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"'Many Paths to Partial Truths': Archives, Anthropology, and the Power of Representation."

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Introduction

Ever since the 1970s, movements in the social sciences and humanities have encouraged an increasing epistemological scrutiny of such concepts as representation, authenticity, and objectivity, and their relationship to matters of power and authority.[1] In 1986, anthropologists George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fisher addressed the implications of this trend for their discipline. "At the broadest level," they wrote, "the contemporary debate is about how an emergent postmodern world is to be represented as an object for social thought in its various contemporary disciplinary manifestations" and characterized the challenge to their discipline as a "crisis of representation." Viewing the broader intellectual landscape, they attempted to describe a "shift from attempts at generalizing theories of society to discussions about the problems of interpreting and describing social reality."[2] Their argument about how that shift might occur in anthropology evoked a stormy response from their anthropologist colleagues and prompted a profound rethinking and re-articulation of the history and the future of the discipline.

Fisher and Marcus had declared in 1986 that "every contemporary field whose subject is society"[3] would have to remake itself in response to this challenge. In retrospect, most responded. But an archival re-reading of this work and other key writings throughout the history of anthropology prompts the reader to marvel at the extent to which archival thinking – surely a "field whose subject is society" -- has remained largely oblivious to these debates. While other disciplines have grappled with postmodernism, until the 1990s, the archives profession remained bound up in modes of thought and practice distinctly rooted in 19th century Positivism.

If there are meaningful and useful analogies to be drawn between archives and other disciplines, and I would argue that this is so, especially in the case of anthropology, then the discrepancy becomes increasingly puzzling and worthy of examination. In contrast to other fields, why has archives remained relatively so isolated intellectually? How has this isolation shaped the development of our profession to this point, and what will be the consequences for our future? If those consequences are a matter of some concern, then what steps might we take to address the situation?[4]

While I cannot answer all these questions, I believe that asking them presents archivists with an opportunity. Cross-disciplinary comparisons can help us to view our field in a larger context, shedding new light on familiar thought and practice, reorienting us toward the broader intellectual climate in which we work. Comparative analysis can help us better to understand our field's past. Ultimately, though, it should help us to improve our practice, because that is most important to us; a conscious understanding of what we do will better enable us to make and to justify the decisions archivists make every day. This latter point is a critical one for archivists. In his essay, "Thick Description," Clifford Geertz's wrote that "if you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners do," adding that in social anthropology, “what the practitioners do is ethnography.”[5]

Anthropology provides a particularly fruitful basis for comparison because the two fields share certain critical features. At their most basic, both are concerned with representations -- of people, of cultures, of events, and ultimately of history and of memory. Both exercise power in the creation and usage of records, of observations, of information. Anthropologists (like archivists) historically viewed themselves as disinterested selectors, collectors, and assemblers of facts from a transparent reality. But both actually serve as intermediaries between a subject and its interpreters, a function/role that is one of interpretation itself. That translates into power over the record and how it is interpreted or points to where power is negotiated and exercised. This power over the evidence of representation, and the power over access to it, endows us with some measure of power over history, memory, and the past. While archivists and anthropologists may raise an eyebrow at the thought of their professions as powerful, the fact is that are so embedded in political institutions and frameworks that any claim of complete innocence and objectivity is unfounded.

But while anthropology and archives share these many features and have both been a part of a shared larger cultural and intellectual climate, they have followed entirely different trajectories in their development. A comparison of the evolution of the archival and anthropological disciplines may be suggestive to archivists hoping to deepen an understanding of their own place, how they got there, and the historical trajectory of their consciousness. To that end, this essay contrasts a few pivotal writings in anthropology with phases in archival thinking as they have been described by Terry Cook in “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift.”[6]

Anthropology: Invisibility, observation, and representation

Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes wrote that, “for generations, ethnographers based their work on a myth and a pretense. They pretended that there was no ethnographer in the field.” The pretense rested on the perception of the ethnographer as “an invisible and permeable screen through which pure data, ‘facts,’ could be objectively filtered and recorded.”[7] But this image lost its luster as other issues came into view. Within the first decades of the 20th century, anthropology began to grapple with its professional identity, took on distinct national conventions, began to break into sub-specialties, and struggled to find its place in the sciences.

Bronislaw Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* was first published in London in 1922. Malinowski articulated for the first time the doctrine of the participant observer, an approach that recognized the anthropologist’s presence in the field, and her function as a filter of information. The formulation of the participant observer was a pivotal point in the development of the discipline, and broke sharply with the approach taken by the missionaries from whom much early ethnographic description came, and with contemporary anthropologists who observed their subjects from afar. The myth of the invisible ethnographer was debunked.

Malinowski also argued that a discussion of field procedure was a critical component to ethnography. As this new emphasis on methodology, standards of practice and standards by which to evaluate research emerged, so did the corollary realization of the importance of *revealing* methods. This was presented as a means to control and to monitor the subjectivity made evident by the recognition of the anthropologist’s dual roles of participant and observer. Malinowski and his generation, while recognizing the tensions in their work, still put their faith in science as knowledge, verifiable by method. “No-one would dream,” he wrote,

> of making an experimental contribution to physical or chemical science, without giving a detailed account of all the arrangements of the experiments; an exact description of the

> apparatus used; of the manner in which the observations were conducted; of their number; of the length of time devoted to them . . . In less exact sciences . . . this cannot be done as rigorously, but every student will do his best to bring home to the reader all the conditions in which the experiment or the observations were made . . . In ethnography, where a candid account of such data is perhaps even more necessary, it has unfortunately in the past not always been supplied with sufficient generosity, and many writers do not ply the full searchlight of methodic sincerity, as they move among their facts and produce them before us out of complete obscurity.[8]

For the next generation of anthropologists, improved methodology and faith in the science of the discipline were not enough to propel practitioners to any Olympian heights of objectivity. Better methods mitigated but did not overcome the problem of subjectivity: cultural relativism, embodied in the linguistic filter through which we experience reality, made that impossible. As Melville Herskovits wrote in 1948,

> judgements are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation. In adducing this principle, we touch on many fundamental questions that philosophers have long raised. The problem of value is one such question . . . We even approach the problem of the ultimate nature of reality itself. . . [If] reality can only be experienced through the symbolism of language. . . [I]s reality, then, not defined and redefined by the ever-varied symbolisms of the innumerable languages of mankind?"[9]

Articulating methods was not enough: the anthropologist had also had to declare his or her perspective or bias. Neither method nor point of view could be considered transparent or self-evident. Just as Malinowski had called for anthropologists to supply explanatory and contextual information using "the full searchlight of methodic sincerity," Herskovits determined that "honesty of purpose"[10] was a critical point on which quality ethnography would turn. If anthropologists could not be completely objective, they could be evaluated and held accountable for their decisions and conclusions: their explicit discussion of methods and viewpoint would make them so. Gradually, then, the specific and detailed articulation of methods and personal and professional perspective was built into the practice of anthropology. With this, Herskovitz peered into, but stopped short of the abyss.

While these anthropologists grappled with and debated the problematic aspects of ethnography, they did not waver in their confidence in the cumulative, positive nature of knowledge. Their methods could be reformulated and improved, the relative merits of individual practitioners' understandings of their subjects could be debated, but their faith in the discipline ultimately remained unchallenged.

In contrast, where earlier generations believed that better methods would allow them to capture and understand reality, the anthropologists who took up post-structuralism and postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s challenged the very concept of social reality, calling into question not only the methodological but the very epistemological underpinnings of the discipline. The two works most frequently cited as early exemplars of this perspective, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, and *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, erupted onto the scene in 1986 and provoked a flurry of response.[11] While heavily influenced by theories first explored in literary criticism (particularly *Orientalism,* Edward Said's 1979 screed against Western representations of non-Western societies), these were the works of anthropologists, critiquing their own discipline.

For Fisher, Marcus, and those who agreed with them, a rethinking of methods was beside the point: their work sought to *detach* the practitioner from methodologies, whether traditional or recent. The issues here were epistemological, they could not be resolved by adjusting methods.[12] For them, the discipline became increasingly reflexive, focused upon the nature of anthropology itself. Just as, for Alexander Pope, "the true science and the true study of man is man," for Fisher and Marcus the true study of anthropologists was anthropology, not the "Other," but the deconstruction of their presumptions and products. But following that path would mean an end to practice and lead instead into an interminable self-analysis. As many critics noted, none of the postmodern critiques resulted in any explicit specification of the criteria for a *good* ethnography.[13] In recognition, finally, that something has to be done, Nancy Scheper-Hughes wrote in 1992, "I grow weary of these postmodernist critiques, and given the perilous times in which we and our subjects live, I am inclined toward a compromise that calls for the practice of a 'good enough' ethnography."[14]

Meanwhile, back at the archives

The long century of epistemological debate and turmoil within anthropology contrasts sharply with the relative calm in the archival profession. Perhaps the most striking example of archival isolation comes from the contrast of two major theorists working at the same time and in the same country: Malinowski and Sir Hilary Jenkinson, who published *A Manual of Archival Administration* in 1922, the same year that *Argonauts of the Pacific* appeared. For Jenkinson, the archivist continued to be a person without "external enthusiasms,"[15] a passive, impartial keeper of innocent documentary residue inherited from the past.

> "The Archivist's career is one of service. He exists in order to make other people's work possible . . . His Creed, the Sanctity of Evidence; his Task, the Conservation of every scrap of Evidence attaching to the Documents committed to his charge; his aim to provide, without prejudice or afterthought, for all who wish to know the Means of Knowledge . . . The good Archivist is perhaps the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces."[16]

For Jenkinson, the archivist was objective and neutral, invisible and passive: selection was done by the creators of records, not by the archivist, whose role was that of an honorable custodian of a naturally occurring record. This is positivism in a singularly unreflexive cast and, in retrospect, it is a stunningly reactionary statement. Given all the intellectual vigor of the early 20th century, with everyone from Freud to Joyce at work, Jenkinson's clarion call sounds a strange, jarring echo of the 19th century.

And one that could not remain unanswered. By the 1930s, key thinkers had begun to challenge Jenkinson and to introduce more searching questions about methodology. Selection became a key component of theory and practice, and with it a new understanding of the archivist's role as an active shaper of the historical record. The archivist was no longer invisible. In the United States, these changes were driven in large part by the sheer volume of records created by modern bureaucratic processes: "American archivists," as Cook notes, "began their collective professional activity facing a mounting crisis of contemporary records, only a tiny fraction of which could be preserved as archives."[17] Margaret Cross Norton, State Archivist of Illinois, commented in 1944 that "it is obviously no longer possible for any agency to preserve all records which result from its activities. The emphasis of archives work has shifted from preservation of records to selection of records for preservation."[18] Methods for selection were first fully articulated by Theodore Schellenberg, and in ensuing decades, important contributions to appraisal theory and methods were made by a great variety of thinkers all of whom helped to increase the sophistication of the ways in which archives are created.

While methods became increasingly sophisticated, however, a basic consensus about what it is to be an archivist remained constant. Archival thinking remained relatively isolated from the larger academic discourse, out of touch with larger discussions about the epistemology of archives. The great majority of American archivists have resisted the questions of these thinkers, and have rested, not entirely quiescent, but more often working in the margins of this consensus, generally inclined to ad hominem rather than larger philosophical debate.

Only since the 1980s have a handful of archivists begun to disturb this calm with a newer, societal driven, approach, one that accepts the subjectivity of the whole process, as of history itself, and argues for an active, conscious, role for the archivist as co-creator of the historical record, as active shaper of the future's past, understanding archives as representations and recognizing and striving to understand the power that that implies. Hans Booms and Hugh Taylor were implicit pioneers of this school of thought; the strongest advocates explicitly have included Terry Cook, Joan Schwartz, Brien Brothman, and Tom Nesmith.[19]

But these matters of power and representation, now that they have been raised, provoked tremendous resistance, and the effect, intellectually, seems to have been frozen archival activity in time.[20] Indeed, the vast majority of American archivists still approach their work with a nineteenth-century-style positivism, viewing themselves in Jenkinsonian terms as the objective guardians of a naturally occurring historical record – this despite the ubiquity of so-called postmodern discourse over the past two decades, despite, really, the intellectual and philosophical tenor of the entire 20th century.

Why have the older strains of thinking persisted so stubbornly, in spite of the compelling challenges from persuasive thinkers within the field? The clue may lie in the profession's focus on "practice" that is so narrowly defined that it neither leaves room for, nor compels, the sort of intellectual self-examination that is now an integral part of most academic fields. To some extent, this is possible because archivists have labored in obscurity. The construction of archives as a purely applied field has, until quite recently, allowed the profession to escape the level of outside scrutiny and pressure to which most academic disciplines are subject and to which they must respond. Defined and represented thus as a practitioner's field, the archival profession has not traditionally been considered *political* or *creative* -- either by archivists or anyone else.

To be sure, practice is the archivist's *raison d'etre*. Archival work could never be an end in itself: archivists do what they do so that others (scholars, students, administrators, government officials, citizens, genealogists), whether in the here and now or in the distant future, may do what they do. And archivists rightly recognize that these stakeholders in the archival endeavor support *archives*, not archival thinking or archival theory. These premises, and others, have led to the conviction, on the part of the majority of American archivists, that the intellectualization of the field is incompatible with their practice of archives.

A number of factors are at play here. Most frequently articulated by practicing archivists is the sense that they are simply too busy "running the shop" to keep up with and respond to the vicissitudes of academic inquiry that takes place in the "ivory tower." This stance is fuelled, in part, by a strain of archival class-consciousness that has run through the profession most particularly since the field took on the trappings of a full fledged profession and aspirant to academic standing, with publications, societies, dissertations and degrees. The archival profession is actually far more diverse than it may appear to non-archivists, and the differing orientations of, for example, archival educators, manuscript curators, and government, academic, and corporate archivists can lead to sharply drawn and deeply felt divisions with regard to issues of practice and theory.

One result is the vague suspicion within the archival community that a certain level of self-consciousness will undermine practice, that to unpack the tenets that undergird our profession, and to introduce questions of objectivity and power, would be to invite trouble on a grand scale. This is not an entirely unfounded fear: postmodernism (writ large) could well function as a great wrecking ball when applied in a literal fashion to the stable structures of archival practice, knocking down years of accumulated professional knowledge, values, and expertise, demolishing our assumptions about ourselves and our profession, and leaving us in a state of professional paralysis.

But neither professional paralysis nor the total decimation of archival tradition are reasonable responses. Respond we must, or face irrelevance. The inability or unwillingness to respond will keep archivists from developing a more formal intellectual apparatus for the discipline, which in turn will prevent us from refining and improving our practice. Our ability to communicate our ideas to, and articulate our differences with professionals in other disciplines will be limited. If we want to enter into conversations with other professionals, we have to wrestle with our expectations and our perceptions.

This is especially important now, as in an interesting twist of timing, just as archivists have begun to turn their attention to the archival role in the production of knowledge and issues of power and representation, scholars from a variety of academic disciplines who have been interested in these issues for some time have begun to train their gaze on archives, archivists, and the nature of archival institutions. These concurrent developments are both promising and problematic. Just as archivists are finding their voices, they find that others have already spoken for them – using their language in ways they may not even recognize, characterizing their profession with an incomplete or distorted impression.[21] We need to talk back, to speak for ourselves, to engage in a dialogue that could invest our work with more attention, respect, support and resources.

If the profession accepts the view of archives as a form of representation, we must devise practicable ways to continue to do archival work without the positivist blinders of the past. The purely reflexive model is clearly not an option. We must settle for an imperfect but more self aware and accountable practice. The point is not simply to study archives, but to increase the consciousness of practicing archivists, and to illuminate and improve practice. New anthropologists write ethnography *and* engage in discourse about the discipline. They become increasingly intellectualized practitioners. There must be a parallel scenario for archivists, in which we would continue to practice, *and* write about what we are doing, explaining it and considering it with increasing sophistication. The implication of this would be the intellectualization of the profession and its practice, resulting in a richer, more complex practice. Theory is not replacing practice; theory is not causing practice to wither away. Theory here is engaged in a mutually productive dialogue with practice.

How might this start us off in a new direction? Here again we can extrapolate from a few of the recurring themes in history of anthropology: revealing methods; declaring bias; reflecting on our work; and engaging with the work of other disciplines and with our stakeholders. Most significant, we must learn to live with uncertainty. As Terry Cook has written, “archivists must . . . act rather than live in continual questioning, but when they act, they must also never stop questioning.”[22] As we accept the challenges to archival tradition that are beginning to arise from within and without the profession, we can expect that a certain unease will become a fact of life for our profession. As Marcus and Fischer wrote of anthropology’s efforts to address the impact of the crisis of representation, “a period of experimentation is characterized by . . . tolerance of uncertainty about the field’s direction and of incompleteness in some of its projects.”[23] Uncertainty is always accompanied by anxiety, but this is an anxiety we should welcome, indeed celebrate The result would not be, I think, some flirtation, but an increasingly mature discipline, and, most important, an evolving set of practices, the articulation of individual decisions in the day to day routine, that can be understood, evaluated and improved over time.

The key, or keyhole rather, is in the postmodern emphasis on perspective. In the early 1930s, the anthropologist Ruth Bunzel went to the small Guatemalan village of Chichicastenango to conduct her fieldwork. The resulting ethnography, published in 1952, remains firmly rooted in its time, yet has a lasting appeal for historians of anthropology. Bunzel realized that she was exploring new methodological terrain, and did her best to articulate self-consciously her assumptions and assert her presence in the ethnography. At the same time, she recognized the uncertainty inherent in her work, noting that in the practice of social anthropology, "there is no magic formula, but there are many paths to partial truths."[24] Guided by this intellectually mature and hopeful attitude, archivists might do the same.

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[1] This scrutiny is sometimes characterized here as "postmodernism," although I recognize that the definition of that term can be as fraught with complications as the debate over postmodernism itself.

[2] George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 6.

[3] Marcus and Fischer, vii.

[4] While the writings from anthropology that are examined here are seminal, they are by no means representative, balanced, or typical of the literature, and certainly not current. They are the selections of a curious non-anthropologist struck by their resonances with archives.

[5] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

[6] This extraordinarily knowledgeable and nuanced article appears in *Archivaria* 43, Spring 1997. With its explicit concern for postmodernist allegations, it provides a useful touchstone for this analysis.

[7] Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: the Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 23.

[8] Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1932), 2-3.

[9] Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 64.

[10] .*ibid*., 93.

[11] George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), and James E. Clifford and George E. Marcus, editors, *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[12] The epistemological issues were not the only ones that were problematic for the more politically engaged anthropologists, whose stance was that postmodernism is often insufficiently aware of any political context.

[13] See, for example, P. Steven Sangren, "Rhetoric and the Authority of Ethnography: 'Postmodernism' and the social reproduction of texts," *Current Anthropology* vol. 29, no. 3, June 1988.

[14] Scheper-Hughes, 28.

[15] Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archival Administration* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922), 106.

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[16] Jenkinson, quoted in Cook, p.23.

[17] Cook, p 26.

[18] Norton quoted in Cook, p. 26.

[19] See Note 14 of Terry Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives,” *Archivaria* 51, Spring 2001, 14-35.

[20] On resistance and other archival responses to postmodernism, see Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense.”

[21] As Richard Cox has written, “many of these studies stretch their definition of archives far beyond how we have approached our work (either stimulating us to rethink how we define the term and our work, or burying a more literal sense and the importance of archives so far into postmodernist jargon as to give us little to compare with or relate to our work and mission).” As examples, Cox cites Derrida’s *Archive Fever* and Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive*. “No matter what insights these works provide (and they provide many), one must still work hard to capture the precise meaning of ‘archive’ or ‘archives’ as utilized by these authors.” *The American Archivist* volume 64, number 2, fall/winter 2001, p400.

[22] Cook, Archivaria 51 p 30

[23] Marcus and Fisher, x.

[24]. Ruth Bunzel, *Chichicastenango: A Guatemalan Village* (Gluckstadt, Germany: J.J. Augustin, 1952), xiii-xiv.