revision and remixing.

Slide 12

Culled bits:

Cultural memory:

Halbwachs calls for a personal introspection to fully understand the outlines and frameworks of our own confused senses of personal memory and our frailties which alter events and add post-scripted relevance at times. Culture creates and dictates memory on a societal and personal level. Conventions, teaching and general knowledge conventions, therefore matter considerably as “soon as each person and each historical fact has permeated this memory, it

is transposed into a teaching, a notion, or a symbol and takes on a meaning.”²⁵ This meaning, in other words, becomes the cultural memory of a particular fact; a notion that creates the sense of tradition and historical record. A framework for the development of an archive, in other words, the foundation of what is deemed important.

Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*,

“There is incongruity in many respects between the constraints of yesterday and those of today, from which it follows that we can only imagine those of the past incompletely and imperfectly.” P. 50

“Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to tuch them up. To shorten them, or to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not posess.” P. 51

“No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections.” P. 43

Archive literature and archival values:

“Archival records are identified and maintained because they have permanent value for an incalculable number and range of users. Arrangement and description are essential to ensure that the records so carefully and conscientiously brought into the archives are indeed comprehensible and accessible for reference purposes.”²⁶

²⁵ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, p. 188-9.

²⁶ Kathleen Roe, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*, p. xiii.

Distinction between archives and manuscripts: archives are records (business, government, etc.) and manuscripts are the important historical documents including written and other formats of materials.²⁷

Most critically, as the ISAD *General International Standard Archival Description* states, “the general purpose of archival description is to identify and explain the context and content of archival material in order to promote accessibility.”²⁸ As Kathleen Roe describes it, this process is a personal one, in which the archivist works to arrange and identify the records or documents and establish an “intellectual pattern” in the material which will be demonstrated in the physical organization. This intellectual pattern reflects the brutal hand discussed above.

A similar notion is discussed in James O’Toole and Richard Cox’s *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts* where they summarize the archivist’s mission as one of preservation and maintenance in service of the client or organization. Saving, in other words, what is deemed worth saving by the values of these stakeholders.²⁹ Critically important to these notions is the sense that an archivist must, in some sense, have a window into the future value and future use of material. The classic example would be the preservation of meeting minutes; the dry minutia of beurotractic operations which, in the moment serve as a record of accountability, but can serve as a primary record of a company’s dealings over a period of time later imbued with importance: this example has an obvious analogue to this project where the quotidian sales figures and dealings of human beings once seen as commodities provide a window into an industry and the enabling government and business apparati futhering its development.

It is clear from the writings of people like Margaret Cross Norton

²⁷ Ibid, p. 2.

²⁸ Quoted from p. 6 of Kathleen Roe, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts*.

²⁹ James O’Toole and Richard Cox, *Understanding Archives and Manuscripts*, xiii.

These anxieties are present in the more critical archive tradition. In fact, in the classic textbook of archival studies, *American Archival Studies*, edited by Randall Jimerson, issues over the nature of archives as an institution of memory

Kenneth Foote “To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture.”

James O’Toole “The Symbolic Significance of Archives”

Helen Samuels “Who Controls the Past” – Archivists have the expertise to describe a documents, but not the expertise to decide if it should be a part of the archive in the first place.

What, however, do we make about the power and impact of materiality? –look at Jay Winter and also look at some of the work by Hubert Dreyfus who questions some of the benefits of machine learning and the ability to connect to materials over the internet.

This also plays into the evolving notions of curatorial work as museum sites become places of exploration and discussion in addition to storehouses of cultural heritage. More to the point, as museums explore, for example, *whose* cultural heritage to emphasize, the same can be said about archives, histories, and our methods of representation. In Jean-Paul Martinon’s new work *Curating as Ethics*, he discusses the way in which digital curation differs from more traditional forms of curation. Specifically, Martinon discusses how the more recent focus on “content” has changed the nature of the wider appreciation of individual items both for the better and the worse. Anyone can be a curator, he discusses, as the nature of what is worth curating has abruptly changed. That said, through the new mediums available through digital curation, limiting factors –most importantly economic barriers—become less of a rigid barrier to access and display.

Decentering the museum experience and attempting to redefine the collections has been an imperative for a relatively long period dating to at least the writings and debates surrounding the so-called New Museology movement represented most vividly in Peter Vergo's edited work collecting essays on the movements away from traditional practice.

Do the Digital Humanities fix these issues? No, of course not, but there are wider avenues to allow a great throughfare of voices, stories, and perspectives through. There is no one definition of the digital humanities that will serve all uses. There are even parody Twitter bot accounts which tweet definitions at regular intervals culled from the expanding dh literature. Importantly, however, the practices of dh have, from nearly the start, emphasized access and immediacy as at least part of their primary objective. Text mining projects, for example, have sought to bring ideas, words, and connections from obscurity

While it feels almost anti-intellectual to suggest that something being lost among text is a concern, it is important to understand the absolute tonnage of weight of existing words in the world.

As some DH scholars, such as Susan Wittig, have noted even as far back as 1978 the digital elements within a humanities project offer what she described as a "limited conceptual framework" due to the traditional humanities, too, being limited in scope and aim. Wittig was specifically discussing computer applications addressing new modes of materiality and textual and literary analysis, but similar questions can arise with digital history as well. This is the tension inherent in the development of the digital humanities as despite the greater depths that we are able to sound, we are still at the mercy of what has been collected. Willard McCarty's essay "A Telescope for the Mind" investigates these questions through the development of DH literature.

Joanna Drucker's "Humanistic Theory and Digital Scholarship" similarly provides something of an epistemological framework for the development of the Digital Humanities and the sense of evolving purpose behind the practice. What is evident through both Drucker's and McCarty's essays is a sense of twinning development that, due to the sources being used, never really escapes notions of traditional humanities scholarship. What are the digital humanities for, then? As both Drucker, McCarty and others discuss, dh provides a window to a grander scale than one is able to explore with traditional methods in a systematic and manageable way. As Franco Moretti discusses in his work, In my previous project, *The Recusant Print Network Project*, I was able to explore some of these central notions directly. The formulation of my project was traditional, but I was able to explore

Matthew Kirschenbaum's "The .textual Condition"

Joanna Drucker's "From A to Screen"