Introduction: Teaching the Archive

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Piles of old papers with hard to decipher handwriting, as depicted on the cover of this guide book, is the image that might come to mind when one thinks of an *archive.* Dusty cellars, rolling stacks, and idiosyncratic catalogues could follow. Or, perhaps one is reminded of the bodies of theory arising from the *archival turn*, wherein the 'archive' stands as metaphor for the 'archaeology of knowledge', the constructed orders that regulate society, the entirety of the historical record and/or the facade of history.[1] However, the ubiquitous use of the 'archive,' as symbol, metaphor, fantasy, or as an umbrella term, overlooks the work of archivists and other preservation workers.[2] Furthermore, the 'archive,' in these senses, appears static and detached from historical processes. Examining archives as dynamic institutions, practices and relationships that are (re-)constructed over time enriches the historical discipline and demystifies the *archive.* Despite the importance of archival research and the reliance on archivists within the discipline of history, archival studies literature is often omitted from history curricula. Likewise, while students of history train to analyze primary sources through contextualization, rarely does this consideration extend to the archive (i.e., Why, how and by whom has this item been preserved? What conditions its access? What logics structure its description?).

Addressing these gaps was the starting point for the advanced seminar "Archives: Gatekeepers to the Past?", which resulted in this guide. The course was taught by us, Riley Linebaugh and Bettina Severin-Barboutie, at Justus Liebig University in Giessen during the winter semester of 2020/2021. It took place virtually during the second pandemic semester and included a highly engaged and curious group of bachelor, master and doctoral students based in Germany and Colombia whose level of participation was tremendous given the difficult circumstances. We conceived of the class as a curricular intervention for students of history in order to address practical, intellectual and political dimensions of archives. Throughout the semester, we dealt with archival concepts and practices that recur throughout this guide, such as *preservation*, *provenance*, *access*, *selection*, *appraisal*, *custody*, and *use*.

To address these concepts and practices, we relied on both theoretical and practical

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[1]   See for example, Jacques Derrida. "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9–63; Michel Foucault. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1969; Carolyn Hamilton. *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013); Niamh Moore-Cherry, Andrea Salter, Liz Stanley, and Maria Tamboukou. *The Archive Project: Archival Research in the Social Sciences* (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2020).
[2]   Brian M. Watson, "Please Stop Calling Things Archives: An Archivist's Plea," *Perspectives on History,* January   (2021):   https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2021/please-stop-calling-things-archives-an-archivists-plea.

contributions. Our syllabus featured a range of literature emanating from archival science (Bennet, Bischoff, Caswell, Cook, Cooper, Drake, Ghaddar, Ketelaar, Lowry, Rimkus, Skokan, Sutherland and Underwood), history (Burns, Cobain, Eckert, Grimsted, Guldi, Hartman, Hitchcock, Laite, Milligan, Moravec, Patel, Story, Weld and Zinn), and inter-disciplinary studies (Manoff and Stoler). Our discussions of this literature were complemented by questions of their practical applicability. In order to make more transparent the work *on the other side of the desk*, we invited archival practitioners to present in the course. For example, we hosted a panel in December 2020 comprised of archivists from the Wellcome Collection, Lloyds Banking Group, and the British Library Qatar Foundation to discuss how these institutions each deal with archival selection, access, and description. Furthermore, representatives from *Coronarchiv* and *We Refugees Archive* attended course sessions to discuss issues specific to digital preservation and community archives.[3] It was through the generous input of our guests and student engagement with them, that the political and historical dimensions covered by literature came alive.

Framed around "gatekeeping," our course paid special attention to notions, practices, consequences of, and challenges to archival control. We began with an intellectual history of archiving as a modern profession wherein we examined foundational principles such as *respect des fonds* and professional self-perceptions of truth, objectivity, and duty. We traced these positivist underpinnings to the deconstructive projects of post-modern and post-colonial theory, calling into questions concepts such as *custody* and *provenance.* These theoretical debates accompanied our objective of historicizing state archives as a device of political power, in service of administration, oppression, and liberation. Our discussions considered the extent to which archival control begets political control and vice versa. To this end, Patricia Grimsted's work on Lenin's Archival Decree of 1918 and Eric Ketelaar's seminal text, "Archival Temples, Archival Prisons," helped historicize the pursuit of archival control as both a form of nation-building and self-determination.[4] We also examined archival control and gatekeeping practices from non-hegemonic perspectives. For example, Jamila Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell's work on decolonial archival praxis resulted in discussions on the redistributive potential of expanding archival access, representation, and custody.[5] These themes were especially pertinent in our course's focus on archival mobilities and the processes of dislocation and concealment that accompanied other historical episodes of state succession. Jarrett Drake's diversity-critical

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[3] The *Coronarchiv* is an online portal that collects, archives, contextualizes and exhibits "personal memories and memorabilia from the time of the coronavirus pandemic." More information can be found at https://coronarchiv.blogs.uni-hamburg.de/. The *We Refugees Archive* is a digital archive "on refugeedom" that focuses on related cities and topics, past and present. More information can be found at https://en.we-refugees-archive.org/.

[4] Patricia Grimsted, "Lenin's Archival Decree of 1918: The Bolshevik Legacy for Soviet Archival Theory and Practice," *The American Archivist* 45, no. 4 (1982): 429–443; Eric Ketelaar, "Archival Temples, Archival Prisons: Modes of Power and Protection," *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (2002): 221–38.

[5] Jamila Ghaddar and Michelle Caswell, "'To Go Beyond': Towards a Decolonial Archival Praxis," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 71–85.

scholarship challenged us to think of the limits of reforming existing archival structures and normative practices that are grounded in Eurocentric hierarchies, especially structures of White supremacy.[6] Finally, our course addressed the mammoth set of questions arising from 'the digital' and the archives of the future.

Towards the end of the course, we experimented with integrating systematic archival reflection as a feature of historical research. In doing so, we looked to the work of Saidiya Hartman and Julia Laite, who have each advocated the merits of speculative history to compensate for the myriad of gaps and untruths found in archival collections, especially in relation to women's, working peoples' and Black histories.[7] By focusing on the conflicts, dynamics, and histories surrounding archival creation and preservation, this course guided students to debates core to the discipline: the making of archival absence, the problem of hegemonic perspectives, the pursuit of alternative sources, etc. While these historiographical debates and methodological questions do not appear explicitly in the pages that follow, they formed the context for our ongoing consideration of archives and at each step, affirmed the rich interstices between history and archives.

Conceived of as a guide book, this publication is an invitation to join our ongoing reflections on the power of archives and those who guard them. Each chapter deals with a different theme and introduces the key concepts and questions on that theme that arose from our course as well as the interests and ideas of its author(s). Chapter 1 provides an overview and analysis of "The Astonishing Career of the Archive," in which the authors take on the impressive task of historicizing the human practices of documentary preservation. From ancient times during the Bronze Age to the media revolutions of the twentieth century, this contribution highlights key episodes in the history of archival praxis, with an analytical focus on the socio-political conditions in which they arise. Chapter 2 addresses archival dynamics directly and situates the guide in present global circumstances, i.e., globalization, pandemic, the endurance of fatal White supremacy. Whereas chapter 1 provides a political history of archival development, the intellectual and theoretical history of the discipline is explored at length here. Chapter 3 identifies and analyzes the role of key archival actors, such as record producers, archivists, record subjects, and users. The authors apply an actor network analysis in order to contextualize these actors in various power structures, with particular attention to the imperial origins of the Archive of the Indies in Spain and the increasing changes in self-documentation spurred by social media platforms. Chapter 4 investigates various values associated with archives, including the social, legal, historical and economic values and costs of archival preservation. In doing so, the authors assess the power of individuals such as archivists and archival institutions

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[6] Jarret M. Drake, "Diversity's Discontents: In Search of an Archive of the Oppressed," *Archives and Manuscripts* 47, no. 2 (2019): 270–79.

[7] Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), xiii–xvi; Julia Laite, "Radical Uncertainty," *History Workshop,* Features, Histories of the Present (2020): https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/radical-uncertainty/.

in generating different levels of archival value through their unique appraisal powers. Finally, chapter 5 elaborates several outlooks, taking into consideration various challenges that archives currently face, namely, accessibility, transparency, representation, and digitization. The authors end with ambivalence: on the one hand, the task of digitization requires much resource and the consequences of further delay are dire but that on the other, there is potential for further diversification and enhanced accessibility.

This is not a comprehensive overview. Ideally, the contents of this guide will encourage your own thinking, resulting in a proliferation of reflections and thought. Like the archives we studied, we see this guide as *dynamic* and *contingent.* We are its stewards, eager to facilitate access and see to its use. As a digital publication, it is easier to change, modify and grow – in case you'd like to leave an imprint of your own.