

Property and Propriety: Reflections on Archived and Archival Cultures¹

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Walter Beck is a retired film director who worked for the film division of DEFA in East Germany, specializing in films for children, including a number of fairy tale films. Post-1989 unified Germany undertook a thorough restructuring of the East German media landscape and production sites, so there was little chance for Beck to continue as a director. Besides, he felt strongly about the quality of his division and what they had been able to achieve as a team despite their limited budgets and technical equipment.

“There was no political interference,” he claims: “we had our own meetings, and intense discussions on what ought to be important in good children’s films. Plus we experimented with aesthetic options and drew on those influences to which we had access.” If anything, the state encouraged treating traditional narratives as part of cultural heritage and thus – despite the clearly capitalist dreams of wealth and success to be found in such narratives – discouraged altering them.² As an early retiree, Beck set out to write the history of what he calls “our studio family” as well as a retrospective of his own work. In trying to locate where the records of the film studio had been stored, he finally located them at the

¹ This is the plenary presentation given during the conference “Cultural Archives and the State” in Columbus, OH, May 3, 2007; only bibliographic references were added and I regard the piece as a first stab at a topic I hope to work on further. Many thanks to go Dorothy Noyes and Margaret Mills for organizing this truly stimulating event. Thanks also go to Timothy Ash, Cornelia Vismann, and Mario Wimmer for giving me access to additional papers and references of relevance to the topic of archival culture. The paper is not attempting to offer an overview of state folklore archives – this is being done in a much more interesting fashion by other participants of this conference. Rather, I seek a path into archival experience and practice in general and hope that this will somehow usefully complement the political explorations in the conference as a whole.

² Some of these films nonetheless found ways to implicitly comment on the nature of bourgeois aspirations. The film makers also drew on non-German tale material so as to have a platform for showcasing pedagogic lessons or expressing more abstract messages. I have been in contact with Walter Beck for a number of years, as he agreed to participate in a lecture series on the folktale at our university, and I would like to thank him for the trust he has shown me in conversations and in sharing his manuscripts.

German National Archives (*Bundesarchiv*). He describes his visits there with a mixture of bitter humor and distress. “None of the material was accessioned,” he exclaims. “They brought me bundles of documents, wrapped in coarse paper – and the string around it was still GDR string!”

The string sums up the greatest affront Walter Beck grapples with – indifference. He hadn’t been a dissident artist and hadn’t worked underground, so his and his colleagues’ work in film all those years in the profession are simply irrelevant to a united Germany. The documentation of their work lives, thus their achievements themselves, ended up stored away, in fact not even unpacked and properly inventoried. The studio had been the property of the state. An upstanding, honorable man like Walter Beck would be the first to insist that the documentation, too, must be placed in one of the state’s archives. But his sense of propriety remains deeply offended.

Walter Beck confronted the negative variant of Michael Foucault’s take on archives. Foucault suggested seeing archives as an interplay of all those rules which determine what is and what is not to be important in a given culture (1969, 169). Transferring the files into the bowels of the National Archives follows the rule that these materials might be of interest, at some point, to someone. Rather than throwing them out, which is something that – and here the psychology of the collecting instinct manifests itself – not only archivists find hard to do, the stacks of material were taken and shelved. Until the arrival of digitized storage media, archivists were charged with deciding what is and what is not archive-worthy (Spieker 2004, 8). Rather than eliminating, it is easier to create hierarchies of value and importance, reaching from fireproof and temperature-controlled vaults for the most precious items to outlying deposit sites for what is deemed least significant. Indeed, the manner in which we deal with the floods of records produced in daily life resembles the tiered practices used in waste management studied by Sonja Windmüller (2004). A comparison of categories and

technologies would reveal, I suspect, an overlap in the **hierarchies of value** that are employed in archives and those that are used in the waste management industry— and I would venture to guess that the categories go beyond Michael Thompson’s tripartite division of the transient, the durable, and rubbish (1979).³

Given that the DEFA was a state-run media production company, placing such materials in a national (rather than a private) collection obeys, in the language of Sven Spieker, bureaucratic passion (2004). Still, compared to many other files generated in East German institutions, the children’s film division was of very minor importance to West Germany after the two countries became one in 1990. Formally, East Germany was incorporated into (or if you prefer, was annexed by or acceded to) West Germany, but to many East Germans, it seemed instead as though they had been colonized, their lives and lifestyles ideologically compromised, ready to be remaindered ...

Walter Beck’s response has been to work against what he perceives as a delegitimation of his work, symbolized by these dusty materials. He has cut open the bundles and offered to inventory them for free while he writes his portrait of forty years of work in children’s film.

The records’ presence in the archives gives him the chance to legitimate his professional past. In this sense, an archive functions as a repository for “facts,” or what some might less carefully call “truths”: truths that are to be reclaimed and returned to the public sphere through the agency of actors who can re-contextualize the materials they find and narrate them in a fashion that garners attention (cf. Fenske 2007, 91). Historians like Simon

³ Here, a differentiation would be necessary between the possibilities of traditional archives handling material, mostly in the form of paper files, and digital archives. The latter, in essence, allows the collection of everything; that results in a transformation of attitudes toward records themselves and toward record-keeping (Spieker 2004). In traditional archives, it is the archivists who have the task of deciding what is and what is not worthy of archiving, much like another institution of collection, the museum, whose custodians similarly select (or are requested to select) what is worthy of keeping, from a much larger potential set of items on offer, depending on the nature and endowment of the museum (cf. Jardine 2001).

Schama, Robert Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davis, or Rebekka Habermas are good at this genre, though, as Carolyn Steedman observes in commenting on the archival experience of the 19th century French historian Jules Michelet, breathing the dust of the archives and raising from the shelves the experiences of the dead may bring illness and death to the researcher of the present (Steedman 2001, 26-28). Steedman does not speak metaphorically, and neither do cultural groups concerned over the lasting potency of archivalia collected long ago and potentially ending up in incompetent hands (cf. Shankar and Kruesi, this conference).

I have chosen Walter Beck's still unfinished process of reclaiming his professional life as an entry to my plea to take an ethnographic approach to archives, their cultural history, and their role within past and present cultural scholarship.⁴ When we ask about the interrelationship of cultural archives and the state, we need to also know what kinds of places are called "archive," what such places feel like, how their spatial contours and behavioral norms imprint themselves on those who come in contact with them, and what appear to be the crucial factors involved in building and employing archives.

My title points to two such factors: property or ownership, and propriety. Both are quite evident in Walter Beck's context-specific experience. Documents, files, and records, once committed to a place called archive, acquire property status. They belong to a state, a city, perhaps a private institution or an individual – an institutional issue that is particularly complex for cultural archives. The owner, in turn, rules over access or exclusion. In Beck's case, records from his work place – where they had been quite easily accessible to him – migrated to a federal institution where the rules of democracy still granted him access, but with far more complications. The "complications," in turn, are part of what I term archival propriety: archival codes of conduct, fortified equally by professional habits and legal access

⁴ This ethnographic fascination I share with my colleague Michaela Fenske, who has written about her induction into archival work (2007, 76-81); Nicholas Dirks (2002) similarly argued for the archive as a site of ethnography, and numerous newer studies, some currently underway, point to the urgency of this perspective.

restrictions, can render working in archives into anything from an exuberant to a painful experience (Steedman 2001, 17-19; Fenske 2007).

The interplay of property and propriety, in turn, has a major impact on what kind of legitimacy an institution that is specifically considered an *archive of culture* can bestow, and upon whom it can do so. Whether begun as byproducts of scholars seeking to legitimate their discipline's place in the ivory tower, or by groups seeking to legitimate their very groupness, archival status and habits produce notions of property and propriety with which both founders and heirs have to struggle. My remarks include "archives of culture" as part of the general phenomenon of archives – not least because my examples illustrate that the culture of archives plays a more dominant role than the purpose for which an archive is established. Stated as a proposition: the (meta-) culture an archive develops, in the interaction between user, material, and archivist, may be more significant than its status as an archive (of culture).

Before I attempt a brief phenomenology of "property and propriety" as encoded in the everyday experience at selected archives, I want to explore how the nature of archival culture has been circumscribed. In the growing and important body of work examining techniques of knowledge production and storage, archives are accorded a key role – along with work on records and files, index cards, and newspaper clippings (Ernst 2002, Krajewsky 2002, Vismann 2000 - all reviewed in Wimmer 2002; te Heesen 2006). Aleida Assmann (1999) has long observed the link between human memory and archives, noting the archival techniques developed for relieving our brain's capacity in transferring selected and naturally altered materials into places such as archives and associated media. Keeping a record of the memorable and passing it down – who, whence and where, how and what – has seemingly been important to human beings the world over; people have kept a record pictorially, materially, and, generally in metric form, orally. The communicative imperative of all culture

and its multiplication by means of developing new communications media leads to secondary deposits for memory storage – collections and archives (Finnegan 1992).

Legal historian Cornelia Vismann links the profusion of archivable records to the media that are at our disposal: user-friendly recording techniques and media result in more, not less, archivalia. Despite the fact that administrators “increasingly ask to be selective, to record only the most important things, “... [R]ecording machines have no author and cannot obey. They record in the manner they are built to do and lead a life of their own. A life without records, without chronicling or recording, a life ‘off the record’, is virtually unthinkable for administrations in the Western world” (Vismann 2000:8).⁵ Removal from the record, as Vismann notes elsewhere, has a complex history of its own – in a properly administered archive, certainty that a file has been shredded can only be provided by creating another file attesting to this destruction (2002, 196-7).

Media are both carriers as well as the contents of an archive (Fehrmann 2002, 19), and in research groups concerned with the history of communicative media and media storage, the definition of archives remains broad. Crucially, it includes space. “Archives are ... collections of data or information” writes historian of bureaucratic communication Sven Spieker, “but they are also organized spaces of greater or lesser topographic complexity” (2004: 9). Jacques Derrida’s lecture *Archive Fever* is surely the most cited entry and we can draw from his etymologically grounded historical observations to grasp the political and legal depth lying behind archival practices:

The meaning of “archive”, its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law. On

⁵ Translation from the German throughout are my own.

account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their house . . . that official documents are filed. The archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited . . . They are also accorded hermeneutic right and competence. They have the power to interpret the archives. . . . It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks the institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the non-secret (Derrida 1994:2-3).⁶

Archives are, and here I would agree with Derrida, peculiarly perched between the passions of the private and the rights or expectations or interest of the public (cf. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, 1997). This tension expresses itself in archival practices and the habitus of the guardians installed in archives.

Archival practices and archival law evolved parallel with the development of modern states, and even before a proper definition existed for it, "culture" also became one of the ingredients reposing in the bowels of royal administrative archives. Monarchs in the age of absolutism in Europe were interested in documenting life ways, nutritional habits, dwelling patterns, agricultural and pastoral practices, or clothing styles because that knowledge helped them to rule – as well, of course, as to tax their subjects. In some places, those subjects were themselves culturally diverse peoples, and one of the predecessor enterprises of modern-day folklore, ethnology, and anthropology was the collecting of social, cultural, and economic

⁶ In English, the word derives from French and Latin, but mostly from the Greek *arkheia*, meaning public records, or *archeion*, government house; in this sense, used at least since the early 17th century, an archive is for historical records and public documents, much in the manner Derrida discusses. The 1968 Intl. Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences has no entry for archive, instead directing the reader to "Information Storage and Retrieval," and then devotes some 30 pages to the topic which reflect, as it notes in the first sentence – written, mind you, 40 years ago! – "the great volume of data pouring from our printing presses and our inability to locate much of it after it has appeared." The German Duden, thorough as always, states it is an *Einrichtung zur systematischen Erfassung, Erhaltung und Betreuung von Schriftstücken, Dokumenten, Urkunden, Akten, insbes. soweit sie historisch, rechtlich oder politisch von Belang sind*. An archive in these formal, definitional senses is not worth the name if it lacks some systematic way of preserving as well as finding documents that are of public importance.

statistics. Acknowledging this connection to “governmentality,” to use Foucault’s term, allows one to better understand the link between government, archives, and culture.

All is not, and was not, dry facts and paper, though. There is also the exuberant, metaphoric use of the term “archive” when talking about folklore, or tradition, or even culture as a whole – which has, given the rhetorical power of enthusiasm, been so instrumental in the very instrumentalization of culture and its archives. Tradition can be regarded as an archive of unwritten history, a resource that passively and unwittingly resided in the mind of the folk, to be mobilized at the right time to regale audiences, a performance in and of the present that simultaneously reaches back into time immemorial (Ben-Amos 1984). Shades of this sentiment still reverberate in UNESCO’s vocabulary when new categories of heritage are coined.

This kind of metaphoric exuberance contributed to the founding of actual archives of culture in the past, to be filled with the “voices of the people in song,” as Johann Gottfried Herder put it in the first call to the literati of his time. Such a culture archive was to have tales and rhymes, superstitions and magic practices, epics and jokes: stored but ready to be consulted, along the lines – and sometimes even in cooperation with – museums that amassed material artifacts.⁷ Thus archives of culture grew to be *actual* repositories of what the Romantics had marveled at as *virtual* storehouses of national past or ethnic essence. As every ethnographer knows, collecting what appears to be “intangible culture” takes not just work but also becomes tangible and weighty, both metaphorically and literally. Ephemeral stories noted on paper, or recorded and transcribed, acquire a materiality with capital consequences. The actors and processes involved in rendering the intangible tangible, making it material, bring about the question of ownership in ways that “culture” simply lived and performed did

⁷ The link between archives and museums as institutions devoted to collection cannot be further explored here, though it is evident in the literature that these two realms of documenting and exhibiting practices need to be considered jointly (te Heesen and Spary, 2002, Siepmann 2002).

so to a far lesser degree – that is, until questions about cultural *property* burst onto the stage in the late 20th century. Individual skill and labor both add to and alter the cultural good in question; there are the skills and knowledge of ethnographers, transcribers, or digitizers; there is the archival know-how that places the tangible with others of its kind and retrieves it again when asked for. The story, proverb, or song collected and archived thus acquires a monetary value exceeding its nature as a form of intangible cultural capital, perhaps even expressed in terms of insurance paid to keep it safe, which performers inside a communal dynamic before the advent of UNESCO programs considered on a quite a different economic scale, if any.

Even when born of an exuberant, metaphoric sentiment, archives of culture have generally not taken an exuberant, alternate shape but have adopted instead the habits and material style characteristic of administrative archives the world over.

In the following, I will examine a series of archives including but not only “of culture.” My goal is to provide a spectrum of examples where life’s flow is transformed into archivable materials. I am interested in the choices and processes that render materials into the property of institutions, but also in the individuals engaged in the activity of archiving, from the state on down to private actors. Yet only in this property-state can archived culture also be used for, or inserted into, other tasks. Thus harnessed, the “flow of culture” can be used for scholarship and art, for politics and business. This instrumentalization of culture has long been studied, in particular during nearly forty years of work on folklore and nationalism, and more recently in the analysis of heritage practices (e.g. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). Heritage, in particular, has brought the question of property to the foreground with a vengeance. All the more reason for ethnography to examine the ways in which such property is culturally upheld. This requires an ethnographic look at archival practices; I argue that these practices are intertwined as much with questions of property as with propriety.

Selecting, accessioning, storing, and choosing storage media have brought about both a professional and an interactive habitus on the part of both archivists and users. Together, they bring forth propriety, a code of conduct in handling archival property in terms of owners and ownership. Ethnographic insights from archives as recently offered by Michaela Fenske (2006, 2007) allows us to recognize how the propriety – or if we wish to take the colder language of Foucault, the disciplining – enacted by workers and users in archives confirms the property status of archivalia. The legal parameters surrounding archival practice and use are less evident to the ethnographer's experiences that are brought out in this presentation, though there is recourse to the law when there are conflicts over archival property or propriety.

For the remainder of this presentation, I propose a stroll through various archives of culture that I have encountered in the course of my training and research as a folklorist/cultural anthropologist since 1978. There is an experiential element in archival work that I mean to refer to, for in the process of transforming the flow of life into materials that can be found in an archive, that part of life is taken out of its living context – only to be placed in a stored context that is still traversed by the living. There is a process involved that renders materials into their archival form, to become the property of an institution. I characterize my encounters in the manner in which I described Walter Beck's encounter with the German National Archives, though it took me – as my central Viennese example from 1998 will show – twenty years to grasp the agency of archivists, the power of an archive's material culture, and the feelings of freedom or constraint those two factors together bestow upon the user and citizen.

A Stroll through Various Archives

In more than 20 years in the discipline, I've encountered a variety of spaces and things that have been called 'archive.' I don't think they all deserve the name, even if the label

often goes uncontested, though I do understand the widespread desire for the prestige and power associated with the term. Instead, I'd like to propose two criteria necessary for the name to be appropriate: there needs to be a modicum of coherence in the collection itself, either thematically or organizationally, and there needs to be a person designated to take care of the materials, someone who by training and/or demeanor renders the assemblage of materials into archived goods and who communicates their availability (or non-availability) to potential users. The archivists' habits, their demeanor, whether patterned by long tradition or energized by new archiving possibilities, render a space and a body of material into an archive and influence, more or less dramatically, how archive users themselves will handle and value the archivalia found.

To take the definitional approach so beloved by Max Weber, let me, by way of illustration, give a few examples of assemblages that do *not* meet these criteria despite the fact that the label of "archive" is used. In 1970, young Dan Ben-Amos published a "Progress Report" on the archive at the Folklore Department of the University of Pennsylvania (Ben-Amos 1970). He was, by training and background, convinced of the legitimacy an archive bestows upon the endeavors of our field, and yet the inchoate materials resting at that department hardly qualified as an archive. All that remains today of a once thriving graduate program in folklore and folklife at Penn is a room called "the archive"; it holds a mix of books, field recordings, student papers, and, before they were given to the main library for appropriate storage, long-playing records, and attests to the power of the term which assists those remaining to keep a foot in the institution and utilize the space for actually depositing new records of ongoing projects.⁸

⁸ My observations are based on the "ethnographic present" btw. 1993 and 2001; since then, this archive has been moved again, its institutional status has further changed, but it has also been transformed, thanks to the main person responsible, Dr. Mary Hufford, more and more into what one might call an archive.

Where I currently work, the institute claims the Merkelbach-Pink Archive, the Broadside Archive, the Lower Saxony Archive, the “Peuckert Archive,” and the “HdA Archive.” The last two turn out to be two small pieces of furniture, holding stacks of index cards left over from, respectively, a successful encyclopedic endeavor – the *Handwörterbuch des Aberglaubens* – and from an encyclopedia project that never came to fruition, the *Handwörterbuch der Sage*. At least in terms of fieldwork history, the Merkelbach-Pink archive is a quite valuable donation of field notes from an Alsatian narrative collector. The so-called Broadside Archive and the Lower Saxony Archive, by contrast, are the meager traces of hope for collecting grandeur on the part of my predecessors. The former consists of a few stacks of photocopied broadsides that occupy an enormous, otherwise empty closet in the basement; the latter consists of two abandoned filing drawers with news clippings intended as the beginning of an inventory of the entire state.

Such stacks of material are, as Reinhard Johler put it, collections, not archives. In two acerbic theses he wrote: “[For a department], it is, first, better to have a collection than not to have a collection ... (but) second, if one does have a collection, one has a problem” (2005:172). In fact, when he made these remarks orally, Johler admitted semi-jocularly that as institute director, he occasionally dreamt of dumping one particular collection he was saddled with into the Neckar River precisely so as to be rid of such a problem...

In neither institution I just described do we encounter an individual with the job designation “archivist.” When funds are available, an occasional student assistant is put in charge of bringing order, with generations of spotty reports and files in outdated computer programs attesting to their failures. If there are jobs associated with inchoate collections, to cite Johler again, university institutes face the dilemma of having to defend hiring people to tend to collections whose very nature is at odds with the research and knowledge interests of the present (175-6).

Perhaps one could see this in somewhat more “natural” terms. An archive does not ‘live’ without someone to tend it like a garden: new acquisitions planted, weeds culled out, seeds of knowledge utilized to continually reorganize the terrain and stay with the questions of interests to users. If such tending does not occur, the only thing prone to grow is the irritation between present and past paradigms.

Parceling the stream of life into potential fields of research: The newspaper archives at the Seminar für Volkskunde⁹, University of Zürich, Switzerland

When you entered the department for *Volkskunde* in Zürich in the late 1970s, you could see, through a generally open door, one or two people sitting at a table covered with newspapers. They had scissors, glue, neatly stacked paper, and cut out articles and photos, advertisements and announcements from these newspapers. New students tended to be mystified as to what this activity was all about, though it was clear that this was one of the few, and hence desirable, jobs an advanced student could get at this department.

Eventually, or more accidentally, students were introduced to what this activity led to. Newspapers were perused for topics either on canonical areas of the discipline or for topics pointing to cultural innovations or culture conflicts, as between guest workers and natives. The news clippings were filed away in stainless steel filing cabinets and cross-referenced. The professor or assistants in the department would draw on this collection to write articles on new phenomena, or use the accumulated data as a point of departure for a seminar or a group project. In a place with an only marginal fieldwork tradition, newspapers from all four language areas of this culturally diverse country substituted for an ethnographer’s ear on the

⁹ The department was renamed as the *Institut für Populäre Kulturen* in 2006, bringing together *Volkskunde* and *Volksliteratur* into one program, in the hope of building a small niche with a more international and interdisciplinary label. The name is also the result of what was institutionally possible. A year earlier, the institute in Basel, all of 100 kilometers away, renamed itself *Institut für Kulturwissenschaft und Europäische Ethnologie*.

ground. Methodologically, a reflexive step was missing in this reasoning: newspaper articles hold evidence of a particular form of *reception* rather than being *reflections* of cultural flows (Almberger 1994). At the same time, journalists and presses are also actors who shape everyday life, in particular in countries where individual newspapers are openly linked to political parties.

Zürich was not the only place that featured such a newspaper archive; remnants of this type of post-war data collection exist in a number of German-language institutes.

Newspapers were seen as a reflection of the public sphere, as a barometer of what was happening on the local level, and finding evidence of new practices in more than one locale could arguably point to their traditionalization.

A 1982 symposium tried to come to terms with this burgeoning yet problematic archival material. Ultimately, it seemed as though every article in a newspaper could potentially be clipped and filed away as evidence of cultural *practice*, and that it would be more profitable to focus on selected phenomena that pointed to cultural *change* (Moser-Rath 1988:187). Yet making that distinction would have required advanced assistants who were capable of spotting such materials – and there were hardly any funds for this kind of labor. Many of these newspaper clipping archives in fact ceased collecting, after a decade or more of vigorous activity, due to the cost of what was ultimately a very labor-intensive selection and filing process. In some places, including Zürich, archiving continues in a circumscribed manner, but there is the not inconsiderable problem that one needs to know enough about what such an archive holds to know how and for what one might want to use it, which rather limits the potential circle of users (Gyr 1988).¹⁰ Some institutes maintain major paper subscriptions without clipping activities, thus bowing to the role of the press in both shaping

¹⁰ Gyr's (2005) investigation of Zürich's new urban carnivals and similar festivities drew on a few years of institute newspaper clippings, and Regula Näf (personal communication, April 11, 2007) reports that Zürich reopened the archive in 1996 after a break, but that it is accessible only from within the institute library.

and reflecting cultural currents, while in others one finds only the remnants of clipping activities in file drawers.¹¹

Materials drawn from papers pose, initially, few ownership problems. Clippings can be properly cited like any other printed source. But the full body of clipped materials, thematically and chronologically organized, renders the clippings into an institution marked by the intellectual labor, as well as choices, that flowed into compiling it. As Martin Scharfe has noted, its use value and its material value, depend on the cleverness of the head that dreamt up the underlying catalogue – for at heart it is all still “just newspaper” (1988:177). Though it is a little facetious to suggest, one can make the opposite argument courtesy of the comedian Ian Shoales, whose mordant radio commentaries on NPR were always introduced with the promise that he would help you catch “the many waves of popular culture,” and argue that at heart, that is precisely what newspapers try to do.¹² With the archive hardly known beyond the institute, the archive is ultimately almost devoid of codes of propriety. It gives evidence of the complex transformation and mystification that takes place with the most public kind of printed information, the *Newspaper Clipping*, as Anke te Heesen has shown in her book of the same title (2006).

Itemized Lore, Categorized Interpretation: The Folklore Archives in Berkeley

A room feels as big as those who breathe life into it. The Berkeley Folklore Archives feel, to the initiated, quite large indeed, for they pulse with the generousness of Alan Dundes’s spirit. Begun more or less concurrently with his professorship at Berkeley in 1964, the file folders hold itemized folklore collected as part of Dundes’s Introduction to Folklore

¹¹Some scholars, notably Konrad Köstlin, make it their trademark to make reference to small news items as key examples in a given article.

¹²Trying to find the proper quote, we have contacted the source (Ian Shoales himself, aka Merle Kessler) who in an e-mail of May 23, 2007, offered the following citation “*“Music! Life! Lifestyle! Music! There are many waves to popular culture. Catch them all with Ian Shoales. Now, here's Ian!”* As he was very enthusiastic at the thought of being quoted – “Something like that, if not exactly. Cite me! I'll take the heat if you're called on it. I'll go to prison if I have to. Judith Miller and I, marking the days with scratches on the wall.... I have the actual thing on a tape somewhere. And I'll consult the Ducks and see if somebody's memory is better than mine.” -.

course. Each student was required to collect 40 items of folklore, including relevant data on the source, the time of collection and additional contextual data necessary for interpretation. Given that these classes routinely drew 200-300 students, the amount of data assembled over forty years was enormous. Although the room appears small and overcrowded, it also says “plenitude” – much in the spirit of its founder who preached the richness of folklore in everyday life, the need, and even the duty of the folklorist to analyze it. Very early in his career he had written an article mocking the anal retentiveness of all those collectors who were incapable of transferring and hence opening their collections to the public in archives and publications (Dundes 1962). I have not been to any other archive so intimately tied to one particular scholar’s analytic passion (though this linkage is discussed in some of the papers here, e.g. by Ergo-Hart Västriik). The data arrived more or less structured, in the form he considered appropriate for potential interpretation, and a number of his own published papers seem like sheaves of these archived items wrapped in bundles of Dundesian verve, and interpretively delivered – at the lightning speed of his speech – to those willing to hang on for the ride. In Dundes’s realm, the lore was property of all, the archive a home for the temporary shape that dynamic tradition will take, and the scholar’s role in this to offer analysis appropriate for his or her time.

This attitude was also evident in the habits of the place. A graduate student served as archivist, as did occasional student interns, but the room was also a space for a seminar or the occasional public talk before a small audience. One could get together there to have a sandwich or a coffee if it rained outdoors – it was a place to drop in, casual and yet filled with an aura of certainty. Storage and reading room at once, the filing system was available to all, usually shared with an offhanded comment on the uncertainties involved in genre placements on a slow day. The place was accessible to all who cared to partake of the materials in the spirit of scholarship – any kind of more arcane conduct would have been considered

inappropriate; after all, it was folklore, not legal records one was dealing with – in short, Berkeley resisted the bureaucratization of archives we will encounter as we go on.

A Memory of Finland, Reinterpreted: The Folklore Archives, Bloomington

After Berkeley, the folklore archive at Indiana University in 1982 – I’m told it’s changed since – was a strangely distancing place, perhaps fostered by the habitus of nascent professionalism exuded by the generally female graduate students holding the archive assistantship. The weight of being “the archivist” fashioned a demeanor of responsibility over the treasures held in this space. The wooden filing drawers that occupied the ground floor of one of the three small buildings housing the department pointed to a relatively early beginning. Though Stith Thompson’s fabled shoeboxes full of index cards that contained the data he had used for compiling the *Motif Index* were not in evidence, a copper bust of Thompson’s head was prominently displayed and symbolized to those in the know the connection to the real folklorists’ dream archives in Finland.

There were no “folklore items” in this archive as at Berkeley, but rather student papers from the introductory courses – and generally professors selected only the best ones, perhaps keeping in mind the space limitations. The criterion “best” seemed quite ambiguous: Was it good analytic papers? Or papers containing rich data? Well-contextualized data? As it was the data in the papers and not the analysis that were the focus of archival activity, this ambiguity remained.

Efforts at accessioning the material in new ways seemed an ongoing endeavor, and a computer was in use already in the early 1980s – a rarity at the time, and still requiring knowledge of code in order to enter data. Most striking to me at the time was the “release form” – the permission from what were then still called informants that their data could be placed in the archive and later used in research and for publication. This was a time when an ethic of fieldwork entailing clearance and research protocols was only just emerging; there

was as of yet no university-appointed board overseeing the propriety of how ownership of cultural data was gained.

The release form signaled a step that transformed culture as lived into culture as archival property, or to put it differently, transforming privately experienced life-worlds into the expanding and seemingly more public archival sphere. At the time, it was an initiation into “proper” behavior with regard to data, one perhaps colored by the concerns about medical ethics or the use of human subjects in other fields. It is, however, also a piece of paper that is sure to transform a peaceful or productive conversation, and research relationship, into a transaction overshadowed by legal and potentially economic considerations. The needs of the archives threw a bureaucratic, legal shadow over the interpersonal process of research. Practices such as also filling out forms by archive users in order to be able to keep track of who had looked at which data further moved the Bloomington archive toward a bureaucratic aura. Such practices, or the demeanor behind them, lead to a strangely discomfoting archival experience for many researchers (cf. Dirks 2002, Fenske 2007).

Remnants of Herder’s Impulses: Volkslied Archiv, Seminar für Volkskunde; Basel

While a graduate student in Indiana, I did an internship at the University of Basel in the summer of 1983. My letter of inquiry to Basel had been responded to warmly – yes, there was the possibility for a brief internship in the folksong archive. I arrived on a sunny day in the old, stately house overlooking the Rhein River near to the main church in the center of town. After meeting the few staff who worked at the *Seminar für Volkskunde*, I was shown the archive with which I was to work. It had no particular space assigned for it, but was instead located on several shelves at the end of space-saving compact shelving units that had been newly installed in the department library – in short, without an archivist it really did not belong into the category of what I call archive.

The “folksong archive” consisted of legal-sized cardboard boxes with moderately organized papers and stacks of – as yet – not very organized materials. There were also recordings on tapes that I was not supposed to work with. My task consisted of organizing this material into a perhaps more coherent system. Some of the material was typed, some still handwritten. All of it had been set in motion by John Meier, who had worked in Basel for only five years until moving to Freiburg in 1912 and setting up the far more famous, and to date still functioning, highly reputable, German *Volksliedarchiv*.

To be frank, I have only vague recollections of the organization I suggested and began to implement. I know that I worked for several weeks longer than I had planned and that I was inordinately frustrated at how insurmountable the task was. The material hadn’t been assembled by music, nor by content, nor by function, but by all three and by none at the same time – as well as by the beginning lines of the stanzas.

This last method was confirmed during a visit to the Freiburg archive to which my practicum supervisor, the soon to be Basel chair Christine Burckhardt-Seebass, had invited me. There, a middle-aged, highly reputed folk song scholar showed me his work in progress, an edition of short, humorous songs that were organized by the first line of each stanza. I recall my internal shock at the endeavor – the kind of critical outrage that is perhaps only possible for a young graduate student not yet appreciating the power of institutional history. I witnessed someone working within the parameters established in the early 20th century, and I was fresh enough to think that this person was not permitted, or did not permit himself, to do what he might consider an important project on his own or for himself. While I realized that these and other efforts at systematization, presentation, and publication had assisted the field of folk song scholarship to bring grand editorial tasks to fruition and had allowed scholars to work internationally, it was also quite evident that the archive organization – dating from

early 20th century scholarship when the archive was founded – continued to exercise a hold, if not a stranglehold, on those who worked with these materials in the late 20th century. This is not to diminish the successful work scholars in charge of the institution after John Meier have engaged in. Indeed, reading the current director's assessment of balancing the tasks emanating from past scholarly traditions against new initiatives that embrace both changes in scholarship and public demands, one appreciates the skill and inventiveness that have been deployed to both transform and reflect on archival traditions (Matter 2005).

In Freiburg, I was shown impressive shelves of boxes containing the collected materials, and an entire villa was dedicated to the archive endeavor and its public service; its archival property is widely shared, indeed, heavily used by singers and musicians and producers. The power of past imagination and its subsequent fleshing out was palpable in the interplay of space, archival substance, and staff. When I returned to Basel the next day, I remember experiencing a pang of uncertainty. Here I was, reading through stacks of texts and was given the liberty to consider how to systematize them. I was too inexperienced at the time to understand what kind of an audacity – from an archival point of view – I was involved in, liberally discarding factors such as context or function because the data for it was lacking, while simultaneously writing “explanatory comments” on the shortcomings of the “content” and “implied purpose” system I was trying to establish. By donating more weeks of work than had been agreed upon, my young, impatient, and unfortunately then already workaholic self fought furiously against an archival truth: work time is the one resource archives claim ruthlessly, and no matter what system or system-revision an archive opts for, implementing it will discipline the impatient either into submission or to lead them to flee the archives.

The Habits of Empire: In Search of Archival Evidence in Vienna, Austria

In 1998, I undertook research in Vienna on the genesis of an ethnographic encyclopedia that was published between 1884 and 1902. The 24 volumes of this ethnographic encyclopedia were envisioned as a tool for intercultural mediation, in a multicultural state, by Austria's second-to-last Crown Prince in 1884. The archival materials produced by the effort to publish what came to be called "the Crown Prince's Work" provided the most cumbersome, but perhaps most insight-laden, archival experience I have had. Hence I take you back into the ethnographic present of 1998 to unravel what happened.

It is June 1998, I am sitting at one of the few numbered places in the hallway-like reading room of the Vienna City and State Archive. As I leaf through the neatly penned pages, my courage wavers: it will take much time to decipher the tight, uniformly lettered handwriting. But at least I finally have some of this material in front of me: Box 1-4. Eventually there will be 9 boxes, in addition to two bundles of books, each tied together with a belt – reminiscent of Walter Beck's GDR string, but far more dignified. But the holding shelves are tight, and I will only be permitted to view the next boxes when I have finished with these ones before me.

Three weeks earlier I arrived at Vienna's City Hall for the first time, searching for the archive in this complicated building with its three inner courtyards, numerous entrances, and countless staircases. "Staircase 6, level 1," the entrance guard said, and so I climbed past the first floor and the mezzanine, past political party headquarters and cleaning rooms, as well as a small hallway exhibit, and finally found the archive reading room. Later I would discover the *Paternoster*—an open elevator that allows bureaucrats and visitors to jump on and off it as it slowly rattles on its endless loops. On the first day, however, I was already hot and sweaty when I arrived. I greeted the man at the first desk, explaining my purpose. He listened kindly, nodded and then guided me through the reading corridor to another person

behind a door and a glass wall. The wall was only half-height, so telephone calls and face-to-face conversations became part of the public domain, and ranged from a dry response to a request for information to embarrassingly loud accusations by Viennese citizens claiming the archive was preventing them from seeing important documents.

While I explained my query to the man behind the glass wall, the first man waited until he was sent back to his desk where he would sit and pull out a stack of illustrated magazines from a drawer. He sometimes carried stacks of books from the storage room to a reading desk, but his role—familiar in a Viennese office of this sort, but not familiar to me, the foreign researcher—was that of a *Diener*, a servant, whose manner of speech and body language made evident he was quite conscious of his occupational station and status, as well as the circumscribed types of tasks he could be asked to perform. The room arrangement and furnishings, as well as the building in which it is located, further this habitual understanding of role, station, and sense of limitations in duties and responsibilities. The titles for positions, while linguistically and socially continually modified, in practice serve to maintain the status gradations of the monarchy and nobility. In oral parlance, even some of the pre-1918 titles, which is to say pre-republican, are maintained (*Geheimrat*, *Oberrat*, etc.). Every employee works within the boundaries of his assigned competences and knows where to direct the supplicant when the request falls outside his sphere.

A system that circumscribes competence and responsibility so tightly invites secrecy. During my first visit to the Austrian Picture Archive, located in the library of the old royal palace, I observed numerous employees looking as elderly as their job seemed to demand. Their ability to find requested items on shelf after shelf of ancient, identically-bound books spoke volumes about their equivalent skill in *not* finding some of the treasures for which they

might want to remain the sole custodians.¹³ I was reminded of James Scott's "arts of resistance" and wondered about the peculiar twists this notion can take in this relatively recently democratized environment. Resistance can *also* mean protection of long deceased royalty and obstinacy against the intrusions of an ever prying, democratic present.

As one example, many of the personal papers of Crown Prince Rudolph relating to the encyclopedia have simply vanished. It is unclear whether they were destroyed along with much of his other personal writings after his suicide nearly 120 years ago, or whether they were removed only once scholars began to probe into this part of his endeavors. Finding the answer most certainly would require another typed letter on official stationery, and I doubt that the answer would arrive expeditiously.

At the City and State Archive, meanwhile, the man behind the glass wall wrote down information about my person as well as my request to gain access into the archive's holdings related to the Crown Prince's Work. He searched for call numbers in a ring binder. His answers were monosyllabic. The materials were stored elsewhere and could only be delivered next week. I ordered the materials nonetheless and left the building, absurdly, with a sense of inordinate accomplishment.

Once the books of editors' protocols had arrived from storage at the City and State Archive, my own insertion into the Maussian 'body techniques' of Austrian archival research could proceed. I handed my passport to the person behind the glass wall, received a number for one of the reading tables, and the servant, the *Diener*, was ordered to show me to my seat and bring me the materials. Over the next weeks, I became accustomed to the cumbersome procedure which replicated in the present the habits of a past into which I was trying to gain entry. I grew fond of the differences between the archives I was working in, as their employees enacted a systemic institutional personality, like what one encounters while

¹³ Field notes, Feb. 1998.

working with people in the field.

At the Vienna City and State Archive, photocopying required the permission of each new person behind the glass wall. I liked the woman because she had determined that only items bearing a seal could *not* be copied; during her days I copied the most. Once permission was granted, the servant accompanied me across the corridor (all of about 10 steps) to the copy room and handed me over to the man who operated the copy machine. This man – a political refugee from Turkey – had learned the restricting habits of the system well. He was not willing to make more than twenty copies per customer. If you needed more, you had to apply for permission to carry the materials down to the general copy room of City Hall, staircase 4, ground floor – in the company of the servant, of course.

At the House and Court Archive, by contrast, the passport had to be handed over on the ground floor before one climbed the stairs. The reading room looked more like a classroom with its shelves bulging with heavy folios awaiting their readers. Here, material to be copied needed to be marked with long thin strips of paper, to avoid any disorganization of the boxed materials one was going through. The exact reference to every single sheet had to be filed into a complicated copy-order form, and the xeroxed materials could be picked up several weeks later.

At the picture archive, where some of “my” materials from the City and State Archive had migrated in preparation for an exhibit, nothing could be copied at all. This reading room, with its glorious view down onto *Heldenplatz*, had ten seats for researchers, around a U-shaped table, with several light tables for those people who wanted to examine negatives. The very same documents I had handled without a problem just a month earlier could now only be touched with white gloves, under the eagle eye of two women who shared the task of customer service. When I was caught taking notes with a pen instead of a pencil, I blushed with embarrassment as everyone else in the room looked at me with scorn. Half an hour

later, a short, elderly lady in light blue costume and matching hat emerged from the ancient elevator, pulling a furry, medium-sized mutt on its leash into the reading room. She tied the dog to the leg of one of the light tables and proceeded to inquire about a number of photographs. No one batted an eye about the dog.

The weeks in these archives were the best entry into the past imperial bureaucracy's efforts to use ethnography for sociopolitical ends that I could have had. Aside from observing my own feeling of being controlled, I saw all the others who sought information but experienced, whether they cared for it or not, the mental and bodily disciplining of the type their subjects of research had been subjected to. The people behind the glass wall remained stoically uninterested in what I or anyone else was working on, and expressions of surprise or delight about archival finds were suppressed in the interest of maintaining quiet in the room.¹⁴

The Fear of Reflexive History: The Archives of an Encyclopedic Endeavor in Germany

My promenade ends with an archive to which access has been barred – an act of ownership, seclusion, and I would argue, also fear. The archive in question is, in legal terms, an assembly of business records rather than an archive. The records came into being in the process of founding and carrying out the most successful large scale endeavor in German *Volkskunde* in the second part of the 20th century – an encyclopedia of narrative research. Success and major funding are hardly common coin in this field of research and hence it seemed important to launch a study to understand how the foundations of this endeavor were laid, how networks were spun, aims and aspirations negotiated, and strategies developed to

¹⁴ There was the Englishman who spoke excellent German and who leafed through enormous, leatherbound volumes, his body exuding a smell of strain and angst—he whispered to me one day that he had difficulty in decyphering the handwriting, but was under time pressure and had not received permission to xerox. One day, a nervous woman requesting assistance from the man behind the glass door began raising her voice, and so did he. He did not know the answer to her question, but she, habituated to administrative stonewalling, was equally sure he did not want to give her the answer. She stalked out, hissing insults, and he picked up the phone to report the incident to a superior. An American, working on the history of Vienna's *Volksooper*, revelled one day out in the hall. He simply could not contain his joy over having found a performance score from the *Volksooper* with Mozart's own scribbles on it.

gain and maintain a public profile as well as an intellectual product worthy of respect in and beyond the field.

However, the heirs of this endeavor and its current editors swarmed up like a disturbed beehive at the thought of having someone study the beginning. The encyclopedia – having reached the letter T – is in the final stages, its machinery of editorial staff and authors sufficiently well-oiled and its funding secured through the project's end. Yet the proposal to have what they called “a living enterprise” studied, scrutinized, nay, “turned upside down” caused outrage; indeed, reading the archival documentation of its founding was considered thoroughly improper. Letters were written to block the research funding, phone calls of a highly incriminating nature were undertaken to lambast the qualifications of those planning to carry out the work. To touch even 30-40 year-old correspondence would be too dangerous an act and could potentially undermine the beauty of this particular beast, it was argued. A legal document was drawn up and the doors to the records, for a reflexive history project, remain firmly shut.

In contrast to the self-assured archival practices I have encountered in earlier fieldwork where harm was never seen in the study of one's past, the scholars in charge of this particular encyclopedia appear to fear both their project's history and the reach of historical reflection about scholarship – surely no small irony given that their own encyclopedic effort rests on the willingness of countless actors among the nameless “folk” to have their narrative practices collected and archived for analysis. These scholars have inhabited their encyclopedic endeavor, lived in the patterns set by those who laid the foundations, and have for ten, twenty, or even thirty years contributed to the accumulation of the 240 ring binders of business records. In sharp contrast to the monarchical demeanor of Austrian archivists quite practiced in husbanding the state's property with traditionalized propriety, the staff of this publicly-funded encyclopedia lacks any archival demeanor – again proving my point that an

archive without an archivist may constitute a property but has trouble in the realm of propriety. A limited study of the encyclopedia's predecessor was nonetheless successfully undertaken (Fenske and Bendix 2009), and a lesson was learned about generational and perhaps also gendered boundary drawing mechanisms among academics, not unlike what Fredrik Barth observed among ethnics (1967).

Conclusions

An archive barring access gives cause to think about what visitors are to be shielded from or, conversely, who and what is to be shielded from the visitors. While one would think an encyclopedia's business archive to be quite harmless, the opening of archives associated with World War II is a different story. One case in point includes the recently-opened archives at Bad Arolson; despite it being the major source of information on labor and concentration camps, it was closed to researchers for more than sixty years and only accessible to immediate family members of those victimized in such camps. Even the German statute of limitations only extends for 30 years beyond an individual's death (cf. Fenske 2007), so the rationale for waiting twice as long remains elusive. It stands to reason that there is information in such archives that people even now have reason to want to hide, things that if made known might be actionable and lead to court cases.

Urs Stäheli's observations, specifically about archives of (popular) culture but surely applicable to archives of all types, muse in a direction that may be more fitting than we think. He describes the separation in temporal experience that is facilitated by archives. An archive is a place for things worthy of preservation, a site of slowness in contrast to the unstoppable world outside of it (2002, 78). The archive is motivated by the aspiration to give eternal life to the original, yet even in the seclusion of the archive this original will be visited upon by popular or folkloric imagination. "One need not have read Derrida to figure this out," writes Stäheli, who proceeds to paint the specter of the undead, attesting to archivalia the qualities

of vampires:

“Archive-ghosts – those half-beings that move between the dead materiality of letters and their performativity. The archive becomes a place of the Freudian uncanny. ... This very place which is meant to protect (the original)... from improper handling, wrong temperatures, and too much light, from theft and destruction, turns in its secrecy into a privileged space of spookiness” (2002, 79).

We *build* archives to have a record of facets of life lived, from legal or business transactions to folkloric performances. We *carry out research* in archives to craft narratives about people and events – so patently shown by the efforts of Walter Beck to recapture, if not revalidate, his own experiences and those of his colleagues. Yet telling other people’s stories, to play on Amy Shuman’s recent title (2006), by building on the archival record is fraught with complications. Though records turn, in theory, legally public after varying amounts of time, and are, by their placement in archives, even meant to be accessible, the cultural practices within archives confine, restrain, and steer in practice. Not all archives preserve the mentality of the time of their founding as starkly as did the ones in Vienna that I nonetheless managed to do research in. Yet most archives, even those ostensibly devoted to culture, assemble regimes of one or more political and/or scholarly era. And nowhere is Johannes Fabian’s observation that the practices and discipline embodied by our professional predecessors imprint themselves on the present quite as palpable as in archives (2000).

If Fabian is correct, then our bodily and mental experiences among archivists and bureaucrats in the present should offer two things: First, experiential traces of those who set up the habits and material culture in these institutions in the first place and second, an avenue to reflect on the dual force of property and propriety in these patterns and the ways in which they impinge on our present knowledge production and dissemination.

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