The Non-textual Record as Manuscript

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Summer School in the Study of Historical Manuscripts
University of Zadar
September 2011
Objectives

• Understand differing constructions of manuscript, record, and text, and how these have an impact upon ideas about archives and memory in professional practice and intellectual discourse.

• Understand some of the major issues that non-textual and intangible records pose for archival capture, appraisal, description, policy, and use.

• Identify research and professional trends relating to non-textual and intangible records.
“When we understand our materials as constrained by disciplines, we understand them as ‘works.’ When we understand them as constrained by the institutions of memory that preserve and grant access to them, we understand them as ‘documents.’ And when we understand them as grounds for our own interpretive activity, we understand them as ‘texts.’ When we understand that humanistic scholarship requires an awareness of all three perspectives simultaneously ... we will be ready for a richer historical scholarship as well as a richer collaboration between archivists and humanists.”

-- David Beard, 2008
“Process rather than product, becoming rather than being, dynamic rather than static, context rather than text, reflecting time and place rather than universal absolutes – these have become the postmodern watchwords for analyzing and understanding science, society, organizations, and business activity, among others. They should likewise become the watchwords for archival science in the new century.”

Terry Cook, 2001
Manuscripts from an archival standpoint

• Ontological vagueness
  – Literally handwritten
  – Drafts of literary manuscripts
  – Unpublished primary sources providing recorded evidence of non-bureaucratic community, individual or creative activity, e.g.,
    • “personal papers” (letters, diaries, etc.)
    • research data (field notes, specimens, etc.)
    • photographs, films, home videos
    • drawings
    • other non-textual documentary materials, especially intangible heritage

• Boundary objects that provide some exemplary and creative points of intersection or collection overlap between archives, library special collections and museums

BUT

• Are collected, described and used variously as informational, evidential, bureaucratic objects and for intrinsic value (such as aesthetic, performative, experiential), depending upon the nature of the repository and context of creation and meaning to and use by creators
Non-textual archival materials

• Non-textual but nevertheless texts, and may still have a life within their creator communities that needs to be kept alive

• Add texture and diversity to the human record

• Often do not “self-describe” or need special playback equipment and therefore require curatorial interpretation or mediation

• Their “truth value” may be questioned as well as the inadequacy of the recording vs the performance or act that is recorded

• 6 main categories:
  – Images with text or symbols
  – Artifacts that come with archival collections
  – Live recorded audio-visual media (e.g., photographs (ca. 1830s), sound recordings (1857), moving images (1880s)
  – Oral and video histories and photo documentation projects
  – Some types of born-digital or “electronic records” (e.g., remote-sensed data, architectural designs, games)
  – Records embodied, inscribed or performed through non-textual means, e.g., oral tradition, dance, song
• All challenge the textually-oriented archival paradigm:
  – Identification, appraisal and acquisition
  – Preservation and permanence
  – Description – often at item or within-item levels; plurality of interpretations
  – Access/accessibility
  – User needs/practices
  – Policy

• How much documentation, collection, description and analysis is the work of the archivist, and how much of the researcher/user?

• What is the appropriate skillset for the archivist working with these materials? How specialized should that be?

• What are key areas for research/knowledge development for archival science, as opposed to archival users?

• How to integrate descriptions of related collections/objects across types of institutions? How to help users find salient aspects of objects across repositories? How can descriptions support multiple narratives relating to the same materials?
Images with text or symbols

• Require strong contextual and sometimes technical knowledge to “read,” analyse and describe

• May be valued today as much for their aesthetic aspects as for their information content, but can also have bureaucratic significance

• Reasons for creation are relevant to understanding and elucidating original use
Common forms: maps, plans, architectural records

Plan of the city of Prato, Italy, ca. 16c. (from the Datini Archive)
Record, manuscript, story or art?

*Boturini Codex* on fig bark depicting the legendary Aztec departure from Aztlán to the Valley of Mexico, ca. 1530-1541 (National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City)
Religious text or record?

14.2m Aztec *Codex Bourbonicus* on fig bark depicting calendar, rituals and ceremonies (Spanish descriptions added later)
Artifacts that come with archival collections

• Whether to keep together or separate and send to another kind of repository better suited to the type of material or its subject
• Culturally appropriate preservation
• How to describe?
Trade union banners in Lund Municipal Archives, Sweden. Taken out for use by trade unions in processions and demonstrations

Bronze bust and other realia acquired along with African American photographs and scrapbooks, Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection, Chicago Public Library
Objects in the archives: artifact or record or both?

Foundling turntable (Santa Chiara Monastery and Church Museum, Naples) and token (Datini Archive, Prato)
Objects in the museum: artifacts, records or a record contained on an artifact?

Colossal Guardian Lion, Assyrian, 865-860 BCE, containing cuneiform inscription recording the temple’s builder, British Museum
Aggregations of non-textual and textual objects

Exhibit on Chinese immigrant history, Monterey Maritime Museum, California
Textual and non-textual objects that are related to each other held in different archives and museums

Heinrich Schliemann’s field notes on the discovery of Mycenae (American School of Classical Studies Archives, Athens; and grave stele from Mycenae, National Archaeological Museum of Athens)
Live recording audio-visual media

• Prior to nineteenth century, no recorded sound or photographic images in archives
• Complex preservation concerns due to rapid and unstandardized change in media and playback technologies
• Labor intensive preservation and description
• Aesthetic concerns
• Identifying (maybe losing) the original, and differentiating versions, copies and interpolations
• Identifying creators, subjects, places and events in images and recordings
• Often need to be described not only at item-level (photographs), but even at scene/shot level, as well as by individual element (image, time, motion, sound, lighting, sequence, composition) (films)
• Which metadata schema to apply?
• Skills of the archivist? e.g., media or preservation specialist, sound technician, film historian
• Access and accessibility concerns, e.g., need for special equipment, rights management
Wax cylinders recording political speeches by unidentified male speakers, late 19c. British Library Sound Archive
Recording, playback, preservation and digital reproduction technology for sound materials, British Library Sound Archives
Sound engineering, British Library Sound Archive
Oral and video histories and photo documentation projects

• Around since 1930s, but bloomed in 1960s and 1970s
• Created both by field researchers and by archivists to document phenomena, groups and experiences not well-represented in the extant record
  – “A time may come when history ... will have more to tell about clerks and less about conquerors,” H.G. Wells, 1920
• Avoiding cultural appropriation and exploitation/addressing the legacy of past scholarly and collecting practices
• Controversial archival practice of creating documentation
• Controversial historical source material
• Original recording or digital copy of oral and video histories now preferred by scholars over transcribed version
• Indexing
• Rights management and privacy concerns
Exhibition of photographs created in photo documentation project, Harsh Collection
Born-digital materials

- The preponderance of materials that will be historical in the future are today created digitally, and many are similar to those historically considered to be manuscripts: email, personal webpages and social networking pages, word processing drafts, blogs
- Identification of new forms and genres (diplomatics, genre theory)
- Assuring trustworthiness (reliability and authenticity)
- Rapidly changing technologies, lack of societal awareness of archival importance of digitally-born materials
- Difficulties in identifying what is and is not the archival object, as well as originals, copies and versions
- Preservation techniques, economics and responsibilities
- Need for archivists to get involved at point of systems design for creation of materials
- Need for much more complex metadata structures and automatic metadata creation to describe juridical/administrative, procedural, technological, socio-historical, and documentary/archival contexts of the materials
- Aggregation/collection, item, and digital component-level description and preservation
Electronic records of the photon laboratory of the KEK Linear Particle Accelerator, Tsukuba, Japan
Records embodied or inscribed through non-textual means

- Often not recognized by archival theory or practice as records
- Can necessitate better understanding of and close partnerships with communities that in the past were absent from the archival record (e.g., Indigenous groups)
- Epistemological, ontological and cultural challenges to preservation, description, access and creator rights (e.g., regarding ownership, secrecy, self-determination).
  - What are the implications of placing these materials in new physical or intellectual or technological spaces? (import and affect)
  - New community protocols-based approaches
  - Co-creator concerns and rights
  - Implications for universal public access
- Avoiding cultural appropriation and exploitation
- Overlap with museums