Narrating the Collective: Memory, Power, and Archival Space

Bernadette Roca

Bernadette Roca is currently pursuing a Master of Information degree at University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from University of California, Los Angeles (2005), and a Master of Arts in English from University College London (2007). Bernadette is interested in archives, recordkeeping, and the growing importance of information systems to both fields. She currently works at York University’s Scott Library. b.roca@utoronto.ca

Abstract

Although many archivists have long thought that postmodernism has little to do with archives and the work of archivists, an examination of archival theory and practice through the postmodern lens can enhance the archival discourse. The view of an archive as a repository of memory particularly lends itself to evaluation through a postmodern point of view. As records of the past, archives are sites where memory, power and narrative threads are navigated. In contrast to many conceptualizations of memory, this paper argues that memory is a contingent process, one that is firmly rooted in the present. Archives as sites of memory production permit and silence various narrative strands in the collective social fabric, and archivists must recognize their role in shaping the archival record. This essay therefore seeks to analyze the current literature on archives and its relation to memory, power and narrative, and to explore the complexity and multiplicity of layers that constitute archives and the work of archivists. The remainder of the essay is divided into thematic subsections; it is important to note, however, that each of these broad themes is inextricably entwined with the others.
“I wanted nothing more than to disappear, go off by myself; wipe out the whole story… wipe out the day before yesterday, yesterday, and today, wipe it all out, so that not a trace remained.” (Kundera, 1992, p. 283)

“You have not enough respect for the written word and you are altering the story,’ said the priest.” (Kafka, 1992, p. 215)

Archives, and the records they contain, have been variously conceived as evidence, documentation of corporate activities, a source of democratic accountability, a linkage to the past and a resource for historical research, among other conceptualizations. In recent archival literature, archives¹ and archivists have been scrutinized through the postmodern paradigm² with an eye towards plumbing the nature of archival activity and investigating the values and assumptions that underpin the profession. Terry Cook has observed that while postmodernism has frequently been dismissed as “fashionable nonsense”, it actually provides a framework through which “possibilities for enriching the practice of archives” (2001, p. 15) may be revealed and articulated. While it may initially discomfit and disturb, the postmodernist method of “denaturalizing” the seemingly natural allows for a far richer discourse to emerge in the archival literature, one that heightens professional self-reflective consciousness and engages more deeply with many of the unquestioned values embedded in archival work. One vein of the literature which has received much attention is the conception of archives as a site of memory construction and preserver of the past. Compounding the dialogue regarding the relationship of memory to archives is the problem that minimal consensus has been formed on what archivists really mean when they refer to memory and use it as a metaphor for and explanation of archival activity (Brothman, 2001). Brothman encourages archivists to look to other disciplines for ideas about memory that will enrich the discourse and enhance its usefulness for the professional rebirth: postmodernism and the practice of archives, Archivaria 51, 14-35. For an excellent discussion of postmodernism as a general concept, see Lyotard, J-F. (1984), The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹ Throughout this paper, “archive” and “archives” will be used synonymously to refer to a repository that contains documents for long-term preservation.

² Postmodernism is notoriously difficult to define. For the purposes of this paper, Terry Cook states that the postmodern paradigm in the archival sense is “a shift away from viewing records as static physical objects, and towards understanding them as dynamic virtual concepts; a shift away from looking at records as the passive product of human or administrative activity and towards considering records as active agents themselves in the formation of human and organizational memory” (Cook, 2001, p. 4). For more on postmodernism in archives, see Cook, T. (2001), Archival science and postmodernism: new formulations for old concepts, Archival Science 1(3-4), 3-24, and Cook, T. (2001), Fashionable nonsense or
archival community. As the following analysis will attempt to demonstrate, the memories that archives perpetuate are as much a social construct as the archive itself; moreover, in contrast to the traditional perception of archives as static entities, many theorists now argue that records are in a constant state of flux and subject to dynamic interpretation.

As the epigraphs to this essay illustrate, conceptions of archival activity, memory and history are intimately linked to the acts of narrating and storytelling, activities that automatically preclude objectivity and neutrality. Both archivists and historical researchers actively construct a story of the past when they arrange, describe and use archives. Respect for the written word or no, every articulation of the past constitutes an alteration of the story; at times, the entire narrative of a people or event can be entirely wiped out such that “not a trace remain[s],” as the narrator of The Joke so desires. Control of the collective memory thus invariably solidifies the dominant regime and displaces “sub-narratives” or “counter-narratives” that might exist (Harris, 2002, p. 83). The archive as a site where power is negotiated emerges as a crucial function of the archival mission, one that archivists need to recognize in order to account for their role in shaping the collective memory and determining the multiplicity (or singularity) of voices that are allowed to exist in the social discourse.

The Past in the Present

When faced with the need to explain or justify their profession, archivists frequently use memory as a convenient metaphor to describe the work they perform (Craig, 2002). However, archivists’ use of the term “memory” usually only connotes a vague reference to the past, without critically examining what they mean when they employ the word. In his articulation of this problem, Brien Brothman distinguishes between “the past of memory” and “the past that concerns history” (2001, p. 54). In relation to this duality, archivists typically describe the records in their possession as being both non-current and as having continuing value. Brothman highlights the discrepancy between these two terms and their inherent paradox, which confuses two notions of the past. Inscribed in this description is a conceptualization of segmented periods of time; that is, the ability to delineate a past that is distinct from the present, which itself is distinct from the future. This view of time is sufficient and even necessary for a historical consciousness, since it “nurtures a deep respect for the autonomy and integrity of the past. The past is comprised of surviving physical artefacts… available for critical, scientific inspection and analysis” (Brothman, 2001, p. 60). This view of the past allows historians to approach history and the documentation thereof with an illusion of detachment and objectivity. The work of the historian, however, is really about interpreting documents and artefacts in order to attempt to anchor a particular meaning or view of the past: archives are frequently “ransacked by experts when some element of the past is to be fixed in time and space” (Taylor, 1983, p. 118).
Memory has commonly been perceived as an intellectual – if not physical – place, a site for storage of past events, as is evident in the definition of an archive as a repository of documents, or in the more recent labeling of a computer’s storage capacity as random access memory (RAM). The historical view of the past corroborates this idea of a segmented, demarcated, distinct space of “the past” that is selectively used by those in “the present” for one or another purpose. A historical view of archives therefore misses the central idea of memory: that it exists in the present, even if its referents are to the past. Laura Millar emphasizes the way in which memory is rooted in the present when she asserts that “present circumstances will also affect how we remember the past” (2006, p. 116), thereby describing memory as an essentially contingent process. Even if one were to assert that the past is always a separate, distinct entity, memory’s grounding in the living individual unavoidably shapes and articulates a version of the past. As Barbara L. Craig points out, the belief in the “existence of an objective past independent of ourselves is an illusion” (2002, p. 285), since memory is an ongoing process characterized by plasticity and flexibility. The process of memory thus occurs in the present by drawing on impressions and texts of the past, where “text” is used loosely to refer not only to written documents, but also photographs, scents and other triggers. In this way, memory compresses and collapses the distance between periods of time:

Memory colonizes – that is, continually construes – the past as an integral component of a perpetual present. The objectives that memory serves make no allowance for a distinct, autonomous past; memory allows no room for the constitution of identities outside the present (Brothman, 2001, p. 63).

Brothman highlights the notion of a perpetual present that assimilations of the past help mold and influence. Memory thus becomes a specifically human activity, one which continually constitutes and constructs versions of the past for an ongoing present.

Concepts of the “past”, seen through the lens of memory as process, enrich the discourse on memory as an integral part of a complex and multidimensional present; it also opens up the discourse on archives by broadening the perception of the roles, functions and uses of archives and the activity of archivists. Laura Millar (2006) employs the rich metaphor of records as “touchstones” that enable or inhibit certain memories. She is careful to distinguish between records and memory, warning that to suggest that records and memories are synonymous is “to conflate two separate phenomena” (2006, p. 114). The documents contained in an archive, while perhaps assimilated by memory, are not to be equated with memory itself. Instead, records are touchstones or triggers of both individual and collective memory and are used to help narrate one particular version of the past. For example, a personal archive in the form of diaries or mementos collected over the years can serve as a touchstone for the ongoing assimilation of the past into the present. Such personal triggers and memories can be translated into “communities
of memory”, whereby the sharing of experiences and the use of cultural tools allows a “given group [to] recognize itself through its memory of a common past” (Ketelaar, 2005, p. 54). This implies that individual memory is intimately bound up with social memory; in fact, Ketelaar blurs the distinction between individual and collective memory by arguing that individual memory is fundamentally rooted in other people through linkages with others’ memory texts.

Memory automatically implies its opposite, forgetting, and this adds another layer of complexity: while many aspects of the past are accidentally and unavoidably lost, at times a society will deliberately forget or overlook a segment of its past. For example, traumatic events in a community’s life might necessitate “some measure of forgetting” so that the community can “heal itself and move on” (McKemmish, Gilliland-Swatland, & Ketelaar, 2005, p. 148). As an illustration of this, Kenneth E. Foote conducted a remarkable study about the ways in which certain types of tragedy are officially memorialized while others are either deliberately or accidentally forgotten. He points out that “society seems to find little redeeming value in accidental tragedy” (1990, p. 389), while supposedly glorious sites of war are glamorized and monumentalized. As evidence of a changing past – or at least a changing perception and attitude towards the past – Foote offers the example of the Chicago Fire of 1871. This event was initially viewed as potentially shameful, but was later reinterpreted as an event that demonstrated Chicago’s spirit. The Chicago Fire demonstrates both the inconstancy of the present’s interpretation of the past, as well as the reasons why a society might attempt to forget or ignore a part of its history until it becomes useful or convenient to “remember” it again. Furthermore, Eric Ketelaar indicates how memory is only enabled through forgetting: because an individual and society’s memory is capable only of retrieving a limited number of facts, only a tiny fraction of the records produced will be stored in an archives as “touchstones” for future acts of remembrance or creation (2001, p. 136). What remains in an archive is therefore highly selective and extremely significant, since they are mere fragments of a past that were chosen to remain accessible to the collective memory and for current narratives.

Hugh Taylor’s observation that “experts” use documents to fix the past is thus challenged by a more nuanced conception of memory, which further refines and complicates conceptions of the record and archives. Indeed, Taylor recognized this since the very idea of “fixing” a past implies that it is in continual flux; securing it to one particular interpretation would then require deliberate force and effort. Records comprise a complex dimension to this discussion since “once recorded, the stories become static and frozen because they are faithfully copied or replicated rather than evolving with each new telling” (Hedstrom, 2002, p. 38). The stable nature of records provides the illusion that the past itself is transfixed and immutable, requiring only that the texts reveal themselves and disclose the objective events contained within. However,
while records themselves may be stable and unchanging, an individual or group’s interpretation of those texts are not.

Lost in Translation: Archives as a Multiplicity of Narratives

From the foregoing discussion on memory comes an awareness of the various strands of the past that could be represented at any given moment. Such strands might be congruent and mutually supportive or, more likely, they might diverge, compete, and attain different degrees of acceptance and dominance in the broader social memory. In her comparison of anthropology and archival science, Elisabeth Kaplan notes that both fields are “concerned with representations – of people, of cultures, of events, and ultimately of history and memory” (2002, p. 211). Although archivists tend to tout their neutrality and objectivity, such claims are made untenable since archivists are so deeply enmeshed in the representation of collective memory. Kaplan criticizes the archival community’s traditional lack of self-reflective assessment and constant denial of their role as “active shaper of the future’s past” (2002, p. 216). Instead of passively existing in a state of unreflective work, Kaplan advocates for the recognition of the subjectivity and inherently political nature of the archivist’s activities.

If archives are sites of memory negotiation, each one contains multiple voices and innumerable relationships which come together to create differing social narratives (Duff & Harris, 2002). With every representation or reinterpretation of archival documents and artefacts, something is lost in translation and will always remain incomplete. What archivists, researchers, anthropologists and others who work with cultural artefacts choose to emphasize or disregard is an inherently subjective activity that reflects value judgments, whether consciously recognized as such or not. The power to select therefore shapes the narratives that are permitted to emerge and the stories that can be created from the past: “each story we tell about our records, each description we compile, changes the meaning of the records and re-creates them” (Duff & Harris, 2002, p. 272). Duff and Harris further highlight the power of narratives to largely dictate what can be known in a particular society or culture and impose an order and control on the types of narratives that are officially sanctioned. This is not to say that marginalized or competing voices cannot articulate themselves to form counter-narratives; rather, that such voices are likely to be silenced or kept at the periphery, where their influence and detection can be minimized (Harris, 2002).

The arena of activity that Duff and Harris (2002) highlight as particularly laden with value decisions is the process of describing records in an archive. They assert that the descriptive process is highly politicized and fraught with issues of power and control in significant ways. The past is consciously and deliberately constructed by archivists when they create information objects – finding aids, scope notes, etc. – since each act of description constitutes a storytelling moment, which in turn
affects future readings of any given record. Moreover, appraisal and selection themselves are also highly politicized domains of activity, ones which shape the narratives of the future, since archivists determine in the broadest sense the artefacts, documents and cultural items that are worth preserving. Eric Ketelaar calls this process “archivalization,” a term he invented to denote “the conscious or unconscious choice (determined by social and cultural factors) to consider something worth archiving” (2001, p. 133). Ketelaar uses the term broadly to indicate internal cognitive processes that occur prior to the act of archiving that “sweep the world” for objects of archival value. Ketelaar refers to Derrida’s idea that every interpretation of the archive enriches and extends it, changing and altering the significance of both earlier and later activations (Ketelaar, 2001). Use of the archive thus imbues the records with layers of meaning that are not drawn from the record, but externally imposed upon it. Records thus possess no inherent value, but are assigned signification through an interpretation of the record that articulates a meaningful narrative. This leads Ketelaar to characterize the archive as a “repository of meaning” because of the accumulation of interpretations that records sustain over time.

A discussion of the narratives present in and derived from an archive unavoidably draws attention to its opposite; that is, the powerful silences and gaps that equally inform any reading of an archive and are as vital in determining its effect on the collective memory. Robert Smithson suggestively states, “I’m interested for the most part in what’s not happening, that area between events that could be called the gap. This gap exists in the blank and void regions or settings that we never look at” (Carter, 2006, p. 215). The gaps that exist in the archival space contain loaded implications for the individuals, groups and cultures that are excluded and marginalized through lack of representation or deliberate suppression. Gaps in the record should be probed in order to locate the other voices and multiple narrative threads that constitute the fabric of any culture. Silences result because the dominant, powerful groups in society often have the ability to control which voices are heard and which groups are allowed to participate in the past that the archive manipulates. For example, Joan Fairweather documents her experiences in the nascent archives of the post-totalitarian countries of Hungary and South Africa. These countries’ pasts exhibit in obvious forms how voices can be deliberately excluded from social participation, and the way in which suppression of narratives can lead to the closing of the social mind. Fairweather argues that the past must be continuously examined and probed for the “gaps, silences, and hidden messages” (2000, p. 191) in order to reveal social complexity. Moreover, Carter incisively observes that silence is distinct from muteness, in that “it is not a negative phenomenon” (2006, p. 219). Silence implies the existence of a voice that had to be silenced and suppressed; it does not indicate that a vacuum of competing voices existed to begin with. Such silences are the opposite of memory, since without references or traces,
pieces of the social memory will inevitably be forgotten or actively denied.

As much as articulated narratives imply the existence of empty spaces, silence also constantly determines and shapes what is said and capable of being expressed. Because of this, silence is an inherent part of archives: regardless of how much an archive might collect and preserve, some voices will inevitably be left out. No method of capturing all the narrative threads in the world exists, and even if one did, some voices might actively choose to remain silent. Indeed, Carter (2006) points out how silence might be invoked by a particular group as an active assertion of control over one’s own narrative and as a strategy to resist the dominant narratives in society. An archive is thus necessarily incomplete, partial and fragmented; consequently, archivists must plumb the silences for the voices behind them while respecting those that wish to remain silent. Carter and others declare that engagement with the silences and attempts to fill the gaps in the archival record are essential activities. With this in mind, Richard H. Schein (2006) raises some interesting questions: how might one read the silences, gaps, or empty spaces in archives? How do we interrogate an archive such that the silences are capable of even being found, much less articulated? Although Schein admits that such questions are perhaps unanswerable, he asserts that posing them is in itself essential to the archivist. Perhaps the most forceful, eloquent expression of the deep resonance of silence comes from Albie Sachs, Justice of the South African Constitutional Court:

The silences become far more dramatic than speech, the absences from the record more resonant than anything you read. You want to know what has been left out but how do we find out what’s not there? How can we interpret what is there without knowing about the silences and the gaps? (2006, p. 5)

Archives as Sites of Power

As sites of memory negotiation and as spaces where a multiplicity of narratives can either flourish or disappear, archives become profoundly politicized arenas of power and control. By extension, archivists themselves are thoroughly implicated in the power dynamics of archives, since archivists are the primary determinants of who will possess a lasting voice in one of society’s most significant cultural repositories. Margaret Hedstrom (2002) aptly characterizes the intermediary role of archivists through her metaphor of the archivist as an “interface” with the past. In information technology, an interface is the uppermost layer of an information system that mediates between the user and the underlying components and subsystems of a given technology. The interface conceals the complexity of the machine and its ongoing processes; however, the tradeoff for the relative ease and “user friendliness” of an interface is the amount of power and control that the user must relinquish, and the implicit trust the user must invest in the system’s designer (Hockema, lecture, October 2008). In effect, the design of an interface will control the type of interaction that a user will be permitted to engage in with the system, thereby simultaneously enabling and constraining different modes of communication.
Likewise, archivists and archives themselves act as interfaces between an individual and the past that they seek:

The interface is a site where power is negotiated and exercised. For archivists, that power is exercised, consciously and unconsciously, over documents and their representations, over access to them, over actual and potential uses of the archives, and over memory. (Hedstrom, 2002, p. 22)

Because of the control that archivists wield in determining who and what gets included into an archive, he or she exercises power over the way an individual, group, or society will assemble and constitute their memories. The interface analogy also allows for a degree of permeability, which allows goods and information to pass through (Hedstrom, 2002). Archivists release or restrict the flow of information, knowledge and meaning about the past to those who would seek to use the archive. The politics of inclusion and exclusion are further heightened by the archivist’s ability to make conscious decisions about which elements of an archive to expose or obscure. Descriptive objects allow certain types of information to be expressed to potential users (Hedstrom, 2002), and these emphasize particular qualities about the record that the archivist deems important. Since these information goods are the primary means through which the public can access, or even become aware of the existence of an archive’s holdings, these descriptive artefacts serve as yet another interface between the user and the archive (Hedstrom, 2002).

Furthermore, information goods like finding aids are essentially narratives that the archivist imposes on the record, and these narratives contextualize the records to the researcher or reader and form one of the layers of meaning of which Ketelaar (2001) conceives. Hedstrom perceptively notes that the information in finding aids is “often presented as an accurate, factual, and neutral representation of the contents of archives, with little indication of the nature of the interpretation supplied by the archivist” (2002, p. 40). Information goods are deceptive in their authoritative declarations which impart the illusion of neutrality and objectivity; in this sense, a finding aid serves as an interface that conceals the partiality and subjectivity of the archivist.

Beyond the explicit role of archivists in determining the inclusion and exclusion of records into a particular repository, archival documents themselves also reinforce and legitimate those in power. Written documents withstand questioning far more easily (than, say, oral elaboration) because they are inherently difficult to challenge (O’Toole, 2002). A written document is unchanging and constant, and its impassivity prevails against even the most unrelenting scrutiny. Whereas individuals would readily challenge a hearsay report given orally, the anonymity of written records can sometimes enhance their power or their aura of authenticity. O’Toole (2002) notes that only when a document looks suspect – for example, when the signature appears to be forged – do people question the contents of a written document; in contrast, people frequently...
confront each other face-to-face. Thus, the power of the written document itself should not be understated, especially since trust in the document leads to trust in the powers that placed the document in the public and archival realm. Indeed, trust is a crucial element in any negotiation of power relations, and the inherent trust that society invests in both the written document and archives as repositories of information and knowledge should not be taken lightly.

The items that archivists choose to include in archives tend to reflect the dominant political or social body’s values and estimations of importance. Archives are inclined to further reinforce the hold of those already in power (Ketelaar, 2002). Records thus become instruments of power, depriving certain groups the ownership of their own history, as has been especially evident in totalitarian states like South Africa. Verne Harris’ compelling account of the repressive apartheid regime in South Africa, and its accompanying subdued archives, draws attention to the fact that archives are only able to preserve “a sliver of a sliver of a sliver of a window” (2002, p. 84) into the infinite complexity and processes of life. Harris indicates the state’s control over the collective memory of a people as one of its facilitators for controlling society itself; with the dominant narrative justifying the dominant regime of apartheid, and with the obliteration of any competing narrative, the apartheid regime was able to maintain control of the country for decades. Interestingly, Harris (2002) underscores the dominant regime’s narrative as one that involved both remembering and, crucially, forgetting; thus, dictating that which should be ignored, forgotten, excluded, or silenced are all key elements of control. With the end of the apartheid era, the stories had to be rewritten anew to allow a renegotiation of the past since so many of the records of competing narratives were destroyed.

Attendant with the notion of the archive as an intellectual site of power is the actual physicality of archives, since spaces can be viewed as embedding and embodying relationships, in this case between user, document and archivist. Joan M. Schwartz (2006) identifies the knowledge/power nexus as occupying different planes: metaphorical, intellectual, and physical. An archive is not an inert or merely intellectual thing, but rather a physical coalescence of social values and legal rules, all of which have an immediate and discernable impact on the world. As evidence of this, O’Toole (2002) points out how the sheer physicality and totality of accumulated records offers substantial support and lends literal weight to those with authority and power. Accumulated documentation augments – and at least partially legitimizes – the powerful, and further marginalizes the weaker and unheard voices in the social sphere.

Schwartz makes a strong claim that the archive is a distinct space with embedded power relationships:

Spaces where the archive of the powerful reside; spaces where the power of the record is preserved; but more importantly and less well recognized, spaces where archivists and
their institutions exercise power… power over the choice, content, and presentation of everything… (2006, p. 8)

Thus, archives and archivists both have the inclination to perpetuate established powers through the exercise of their own. Schwartz claims that “coming to terms with the grand narratives of the past” (2006, p. 8) is one of the dominant themes of the twenty-first century; nevertheless, it appears that archivists should instead be concerned with challenging the dominant discourse of the past and contextualizing it in a present that embraces multiple voices. Barbara L. Craig underscores the physicality of archival spaces when she declares that “archives are a physical space for memory and a site in which it is recalled, or “made” in the social-construction sense… time, space and process are focused in archives” (2002, p. 287). By uniting the multiple aspects of the power-knowledge dynamic in one location, users of an archive can articulate their own memory and situate it within the broader social context. Archives thus embody in a physical form the compression of time that memory affords, as it is continually situated in the present, focused on the past, but also simultaneously targeted toward the future.

Perhaps the most incisive and insightful analysis of the role of power in archives and in archival activity comes from Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, who remind us that despite being intellectual constructs, archives – as well as information, knowledge, and power – never exist in a vacuum. Schwartz and Cook argue that archives have an impact on people’s lives, and that the assertion of neutrality by archivists with regards to the documents in their care – including their role in selecting, appraising and determining an archive’s contents – ignores the very real power that archivists wield:

At the heart of that relationship is power… power to make records of certain events and ideas and not of others, power to name, label, and order records to meet business, government, or personal needs, power to preserve the record, power to mediate the record, power over access, power over the individual rights and freedoms, over collective memory and national identity… (2002, p. 5)

The power of information institutions and the power they wield over information are interrelated and deeply implicated in the relationship between records, representations and memories of the past. As intersections between past, present, and future, archives are the spaces that are the “loci of power of the present to control what the future will know of the past” (Schwarz & Cook, 2002, p. 13). Thus archivists, as those who manage archival spaces, are charged with immense responsibility and must recognize their powerful role in shaping the social discourse and negotiating the past.

**Conclusion: Implications for the Archivist**

In his discussion on postmodernism and archives, Mark A. Greene (2002) lists four qualities that characterize the postmodern age: diversity, heterogeneity, the local and the popular. He qualifies this statement as a defense against those who would say that postmodernism has nothing to do with archives
or archival theory, asserting that a postmodern view of archives simply means situating anew and recognizing the multiplicity of meanings that can be ascribed to an archive. In other words, a postmodernist perspective does not imply the absence of meaning, merely the reconstruction of meaning as local and heterogeneous. Terry Cook takes a broader definition of postmodernism, and follows Jean-François Lyotard in stating that the postmodern is defined by an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (2001, p. 22). He further highlights the fact that the postmodern framework of archives acknowledges the multiplicity of narratives, stories and audiences across time and space, a multiplicity that archivists have a duty to protect and promote (Cook, 2001).

While archivists can pretend that postmodernism has nothing to do with the work they perform, they cannot ignore the fact that archives exist in a real world with a complex, multifaceted and politicized social milieu. Cook and Schwartz argue that the idea of archivists as passive, neutral “keepers of the archives” is no longer tenable, because the archivist is actually an active actor, performer, mediator and interpreter. It follows that the notion of the impartiality of archivists and archives is no longer acceptable in light of the politically charged nature of archival activity (Cook, 1997). To ignore the implications of archives as deeply embroiled in political struggle, power negotiation and interpretation of the past through present memory would not absolve nor abdicate the archivist from accountability for their actions. Instead, such a role would merely indicate a timorous stance towards responsibility and would only perpetuate already existing power inequities, both through representation in archives and in society at large.
References


McKemmish, S., Gilliland-Swateland, A., & Ketelaar, E. ‘Communities of memory’: Pluralizing archival research and education agendas. *Archives and Manuscripts, 33*(1), 146-174.


