Archival Theory and Practice
AMST 620/HIST 652C/ ENGL 696
Fall Semester 2008

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Description:
In an age of digitization, what is the status of the “real”? How do archival collections, brought together, arranged, and described by fallible human beings come to be seen as bottomless wells of information about what “really happened”? What’s the importance of the material object in making history—what happens to us when we hold the 100-year-old letter in our hands, when in the course of our research we breathe in the dust of centuries?

This course will seek answers to these and other questions as it engages innovations in theories and methods of archival research while introducing students to the practice of archivists. Using several archival collections, we will discuss both the “how to” and the “how come” of archives: their invention, organization, cultural significance and pragmatic use for humanities and social science research. We will read discussions of archival creation and study by leading scholars and we will work with archival collections to index their contents, create finding aids, make preservation recommendations, or digitize materials even as we use those materials as the basis for our critical work.

Texts:
Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever (at Von’s)
Carolyn Steedman, Dust (at Von’s)
Susan Curtis, Colored Memories (available from the author)

Coursepacket (CP), available at Copymat

Recommended: Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History ed. by Helena Pohlandt-McCormick et al.

Assignments:
Finding Aid Exercise (10%)
We will discuss in class the rhetorical purposes and work of various finding aids. This assignment asks you to construct a 1-2 page finding aid for any “collection” held by you or your family. Also, in 1-3 pages, discuss the humanities (or other) research potential
for such a project. Who do you imagine might be interested in such a collection, and why?

**Research Journal (20%)**
Beginning on the first day of class, create a research journal as a place to keep track of your research directions and findings, and to record your efforts for regular evaluation and feedback. We encourage you to keep this a digitally or to use a three-ring binder or a folder so you can keep the larger journal in your possession while handing in the pertinent pages when they are due.

Your research journal should have two sections: a “log” section in which you keep a record of what you do, read, and discuss inside and outside of class (make sure that, when appropriate, you are logging titles of outside resources, page numbers, archival call numbers, etc.). This section can be important in our conversations with you about your project in that if it’s a full description of your work, we may be able to help you see connections among ideas or materials that are eluding you. Part two should be an “analysis” section where you comment on your observations, make connections between your research/archiving activities and class discussions, ask questions (of yourself, for the class, and for us), note future plans or goals, and even provide evaluations of your work or that of the class as a whole. Note: if you have particular questions you’d like us to answer, please highlight them.

Throughout the syllabus, we’ve included “journal questions” for you to consider. You don’t need to answer these every week; they are meant to spark your thinking, and they indicate the kind of analysis we’d like you to attempt in this assignment.

**Colloquium presentation (10%)**
Since our work is informed by and depends on community resources—memory, collections, support, audiences—we will report our findings to the community at the end of the semester. Each of you will make a presentation in an open colloquium, most likely to be held at the West Lafayette Public Library. In the past, we’ve had a mixture of poster presentations and short talks. As your work develops, we will discuss the best format for sharing your work with a wider audience.

**Research Paper (30%)**
Topics for these “conference plus” length papers (about 15 pages) will arise out of your close work with collections. We expect that the final papers will be informed by our critical and theoretical readings for the class and will reflect your standing at the intersection of archiving practice and literary/historical/cultural scholarship. Please note that there are interim deadlines (prospectus, bibliography) before the final paper is due.

**Service-Learning Project (30%)**
By the end of the second week of the semester you will have identified a collection with which you will work throughout the semester. In discussion with the owners/curators/archivists in charge of these collections you will decide on work that will enhance access or preservation of their materials. Near the end of the semester, you will
report on your work, detailing the initial goals, your achievements, the current state of your project/the collection, and your recommendations for the next student or archivist to work with the materials. You will also hand in a copy of any tangible outcome of your work—finding aid, index, etc. After receiving our feedback and making any recommended changes, you will meet with your community partners to turn over the results of your work. In assigning a grade for this project, we will take into account the evaluations and recommendations of your community partner.

**Academic Honesty**
Every student in the seminar will be working with original materials for the archival project and research paper. As you interrogate and analyze the materials, you will undoubtedly consult the work of other scholars who have studied the same broad subject matter or similar original materials. Citing the work of other scholars shows that you have done your homework, so to speak. Even if you do provide a citation, remember to enclose in quotation marks all passages composed by another writer and provide information about your source that will lead your readers directly to that passage; some readers like to see the quoted material in its larger context.

Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course—it is considered a form of academic dishonesty. All scholars depend on the work of others before them, and it is a sign of academic honesty that you credit those on whom you have relied for information. Often plagiarism happens when a student inadvertently fails to enclose the words of others in quotation marks or paraphrases another author’s ideas without giving him/her credit. When it happens purposefully, it means that you are taking someone else’s work and passing it off as your own; such intellectual thievery is unacceptable. Penalties for intentional plagiarism may range from the failure of an assignment to failure of the class and notification of the dean.

If you have a question about how to use the work of others, when to quote, when to paraphrase, or how to cite previous scholarship, please consult one of the professors in the course.

**Schedule of Readings and Assignments**

**Week 1, August 27**
Introduction to the course  
Syllabus—distribution and discussion  
Class survey  
Tours of Purdue and West Lafayette Public Library collections  
Archival Collection exercise
Week 2, September 3
Workshop: with Professor Sammie Morris, Purdue University archivist.
Readings:
  James O’Toole, excerpt from Understanding Archives and Manuscripts. (1990) (CP)
  Sammie Morris, “Starting from Scratch,” Museline, Summer 2003 (CP)
Tour of Long Center collections
Class dinner at Bruno’s
By noon Friday, September 5, email Curtis and Bross with your collections preferences. Assignments will be announced by the next class period.

Journal questions: as you make your collections choices, record your initial impressions, goals, and assumptions about your choice. What has sparked your interest in the materials? How do you expect to serve the collection, and what do you hope to learn from it? As you become better acquainted with the materials, revisit this entry and mark your ongoing relationship to its contents.

Week 3, September 10: Field
Scholarship in History, Literature, American Studies, and Sociology and many other disciplines has moved in new directions that tend to focus on the lives and experiences of people formerly left out of official narratives of the nation. The readings below explore some of the ways that the fields have evolved in the past three decades. They invite us to think about archives that support this work. How do researchers and archivists work to pry open archives that may contain important aspects of that experience? How do they create new archives or supplement old archives in order to document that experience? (How) have archives “kept up” with research interests?

Presentations by Bross and Curtis on the history of archival research in their disciplines
Readings:
“One Rape, Two Stories,” from Martha Ballard On-line, http://dohistory.org/two_stories/index.html. NOTE: if your last name starts with A-G, read “The Official Story” before class, skipping the “what did Martha have to say” links. If your last name starts with H-Z, read “Martha Ballard’s Story” before class, skipping the “what does the official record say” links.

Journal questions: characterize the methodologies or approaches of each of our texts. What questions do they ask of the historical record? What questions or approaches to
these authors suggest that seem to you useful or that seem off track, and why? What surprises, if any, did you encounter in these readings? How do the questions we ask as researchers shape our methodologies and our choices of archives? What traces of archivists’ work do you see in the researchers’ accounts of their practices and findings?

Required prompt: In terms of your work with your chosen collection, spend a bit of time describing the physical appearance of your collection—do you know its original order or provenance? What about its current physical condition and location? What do its framing elements—preservation techniques, description, finding aid, index, notes by owners or archivists—suggest to you about the collections significance, meaning, or use?

Week 4, September 17: Archivists’ Work
Archivists perform essential work in assessing, preserving, describing, and making accessible fragments from the past. Their decisions affect how researchers use the materials (or do not use them), and they require historical awareness, imagination, anticipation of future use, as well as practical knowledge about how to create secure environments, how to gain both physical and intellectual control of archival materials, and how best to slow the process of decay. The following readings raise issues about how the practical and theoretical intersect.

Readings (please follow this order):
Gregory Hunter, “Selection and Appraisal,” in Developing and Maintaining Practical Archives (CP)
Richard J. Cox, “Why Can’t the Paper Keepers Keep All the Paper,” from Vandals in the Stacks? (CP)
Caitlin DeSilvey, “Art and Archive: Memory-work on a Montana Homestead.” Journal of Historical Geography 33 (October 2007): 878-900. This article can be found at www.sciencedirect.com/science. Once there, type the title in the Quick Search box.

Discussion of finding aids in collections (CP)

Journal questions: how do these various archival custodians imagine their relationship to users? What preservation considerations are paramount, and how do those considerations mark the organization or presentation of collections? What is the status of “waste” materials—or, how can archivists and users help determine what should be kept and what should be discarded? What do you make of DeSilvey’s interdisciplinary mix of art and archives? What other non-traditional interdisciplinary connections can
you imagine, and how might they work together in the creation or presentation of archival collections?

**Week 5, September 24: Theorizing Archives I**

Why do we need a theory of archives? Traditional scholars in the past regarded archives as repositories and archivists as caretakers; use of archives occurred because of questions generated outside of the archives by researchers who formulated a researchable and analyzable question. Given the rise of new interests and new purposes for conducting archival research, scholars confront the impact of un-theorized archives on the kinds of stories that have been told, the shape of national narratives, and the absence of voices and experiences from the body of collective lore. Postmodern, postnational, and postcolonial concerns have also prompted epistemological questions that require a deeper theoretical understanding of archives and archival research. The following readings offer theoretical insights into archives, research, and narrative possibilities.

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

Due: Finding Aid exercise  
Research journal to date

*Journal questions:* what was puzzling in this work? What was helpful or revelatory? What is an archon, anyway, and what relation does an archon bear to contemporary archivists or to us in this class? Consider the origins of archives in institutional records—what relationship do such archives bear to the kinds of collections we are working with? In what ways do our efforts replicate those of official records/record-keeping, and how do we challenge those efforts? Are we “killing” the materials in our collection? How do they haunt us? When are our archives silent? When and how do they speak? Several of our previous readings bear the marks of Derrida’s theories—Avery Gordon’s in particular. Reflect back on how such scholars use or resist Derrida.

**Week 6, October 1: Theorizing Archives II**

Readings:
Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*
Alexis Ramsey, Chapters 2 and 4, “[Ad]ressing the Past: A Critical Methodology for Archival Research in Rhetoric and Composition.” (Ph.D. Diss., 2008, Purdue University). (CP)

*Journal questions:* Why do both Derrida and Steedman use metaphors of (or literally reference) illness contracted from archives? In what ways does Steedman illuminate Derrida? In what ways does Ramsey illuminate both Steedman and Derrida? What do you think about Ramsey’s view of the archive as a “generative space?” How does each of these authors draw on theories of the Archive? What new theories or methodologies are they constructing? What are the implications of these theories (Steedman’s, Derrida’s, and Ramsey’s) for the research process? Can postmodern approaches unite the efforts of curators and users? If so, how? How does the scholarship of rhetoric,
history, or archiving change from traditional practices if new theoretical approaches are applied? What is gained? What is lost?

Due: Research journals to date

**Week 7, October 8: Writing from a Theorized Archive**
Readings:

*Journal Questions:* How do these authors draw on theories of the Archive? What new theories or methodologies are they constructing? Using at least two points of the text in *Colored Memories*, trace the narrative of archival encounter Curtis presents. What was her scholarly response to Lester Walton’s spectral presence? What seems to be her personal response? Is there a difference? For both Curtis and Lepore, consider the status or use of the personal anecdote or first-person voice in these academic studies and the relationship of such a voice to memory and the making of histories.

**Week 8, October 15: At-risk Archives and Memory**

Because of the impulse to theorize archives, attention increasingly has come to focus on absence as well as on presence—on archives with which we are familiar as well as with those that are at risk of being lost. War- and disease-torn regions, like Liberia and South Africa, pose particular concerns; third-world nations and places recovering from recent disasters prioritize other concerns above preserving archives and archival materials. People affected by past oppression/colonization may not easily undo destruction of their historical traces; others are seeking creative ways of reconstructive archives or seeking recognition of non-Western forms of memory presentation and signification.

Readings:
Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (CP)
Kristina Bross and Hilary Wyss, “Native Community Literacies in Colonial New England: Notes towards a Critical Archival Practice” (CP)

Websites to explore:
In the “Ephemera” issue of the on-line *Venture*, see the following projects: “Digital Dynamics Across Cultures”; “Hurricane Digital Memory Bank”; and “Slavery’s Ephemera.” Website: [http://vectors.usc.edu/archive/?issue=3](http://vectors.usc.edu/archive/?issue=3).

*Journal questions:* how do new subjects for/agents of archival collections come to be identified? What are the motivations for previously ignored groups to establish archived
collections? Are there reasons to reject archival preservation? What techniques can researchers use to assist in the reconstruction or creation of new archives. Who should have access to these materials? The originating community? All researchers? The public? What roles do intentional discovery/recovery and serendipity play? How can we preserve ephemera? Can postmodern approaches unite the efforts of curators and users? If so, how?

Week 9, October 22: Technology
In recent years, conversations about archives include collections accessible on the Internet. Traditional archives digitize their collections and make them available to distance researchers; individuals and/or groups post images and documents on-line that represent the fruits of their own collecting; and sites like E-Bay serve as unofficial archives for scholars interested in recent material culture. How has the electronic explosion affected our understanding of archives and our professional practices? The following readings grapple with some of the implications of the technological revolutions of the late-20th and early-21st centuries.

Readings:
www.common-place.org
Dydia DeLyser, Rebecca Sheehan and Andrew Curtis, “eBay and Reasearch in Historical Geography.” Journal of Historical Geography. 30.4 (October 2004): 764-782. Essay to be found at www.sciencedirect.com/science. Once there, type the title in the Quick Search box.
Michael Doylen, “Experiments in Deaccessioning: Archives and On-line Auctions” American Archivist 64.2 (fall-winter 2001) (PDF version available here: http://archivists.metapress.com/content/2221602x5k72812u/)

Panel presentation on the use of eBay in historical and cultural research

Discussion: digital databases; please consider the “front pages” and/or search engines of the following digital databases, all held by Purdue Libraries: Early American Imprints, Vol. 1 (Evans Collection); Archives USA; Early English Books On-line; and Library of Congress, “American Memory at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html. We will also consider Ancestry.com in class.


Journal questions: The first questions must be—what are the benefits—ethical, material, or otherwise—to using eBay for to enhance collections and scholarship, and what are the limitations or problems? How does each of these authors present the possibilities of the brave new digital world of archives and technology? Finally, how “democratic” is the digital revolution as exemplified to eBay—who is afforded access and who is not? How
has or can the eBay phenomenon bring scholars and others together to value the objects and texts that make up our common histories? How does eBay (or other technologies) work to preserve or make accessible collections and histories that have been neglected by other institutions?

**Week 10, October 29: Research**
During the class meeting time, Professors Bross and Curtis will be at the WLPL worksite.

Journal questions: Go back to your journal entries from week 3, or from your early work with your collection. From this distance, comment on the rhetorical work that the collection initially performed for you even before you began your work with its contents. What meaning did (and does) the original order, physical location, physical condition, finding aid, index, previous studies, or etc. of your collection provide? In other words, what has your collection as a collection, an ordered grouping of texts and materials taught you about its content? What, if anything, did you need to unlearn in order to make progress with either your archiving work or your research?

**Week 11, November 5: Research**
During the class meeting time, Professors Bross and Curtis will be at the WLPL worksite.

Journal questions: now that you’ve spent a good deal of time getting to know your collection, what questions, objects, texts, figures, or ideas in the collection are “haunting” you? What methodological or theoretical ideas and readings from previous class discussions do you have in your researcher’s or archivist’s toolbox, and how are they functioning to help you make meaning of your materials?

Due: Research journals and proposals for research paper. This one-page abstract should articulate your (provisional) thesis and describe your projected findings. You can also include your projected research or questions yet to be answered.

**Week 12, November 12**
Research
During the class meeting time, Professors Bross and Curtis will be at the WLPL worksite.

Journal questions: in order to use your collection as the foundation of your research paper, what other sources must you utilize? Secondary studies? Theoretical approaches? Other archival collections? Published primary sources? In what ways has the community been a source for your work? If you haven’t depended on local knowledges, speculate about how such knowledge might be useful, and where it might be located.

**Week 13, November 19**
WLPL gathering
Research
Due: Final research journals
   Bibliography for final research paper
Week 14, November 24-28 NO CLASS, THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 15, December 3: Planning and Research
The entire class will meet at the WLPL worksite before breaking for research time. Come prepared to give a very short presentation on your archiving work and the topic of your final paper. We will also make plans for the public colloquium

Due noon, Friday, December 5: Archiving Project Report

Week 16, December 10: Research
During the class meeting time, Professors Bross and Curtis will be at the WLPL worksite.

Finals Week: Public Colloquium
At the West Lafayette Public Library; format and time TBA

Research paper and 2 copies of your revised Archiving Project Report due at the colloquium