Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019

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The digital archive is a reactive entity, one that attempts to account for its own authorizing logic in ways that make it theoretically, not just technologically, separate from earlier physical archives. This is in part because the first digital archives emerged in the midst of the archival theory of the 1990s and 2000s. Many of the earliest digital archives were created with the understanding that archives are political, interpretive tools. But postcolonial digital archives in particular—both those that date to that era and those developed in the present—manifest a double awareness of this reactivity. In addition to the theoretical and technological strictures of the archive, the postcolonial digital archive is haunted by its historical predecessor, the imperial archive, that which embodies “a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire” (Richards 6). The postcolonial digital archive thus critiques its relationship to imperial culture by acknowledging its rootedness in imperial and colonial pasts. At the same time, it engages with postcolonial and archival theories to reinterpret the imperial and colonial ideologies embedded in the archive’s primary materials, both through digital remediation and critical frameworks.

Historically and hermeneutically, this is the archive after theory. This phrase is deliberately provocative. There is no “after” theory, of course, nor is there a singular, capital-T theory to come after. Instead, the phrase gestures toward a historical and interpretive condition, one that offers us a timely opportunity: What do we see when we are confronted with the digital result of our postcolonial and archival theories? Might these newly formed archives preserve the past differently in order to imagine new futures? While postcolonial digital collections continue to grapple with both ethical and technical challenges, the archive after theory nonetheless exemplifies how building can come together with humanistic critique to imagine new archival forms. Postcolonial digital archives have tended toward an ethos of repair, wherein scholars using theoretically informed digital tools and platforms attempt to redress the harm of imperialism and colonialism. Pushing the boundaries
of archival imaginations, our newest projects demand a shift in the temporality and
the site of that repair.

Informed by an awareness of the violence of imperial practices and settler colo-
rialism, the postcolonial digital archive often attempts to repair the past by recover-
ing colonized voices and deconstructing imperial and colonial values. To make visible
the painful past, the archive after theory attempts to acknowledge the complicity of
archives in the production of that pain, to resist the further propagation of the prac-
tices of the imperial archive, and to devote itself to mediating the imperial and colo-
nial records. This form of repair is sometimes characterized as “decolonizing,” as
when Roopika Risam writes of “the need for the creation of new methods, tools, pro-
jects, and platforms to undo the epistemic violence of colonialism and fully
realize a decolonized digital humanities” (81). The results of this decolonizing
project can range from the creation of archives that function as sites of resistance
to those that purposefully preserve underrepresented voices and recontextual-
ize imperial and colonial materials. In this way, postcolonial theory is brought to
bear on a more generalized ethos of repair, further enabled by digital platforms and
tools built with an awareness of their own potential complicity in imperialism and
colonialism.

Debates about postcolonial digital archives do not typically question the ethos
of repair, but discuss how best to execute it. In a recent article on Caribbean digital
archives, for instance, Nicole Aljoe et al. sum up the primary approaches that post-
colonial scholars have taken in the formation of archival materials related to the
history of imperialism and colonialism: “revisionary recovery, rereading, disem-
bedding, and recombining” (260). Each of these methods exists in relation to the
imperial and colonial pasts. As the prefixes “re-” and “dis-” suggest, the primary
work of the postcolonial digital archive—informed by decades of theory—has
conceived of intervention as going back over the historical record with the intent
to augment or disrupt it. Other scholars have argued that we need to pay more
attention to materials, creators, and authors. In a 2014 forum on “The Postcolonial
Archive,” for instance, Siobhan Senier argued for a failure in method: the “the most
visible and best-funded digital archives have tended to privilege colonial collections
over those stewarded, often for centuries, by tribal communities themselves” (298).
Despite differences in methods or subjects, a focus on the past persists, whether
through recollecting, remediating, or resisting it.

Recently, however, archival scholars have called for a different kind of archival
disruption, one oriented toward the future. Arguing that digital collections
should not be “lenses for retrospect,” Bethany Nowviskie proposes the creation
of “speculative collections.” Tom Schofield et al. offer the design-based concept of
“archival liveness,” wherein participants see the archive being created and main-
tained in the present. In another recent appeal, Jarrett Drake, following the work
of Michelle Caswell, argues for community-based “liberatory archives” as a way to
break entirely with traditional archival practices. Projects such as these petition
for digital collections that effect change in the present by emphasizing the archive's multiple temporalities. They ask archives not only to react to the past but also to engage with a different sort of activity altogether: to build archives that imagine the future as well as preserve the past.

Imagination is no stranger to postcolonial theory; the counterfactual history has long been recognized as a coping strategy and a tool of resistance. What makes these calls different is that they identify the archive as the site of futurity, a place where resistance can happen through archival design and practice. Rather than seeking out the gaps and silences in the past that have been archived, these projects expand the archive's temporal reach, emphasizing its ongoing and eventual creation, and its centrality to conceiving of alternative futures. Though oriented toward the future, these archival projects are nonetheless motivated by the same ethos of repair that shapes the postcolonial digital archive's reactive stance: they imagine repair as a creative process that will engage with the legacies of imperialism and colonialism in a new, as yet unimagined way. If, as Nowviskie hopes, archives can be "stages to be leapt upon by performers, by co-creators," repair can happen through inspired acts of making that engage with the archive's multiple temporalities.

This recent scholarship draws on postcolonial and archival theories with the intention to revise the idea of "archivists and institutions as producers of versions of the past" (Schofield et al.). Instead, it asks archivists, institutions, and communities to look to the present and beyond, not acting as "producers" but as cocreators. Nowviskie hopes that a "speculative collection" would work against the idea that "the present state of human affairs is the inevitable and singularly logical result of the accumulated data of the past" by looking "forward to imaginative, generative, alternate futures or slantwise through branching, looping time." As this suggests, moving away from an orientation to the past is not linear; the work of liveness, speculation, and liberation depends on a sense of temporal play.

This present- and future-oriented work would, Nowviskie believes, result in "archives that permit speculation and maybe not only demonstrate, but help to realize greater community agency in the context of shared cultural heritage." Archives created by the communities they represent, Drake argues, enable "seeing the unseen" through their ground-up structure, a way of unearthing the past in the service of future change. As Caswell puts it, the liberatory archive does not just "document[t] a more diverse version of the past based on the identities of the present" but also "uncover[s] previously untold, ignored, or misinterpreted histories" so that "communities can imagine and reimagine different trajectories for the future" (49).

Here the past is the condition of imagining the future, a view Schofield et al. enact through design features that help users see "the archive as a set of ongoing professional, institutional and technical processes." Drake goes further still, arguing that a reparative stance is actually inherently damaging: "Reformation of oppressive institutions—be they prisons, police, or archives—only yields more mature manifestations of oppression." The only way to repair the damage of the archive, Drake
argues, is to invent completely new forms, starting with institutional and technical infrastructures. In this, the most radical of the future-oriented archival imaginaries, Drake proposes the end of the archive as we know it (though what will replace it is less clear).

The archive after theory encompasses this future orientation, but sees it as inevitably tied to the past. We cannot have a future archive without the realization of the digital archive’s haunting by the imperial archive, an acceptance of the impossibility of ever being free of that ghost, and a bedrock reliance on critically mediated digital building to accommodate that dual position. It is this very sense of after-ness that affords the digital archive a future orientation that is not utopian and a past orientation that never stagnates. Invested in critically mediated building from its inception, the archive after theory preserves reparatively at the level of structure and content. It strives never to be caught unaware of its own complicity, never to preserve naïvely.

At the same time, however, the duality in temporal orientation also suggests a gap in our digital archives’ theorization; perhaps the archive in question is not so “after” after all. The prevailing ethos of repair is complicated by the temporality of digital objects considered more broadly, which always operate in multiple registers. Kris Paulsen has described the digital index as an “ephemeral, doubtful, distant, present-tense sign” (98), which beautifully captures the conundrum of any digital object: both close and far, past and present, material and immaterial. If the work of decolonizing depends on a temporal structure of undoing the past in the present, the digital archive complicates this work with its own, separate, and shifting multiple temporalities. This split in the chronos of repair suggests these intersectional theories are still emergent.

But to end with the same deliberate provocation with which this chapter began, seeing the digital archive as after (certain) theories is as important as looking to its theoretical future. Digital archives are the genre of theoretically inflected digital building with the longest durée. While calls for new theories are often invigorating, they too are subject to the archive’s long, fraught past. We can only know the theories we need by explicitly acknowledging the ones embedded in our collecting practices, our contextualizing materials, and our code. Seeing what the archive is after is a way of seeing what is yet to come.

**NOTES**

1. For a useful summary of archival theory pre-2004, see Manoff.

2. Archival scholars and digital humanists alike understand that “the archivization process produces as much as it records the event,” an awareness manifested in the idea that digital archives “cannot but make arguments about whatever it is they digitize” (Derrida, 17; Mussell, 383).

3. Roopika Risam offers an extensive and fruitful discussion of these challenges in *New Digital Worlds*, especially Chapter Two, “Colonial Violence and the Postcolonial
Digital Archive,” and Chapter Three, “Remaking the Global Worlds of Digital Humanities.” Stephen Ramsay and Geoffrey Rockwell make a seminal case for “building as a distinct form of scholarly endeavor” by arguing that the digital tools and platforms that we create can act as a theoretical lens. The archival theories cited in this chapter take this as a given, arguing for the political and ideological ramifications of their building choices.

4. This approach informs important recent projects such as #DHPoco and #TransformDH, which argue particularly for greater representation of past voices as a form of resistance to the imperial archive’s lingering influence.

5. For a critique of the broader use of the term “decolonization,” see Tuck and Yang.

6. See also Adeline Koh’s contribution to this same forum, in which she argued that the digital literary archive “does not actively showcase the contributions of people of colour to literature; neither does it make clear the impact of imperialism on Europe and the Americas in the nineteenth century” (392).

7. Drake draws on Caswell’s introduction of the term “liberatory” to describe community-based archives and the imagined futures they make possible. Caswell’s more recent work with Anne J. Gilliland builds on the role of imagination in archival work to argue that archives must account for the “imagined records” that exist in every archive: the content that users and archivists believe must exist but have no evidence of. Acknowledging the existence of such imagined records will, Gilliland and Caswell argue, allow the acknowledgment of “impossible archival imaginaries,” which engage with the affective power of archives and provide ways of producing an archive when “the archive and its hoped-for contents are absent or forever unattainable” (61).

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