

Editorial

Archives and new modes of feminist research

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Archives retain a sustained gravitational pull on feminist researchers. We experience them as sites of promise and desire, even as we recognise they are also sites of power and privilege that have long been implicated in acts of violence and erasure. We celebrate the growth in online social and cultural data and the new questions, methods and debates that this proliferation supports, at the same time as we ask what feminist archival research looks like in an era when the metaphor of the archive is invoked to cover almost any kind of memory, collection or accumulation. Importantly, we also acknowledge that our work as feminists is conditioned by the tools – epistemological and technical – available to us at any given point in time. For this reason, contributors here are keen to mark out what may be novel and what is enduring in the ways in which feminist thought and feminist practice frame archives. What follows are some initial provocations along these lines.

If, as Susan Howe has observed, ‘the nature of archival research is in flux’ (2014, 9), it is critical to ask what this means for feminist researchers. Howe was pointing to the impact of digital technologies on the experience of being in the archive and there is no question that large-scale digitisation projects have brought about monumental changes in our understanding of

what an archive is and in the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of archival research. If archival research was previously synonymous with the ‘need to see and touch objects and documents’ (Howe 2014, 9), that experience is increasingly digitally mediated. Digital technologies have transformed archival access for researchers in ways that offer degrees of democratisation for what was once an elite practice available principally to the privileged few with time, money and credentials. Further, as Deborah Withers observes, ‘the digital has enabled greater *immediate* access to feminism’s already-there, as well as emergent proximities to archival materialities existing under the digital skin-screen’ (2015, 27).

Yet mass digitisation and the affordances of web 2.0 technologies are not without their challenges. The cost of developing and maintaining digital archival environments has seen major shifts in budget priorities within and across collecting institutions, frequently against a background of widespread and sustained budget cuts. How then might feminist researchers begin to talk about these new and emerging political economies of archiving and the various forms of labour—old and new—that they demand? After all, as Stacie Williams has pointedly observed, ‘there is a cultural expectation that archivists will work without complaint, for very little and if we are lacking resources, we will hire volunteers or unpaid interns to do the work’ (2016). Can we, for example, acknowledge archiving as an historically highly feminised profession at the same time as pointing to the ways in which archival labour—like academic labour—‘is often times unequal, rooted historically in sexism, racism, ableism, and classism’ (Williams 2016)? How important is it as feminist researchers that we reflect on our dependence upon the ‘invisible’, taken-for-granted and often precarious labour of the highly skilled technicians and archivists responsible for so many digitisation projects? At the same time, how do we reconcile the enthusiastic embrace of crowdsourcing by some archival institutions and

its democratising potential with the demands for free labour that such projects entail and the displacement of professionals that may result (Eveleigh 2014)?

In addition to such issues of political economy, as feminist researchers we must contend too with the fact that the same technologies which support new ways of building and distributing archival collections and upon which we increasingly rely, cannot guarantee on-going access to them. These technologies are inherently unstable, so while they facilitate welcome new levels of access to both digitised and born digital resources, they offer only the illusion of secure preservation. In the face of rapidly changing formats and technologies both researchers and archivists struggle to understand how best to safeguard the resources offered via these platforms. The challenge is to ensure that the important resources and projects that make up the emerging feminist digital footprint do not disappear in an environment where threatened obsolescence dictates they ‘be rebuilt every five to ten years’ (Giannachi 2016, 52).

With this in mind, it is important that the current proliferation of digital resources not blind us to how questions of use and value still determine what materials are made available to us as feminist researchers whether digitally or in more traditional formats. Institutions continue to make assumptions about the current and projected needs of researchers and these in turn shape priorities concerning the acquisition, processing, conservation and digitisation of particular archival materials. While feminists have successfully inspired broad-based collection-building strategies that have addressed some of the impact of past patterns of exclusion (Zanish-Belcher with Voss 2013), we should not assume that this work is complete and that there is no need for continued dialogue with institutions around the questions, methods and materials that inspire

our research. Indeed, as our work evolves so too must our engagements with those working professionally in archives and in the field of archival science.

And yet, according to Michelle Caswell (2016), this may be one place where we are failing. While the ‘archival turn’ across the humanities has prompted researchers to offer increasingly reflexive accounts of their own work in different archival collections, this is rarely accompanied by recognition of the role and work of archivists or by sustained engagement with the extensive scholarly and professional literature produced in archival science. Few humanities scholars have formal training in archival practice and so tend to discount the critical role of archivists in shaping the collections with which they are concerned (Sachs 2008, p.651-2; Tansey 2016). Indeed, writing of how humanities researchers respond to archivists and to research emanating from archival science, Caswell highlights—as I have already foreshadowed—how ‘even those whose work focuses on gender and class have been blind to the intellectual contributions and labor of a field that has been construed as predominantly female, professional (that is, not academic), and service-oriented, and as such, unworthy of engagement’ (2016, para 5). Both communities may write of ‘the archive’, she notes, but we are ‘not taking part in the same conversations, not speaking the same conceptual languages, and not benefiting from each other's insights’ (2016, para 4), a situation she calls for us to address with some urgency.

As will be evident from the contributions here, initial feminist archival projects framed in the language of absence and recovery have given way to more tactical engagements with the role of archives in feminist knowledge making. These engagements actively problematize what an archive is and what an archive does. Feminist work increasingly understands archives

themselves as ‘figured’ (Stoler, 2009), that is, enmeshed in histories, politics and power structures that must be accounted for before any investigation of individual collections can proceed. We no longer imagine there are voices or stories simply waiting for us in the archive, but work instead with an understanding that archives ‘are not innocent sites of storage [but] already texts shaped according to the interests and needs of certain groups’ (Pollock 1993, 12).

In the same way, the idea of evidence as inert, fully-constituted and ultimately awaiting our juridical gaze has been displaced in favour of acknowledging archiving itself as a mediating process. We are increasingly scrutinising of our own roles and that of our inquiries in conferring evidentiary status upon select archival materials. This latter move has taken place, moreover, in the context of wider interrogations of the nature of the empirical (Adkins and Lury 2009) that push us to reconsider the ‘stuff’ with which we work and what it is we accept as archival evidence. This means the heavily linguistic or textual focus that until recently dominated conceptualisations of archival evidence has been supplemented on the one hand by a focus on expanding data resources and tools of quantification (Lemercier and Zalc 2008; Solberg 2012, Potter 2013) and on the other by considerations of affect and feeling (Cifor and Gilliland 2016; Cram 2016; Cvetkovich 2003) as well as matter and materiality (Dever 2013; Manalansan 2014).

It is perhaps not surprising in the context of all these developments that challenges are now being posed to the idea that presence or visibility in the archive necessarily operates as an unproblematically positive goal. Indeed, the refusal to be archived (Vernon 2012), distrust in the archive (Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd 2009; McKemmish, Faulkhead and Russell 2011), archival repatriation (McKemmish et al 2011) and forms of archival subversion (Cvetkovich 2011; Kumbier 2012) are now understood to constitute powerful political and cultural gestures

of legitimation for specific individuals and groups, gestures with which feminist scholars must engage. In the same way, it is more and more common to talk in terms of archival activism and archival interventions, with understandings of the latter extending to ‘the process of using research and documentation to create an archive where one does not already exist’ (Sheffield 2013, 111). As contributors here attest, such initiatives may take place well beyond the confines of mainstream collecting institutions, they may take the form of individual or community efforts, they may be analogue or digital, and they may represent enduring movements or brief and ephemeral gestures.

Much that I have highlighted here suggests that current considerations of the place of archives in feminist research and knowledge-making are marked by degrees of uncertainty. In approaching the major transformations that characterise the contemporary archival realm, however, it is important to remember that futures—and often uncertain ones at that—have been as central historically to the conceptual underpinnings of the archive as they have to the emergence and unfolding of feminism’s intellectual and political projects. If archives matter for us as feminists, then their mattering is bound up in their productivity and their potential far more than in any idea of the past. To borrow and adapt from Derrida (2002), if we want to know what a feminist archive is, what feminist archiving looks like or what archival tools and theoretical dispositions feminist researchers might require then ‘we will only know in times to come’.

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