

# Archival Theory and Practice

## AMST 620/ENGL 696

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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)  
Nicole Cooley, *Afflicted Girls* (at Von’s)  
Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (at Von’s)  
Course packet (CP), available at Copymat

### **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 January 10**

#### **West Lafayette Public Library**

#### **"What's Worth Saving I?"**

Introduction to the course—its objectives, expectations, requirements, and readings

Readings: (To be completed by the first class)

Marilyn Johnson, "What's Worth Saving?" from *This Book Is Overdue*

Susan Scott Parrish, "Rummaging/In and Out of Holds"

Ira Berlin, "Mining the Museum"

*The first seminar is devoted primarily to diving into the themes and issues of the course. Themes to consider as you read: The fundamental work of an archivist is to decide what is worth saving, why it promises to have "enduring value," and how to describe it. What are the implications for shared public knowledge as well as scholarship of these fundamental decisions? How are "hidden histories" uncovered? And by whom? Can they be uncovered in conventional archives?*

During this session we would like to identify a small ad hoc grants writing committee—small grants are available to students interested in community service work, and the final public presentation of the semester would be a good use of such a grant. If you are interested in the role of the public intellectual and think that you might want to explore that role this semester, this committee would be a good jump off project for your final archival and/or traditional project.

### **Week 2 January 17 --NO CLASS, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day**

#### **Purdue University Archives and Special Collections in STEW**

The seminar will meet on *Saturday, January 22, in Archives and Special Collections, 1:00-4:00 p.m.*

Elizabeth Wilkinson of Purdue University Archives and Special Collections will conduct a workshop on the fundamentals of archival work. In addition to introducing students to institutional collection mission, determination of "enduring value," preservation strategies, principles of arrangement and description, the essential elements of finding

aids, and the like, students will actually do some hands-on work with a collection to begin to recognize the challenges associated with archiving.

Students will also begin to plan the “Archives Road Show” event to be held at the West Lafayette Public Library. What items do we wish to solicit from the public? How might the students imagine doing a “Fred Wilson” on West Lafayette’s history? What is saved but rarely part of the narrative of West Lafayette’s history?

Readings:

Greene, Mark A. and Dennis Meissner. “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing.” *American Archivist*, vol. 68, no. 2 (2005), p. 208-263.

Meehan, Jennifer. “Making the Leap from Parts to Whole: Evidence and Inference in Archival Arrangement and Description.” CP)

### **Week 3 January 24**

#### **REC 309**

#### **“What’s Worth Saving II?”**

Readings:

Caitlin De Silvey, “A Montana Homestead,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 (October 2007): 878-900.

[http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?\\_ob=ArticleURL&\\_udi=B6WJN-4MRND1D-1&\\_user=29441&\\_coverDate=10%2F31%2F2007&\\_rdoc=1&\\_fmt=high&\\_orig=search&\\_origin=search&\\_sort=d&\\_docanchor=&\\_view=c&\\_searchStrId=1577722479&\\_runOrigin=google&\\_acct=C000003858&\\_version=1&\\_urlVersion=0&\\_userid=29441&md5=92d632b3df1792745b6efb47bf85a644&searchtype=a](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science?_ob=ArticleURL&_udi=B6WJN-4MRND1D-1&_user=29441&_coverDate=10%2F31%2F2007&_rdoc=1&_fmt=high&_orig=search&_origin=search&_sort=d&_docanchor=&_view=c&_searchStrId=1577722479&_runOrigin=google&_acct=C000003858&_version=1&_urlVersion=0&_userid=29441&md5=92d632b3df1792745b6efb47bf85a644&searchtype=a)

Chris Rose, “Magnet Man,” From *I Dead in Attic* (CP)

Richard Cox, *Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling*, Chapter 1 (CP)

The first week opened the discussion about archives by discussing “serious” collections. Today’s readings ask you to consider the ways that private materials connect to some kind of public, collective history.

***Questions to consider as you read:*** *What are the upper and lower limits of saving strategies? Does Parrish’s gesture toward “punctum” mean that the more one saves indiscriminately, the more puncti one can expect to find? Is the Montana Homestead or the Magnet collection an “archive” in any sense? Do you find Cox’s argument for the necessity of private saving persuasive?*

***Exercise #1:*** Describe a collection of your own and create a finding aid for it. In light of the growing use of digital and searchable finding aids, create a list of keywords you would highlight to help users find your collection. The finding aid and keywords list are due next week.

## **Week 4 January 31**

### **West Lafayette Public Library**

#### **“Theorizing Archives and what can be said from them”**

##### Readings:

Michel Foucault, “Introduction,” and “The History *a priori* and the Archive” from  
*Archaeology of Knowledge* (CP)

Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*, excerpt (CP)

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

This is a demanding week of reading. The seminar will divide into groups to make an inventory of the key theoretical points made by these authors. Consider how these theoretical points help us see how each imagines what archives can do; what archives cannot do; and how each imagines a relationship between archival traces and what can be said about the past. ***Questions to consider as you read: What do each of these authors say can be said from the archive? How much power does an archon have over what we can know about the past? What are the implications of this power to what gets saved and whose stories are told?***

***Exercise #2:*** Identify an institution to which you belong that has (or should) have archival records. Arrange an interview with an “archon” of that institution—someone responsible in some way for those records. Find out all you can about what records are kept, how they are preserved, who has access to them and what their final disposition is. When were records first collected? Have the kinds of records retained or their use changed over time? Does your interviewee set collections policies? If not, who does? To what use are the archives put in your institution? If you can look at the archives or get a sense of what they include, speculate on the research potential of the records—academic or otherwise. How might Foucault, Derrida or Steedman understand this archive and its archon? Your report on your interview should include an appropriate record of your interview (verbatim or close paraphrase) and a 3-4 page analysis of it.

***SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 5—ARCHIVES ROADSHOW AT WEST LAFAYETTE PUBLIC LIBRARY, Time and Place TBD.***

## **Week 5 February 7**

### **West Lafayette Public Library**

#### **“What *have* Scholars said from the Archives?”**

##### Readings:

Curtis, “Pictures of His Face,” from *Colored Memories* (CP)

Roland Barthes, excerpts from *Camera Lucida* on “studium” and “punctum” (CP)

Jill Lepore, “Historians who Love too Much” *Journal of American History* 87 (June 2001): 129-44.

<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&hid=15&sid=b0d9647c-0c36-415c-87a7-91eba4460c51%40sessionmgr4>

Joanna Brooks, “Our Phillis, Ourselves” *American Literature* 82 (March 2010): 1-28.

<http://americanliterature.dukejournals.org/cgi/reprint/82/1/1>

We will begin the seminar with a brief discussion of the Archives Road show. We will consider the extent to which as hosts of the Road show, we have become “archons” and what responsibilities we have to the people who have entrusted their materials to us/WLPL.

Today’s readings offer practical experience from the archives. They raise the issue of authority that derives from “having been there.” They also encourage us to think about the question of objectivity and the extent to which scholars/authors are nevertheless implicated in the narratives they create from time in the archive. *Questions to consider as you read: What happens when we actually hold the real thing in our hands? Can a lock of baby’s hair counteract the weight of a rational assessment? What does a subjective response add to what scholars do? How do scholars “read” images and archival traces—especially those Barthesian elements that are simply along for the ride? How do scholars extrapolate or speculate from archival traces and how do they debate their different conclusions? You might consider how Brooks represents Gates’s work (and/or compare her representation to some of his actual work, here: [www.neh.gov/whoweare/gates/lecture.html](http://www.neh.gov/whoweare/gates/lecture.html)). Finally, what does the Archives Road show experience contribute to the way you read today’s assignment?*

**Week 6 February 14**  
**West Lafayette Public Library**  
**“Finding Hidden Histories”**

Readings:

Wendy Warren, “The Cause of Her Grief” *Journal of American History* (March 2007): 1031-49.

[http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/93.4/pdf/warren\\_jah93.4.pdf](http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/93.4/pdf/warren_jah93.4.pdf)

Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*

The discussion of this week focuses on how once-hidden histories come to light. *Questions to consider as you read: What are the scholarly strategies for uncovering hidden histories embedded in archives? What can we learn by reading Morrison’s novel—what does it tell us about archival work? What are the historical parameters of the novel and what are some historical events during that period that you associate with it? How do we recover voices that have been silenced? Reading Warren, a historian, and Morrison, a novelist, we have a chance to think about the very blurry nature of “history” and “fiction.” How are the strategies for dealing with partial archives the same/different for history and fiction?*

*Exercise #3:* At the end of today’s meeting, each student will receive a piece of paper on which is written the name and location of a memorial in the community. It will be the job of each student to dig as deeply as possible to find out about the person/event being memorialized. At the next meeting of the seminar, students will bring the results of their findings. Professors Bross and Curtis will model the exercise with research related to the Purdue train wreck of 1903.

**Week 7 February 21**

**West Lafayette Public Library**  
**“How do we remember?”**

Readings:

David Charles Sloane, “Shrines and Granite Sketches: Diversifying the Vernacular Landscape of Memory,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 12 (2005): 64-81.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20062046>

The seminar will use Sloane’s essay to unpack the various memorials students visited over the course of the week. We ask students to prepare for the seminar by considering the following questions in relation to their particular memorial in a 2-3 page response: ***How does remembering the subject of your memorial matter? What form does your memorial take, and why do you think it took that design? Why do memorials eventually blend in with the scenery? Or are memorials “overwritten” with new signification? What is the impulse to memorialize—is it an immediate, urgent, open wound, or is it meant to last? How do we re-introduce the community to these markers of memory?***

**Week 8 February 28**  
**West Lafayette Public Library**  
**“Literature/Art and Archives”**

Readings:

Nicole Cooley, *The Afflicted Girls*

Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, “Prologue: What Happened in 1692” from *Salem Possessed* (CP)

Salem witchcraft trial records accessible here:

<http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/home.html>. Click on “Documents & Transcriptions”—“Court Records” then “Transcription of the Court Records, The Salem Witchcraft Papers” and read the case materials for the following accused witches: Tituba, Candy, Martha Carrier, Sarah Good, Dorcas Good, and John Willard.

Nicole Cooley will be out guest for this seminar to talk about her use of archival research in her work, focusing on her book, *The Afflicted Girls*, which uses the records of the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials as inspiration. We’d like you to work through these materials by first reading Cooley’s book “cold,” without delving into historical or primary texts, then to reconsider what she’s accomplished after you’ve read the 1692 materials. ***Questions to consider as you read: What differences do you note between Cooley’s representation of Salem events and that of Boyer and Nissenbaum? Where and how does she extrapolate from the original sources? Thinking “bi-directionally,” how does her poetry add to your historical reading and how does the historical reading deepen your understanding of the poetry? Please also use this week’s journal entry to articulate questions you would like to pose to Professor Cooley.***

**Week 9 March 7**  
**West Lafayette Public Library**  
**“Literature/Art and Archives”**

Readings: To be determined

More visitors to class! Professors Donald Platt and Mary Leader will visit the seminar—one in the beginning and one at the end. In between we will begin working with the Margerum Papers and materials from the Archives Road Show. One could argue that every document is “storied” (or perhaps “lyrical”) in some sense. *Questions to consider as you read: What form do the writers considered today use to represent archival or historical truths? What difference does a prose versus poetic representation make for our understanding/appreciation/emotional reaction to the history being considered? How do the poets and fiction writers of the archive who we’ve encountered this semester “speak for” their subjects? Is that “speaking for” ever violent? If so, is the violence necessary, and to what end? As you read, speculate on where the writer is being directly inspired by the archives he or she consulted and where he or she is extrapolating from trace evidences. And as with Nicole Cooley’s visit, this is a place for you to articulate questions to ask our guest speakers.*

*Exercise #4:* Students in the class may not be creative writers, but all can formulate a narrative or lyrical response to archival materials. The assignment in this week is to select materials from either the Margerum papers or some other collection and put together a story for the class. How much of the story is documented? How much derives from the imagination?

**Week 10 March 14 – NO CLASS, Spring Break**

**Week 11 March 21**

**West Lafayette Public Library**

Students work on archival projects or on related research. Our assumption is that your work on the archival project will have begun some time ago, but that you will have focused and dedicated hours to complete the work through the end of the term.

**Friday, March 25: Critical Review is due**

**Week 12 March 28**

**West Lafayette Public Library**

Students work on archival projects or on related research.

**Week 13 April 4**

**West Lafayette Public Library**

Students work on archival projects or on related research.

**Week 14 April 11**

**West Lafayette Public Library**

Students work on archival projects or on related research.

**Week 15 April 18**

**West Lafayette Public Library**

Students work on archival projects or on related research.

**Friday, April 22: Critical Archival Project write-up is due**

**Week 16 April 25**

**Public presentation of student work, West Lafayette Public Library. Format to be determined by class in consultation with instructors, Director Nick Schenkel, and Archivist Elizabeth Wilkinson.**

**Monday, May 2:** Final Project is due. Place to submit TBA.

**Assignments:**

Participation (10%)

We take your active participation in seminar meetings very seriously. We expect that graduate students will be present for each class session, having read and digested the assigned readings with questions and comments to offer to the group.

Critical review (15%)

We have generated a list of books or other major projects that respond to or illustrate the “archival turn” that we are investigating this semester. Some of these will be full works from which we have excerpted class readings, others will be works that we wish we had the time to assign the class. Choose one of these works and write a critical review of it *as it responds to or illuminates our work this term*. We will provide examples of our published reviews to the class website as resources for the whole group.

**Due Friday, March 25 by email to both Susan and Kristina.**

Research Journal (25%)

Each week for which we have assigned content, we have posed several questions sparked by the readings, and there are four exercises scattered through the first part of the semester, which should be included in the journal. **We will collect and comment on these journals after each exercise**; please keep copies of your journals electronically so that you can continue to add to them even when we are evaluating parts. Our goal for these journals is twofold—to get a sense of your critical thinking about archival theory and practice and also, perhaps more importantly, to have a formal place in which we can have a conversation with you as you develop your two final projects for the semester.

To that end, we expect that you will spend 2-4 pages responding to the reading prompts, though you need not answer each and every question posed. In addition, please keep a record of your archival work and research in the form of regular discussions of what you are doing with the archives and (most importantly) how the readings and discussions have illuminated your work with our community archives and vice versa. Please use subtitles each week to delineate your response to each element of the journal (i.e. “Response to Readings”; “Exercise #n”; “Archival Research.” You may not have an entry each week for archival research in the early days of the semester, but we expect by the end of the term that you will have ramped up this element of the journal.

Critical Archival project and public presentation (25%)

The form of these projects will vary depending on the work you undertake in service to the various archival collections made available to the class. You should have an articulated direction for this project (constructed in consultation with Susan and Kristina) by Monday, February 21. Please submit a 1-page description of the project and your goals by email to both instructors.

Final “Traditional” Project (25%)

This project will be a traditional, research-based seminar paper of 15-20 pages plus bibliography. The expectation here is that the subject of your paper will have emerged from work with the archival materials.

Appendix: Eligible works for the critical review assignment

Critical and Archival Works:

- Rebeca Antoine et al, *Voices Rising: Stories from the Katrina Narrative Project*  
Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed* (reviewed alone or in conjunction with *Salem Village Witchcraft*)  
Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Village Witchcraft* (reviewed alone or in conjunction with *Salem Possessed*)  
Kristina Bross and Hilary Wyss, ed., *Early Native Literacies in New England: A Documentary and Critical Anthology*  
Antoinette Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*  
Lisa Graziose Corrin, ed., *Mining the Museum*  
Richard J. Cox, *Personal Archives and a New Archival Calling*  
Nicholson Baker, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*  
Susan Curtis, *Colored Memories: A Biographer's Quest for the Elusive Lester A. Walton*  
John Demos, *The Unredeemed Captive: A Family Story from Early America*  
Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*  
Annette Gordon-Reed, *The Hemingses of Monticello*  
Jill Lepore, *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan*  
Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*  
Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*  
Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*

Creative Works:

- Pope Brock, *Indiana Gothic: A Story of Adultery and Murder in an American Family*  
Drex Brooks, *Sweet Medicine: Sites of Indian Massacres, Battlefields, and Treaties*  
Cathy Day, *The Circus in Winter*  
David Hamilton, *Deep River*  
Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*  
Richard Misrach, *Destroy this Memory*  
Ellen Bryant Voigt, *Kyrie: Poems*  
Kara Walker, *After the Deluge*