

Archival Lives of Popular Culture: Our Introduction

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IN THE LAST DECADES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, THE CONCEPTIONS and contents of archives became a subject of intense inquiry among scholars in a range of disciplines, all of them making the “archival turn” (Ketelaar; Steedman; Stoler).¹ Although a great deal of work that made up the archival turn studied popular culture materials, explicit discussions of the complex relationship between archives and popular culture have remained rather limited. In this special issue of *The Journal of Popular Culture*, we bring together a group of essays by scholars and practitioners, diverse in their geographical focus and objects of interest, to examine how studying popular culture materials can fundamentally advance our conceptions of the archive and how using the archive as a lens can enrich the study of popular culture.

To bring into the same frame “archives” and “popular culture” in the twenty-first century is to recall the intricate political relationship between descriptions of the present (“society,” “culture,” and the people that make them up) and the available accounts of the past from which such a present can emerge. For a long time, archives were the purview of professional historians trained and licensed to access and use these repositories of authoritative historical documentation assembled and maintained by institutions of the state. The “archival turn” of the past half-century has been less an effort to direct all fields of inquiry to such repositories and more a challenge to reimagine the writing of history, especially as an effort to populate the historical imagination with subjects whose existence would have been

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unremarkable in the official government record. This approach to historiography, more responsive to the modern society transformed by capitalism, building and undoing of empires and nation states, and radical political and economic change, reflects a deep effect of Michel Foucault's engagement with the notion of archive as the "law of what can be said" (145) and insistence on "genealogy" as the necessary (and painstaking) work done to "retrieve the marginal, the disadvantaged, and the lowly from the suppressed and occluded 'ahistorical' corners where conventional historians tended to banish them" (Eley 128).

Such work has treated archives "not as sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production" (Stoler 90), proliferating questions about archives' forms, textures, and conditions of possibility. By way of inscribing the non-elite, the unpropertied, and the unlettered into our visions of the past, the new social and cultural history redescribed what could count as documentation and where one can find historical evidence of unremarkable existence. "Archive" has since become a name for the effort to describe the conditions of possibility for the evidence of existence in the past, as this past shapes the present that defines the possibilities and purposes of history writing. More broadly, the archive has come to function as a metaphor that "directs us to all the materials surrounding the processes and techniques that make the world available for knowledge, that render it graspable or reducible as such" (Eley 166). Whereas the profound transformation of professional historiography in academic settings has brought new attention to the institutional repositories' understanding of "best practices" in archiving, reflective about their place in the deep structures of cultural authority, this collection of essays is concerned more with the relationship between epistemic authority and the materiality of evidence that sustains claims to knowledge and existence.²

The intense interrogation of archives (that many thought Jacques Derrida named well in his text on "the archive fever") has shifted the status of knowledge makers, once reserved for the licensed writers of history and guardians of official memory, to other disciplines and non-professional and extra-institutional settings. The emergence of contemporary cultural studies in Europe and North America over the second half of the twentieth century paid attention to the variety of material products of popular culture that had gone unnoticed by archives, traditionally understood as institutions designed to "solidify and memorialise first monarchical and then state power" (Steedman

69). Although the turn to cultural history (via social history) opened up questions about the conditions of knowledge about the past and the present, the shift toward the study of “culture” was not left solely to anthropology. A discipline reckoning with its own “inscription into colonial and broad imperial relationships” (Eley 132), anthropology brought into question the history and context of the ethnographic encounter and the location of “culture” that was to be brought under the sign of the human and the universal. Contemporary cultural studies, the unprecedented intrusion into academic institutions by scholars with unlikely biographies (e.g., working class men, women, post/colonials, queers, ethnic and racial minorities), assumed “culture” to be in all places, imbricated in the economic and the political, a “material practice producing representations and languages that embody active forms of power” (Eley 140), ideology’s vehicle and form.

The sustained interest in the materiality of archives as culture brought attention to the objects and uses of popular culture, the evanescent layer of commercial activity inseparable from the forces of the market and their powers of obliteration, available for often unexamined (consuming) enjoyment and for curiosity about the life cycles of commodities as objects of value and attachment. The “archival turn” has defied condescension for the fleeting, superficial, and largely ignored enjoyment and consumption. Cultural studies put pressure on popular culture as a kind of “history,” a depth of existence guaranteed by the weight of an “archive.” Such archives—popular books, photography, film and video, popular music, statues and monuments, “high fashion” and unremarkable garments worn by millions, furniture and silverware, various products of the “new media”—are far from the inert, dusty, tentatively organized collections of authoritative historical documentation and hardly ever printed on paper. As archives, they take on new lives as once-obsolete cultural products that have shaped public culture. They are dynamic, decentered, emergent collections that might not be contained or containable in a physical space or the space of a national or linguistic community, especially in the first decades of the twenty-first century. For such collections or repositories the matters of cataloging, indexing, or custodianship may remain unaddressed (sometimes impossible to address), and may on occasion be irrelevant or strategically avoided in order to keep the powers of gathering, access, and permission to

narrativize out of the hands of such traditionalist and partial collectors as the state and the commercial market.

Dynamic collections offer new opportunities for identification—new ideas for how to gather. As material evidence of the community's convergence around the members' participation in popular culture practices, community archives have often been "both a critical practice and community building exercise" (Sheffield 359). The critical practice of such collection foregrounds questions about the logic of acquisition and preservation in formal archives organized around the genres of documentation produced by state institutions. This is why "community archives" retain materials conventionally thought to belong in libraries (e.g., books and journals), orphan records whose provenance is difficult to trace (e.g., undated photographs of unidentified subjects), and, most significantly, ephemera "such as pamphlets, postcards, and buttons, and other materials that may not meet the conditions of authenticity and reliability demanded by a traditional archival program" (Sheffield 360). Rebecka Sheffield points out that many such collections are likely to call themselves a "library, resource center, or historical association" (360), perhaps to signal to potential users their critical distance from the conceptions of historiography and authenticity sponsored by institutions formally labeled "archives." The move away from state and institutional archives as ideal documentation of "national consciousness" has taken seriously the significance of popular culture as tentative collections of material that describes the emergence of communities, their persistence and survival, often around public (circulating, contagious, shareable, teachable) feelings: pleasure, joy, and pride, but also defeat, embarrassment, betrayal, and hopelessness. These communal configurations have given plasticity to the categories of identity used uncritically in institutional political representation.

Such challenges to official archival authority have made it difficult to arrange dependable narrative arcs of historical continuity, deliberate or fated, across the disruptions (and often embarrassments) of deep structural and ideological change made in the name of nation states and empires and their volatile agendas. Against distinctions between "culture" and "popular culture" that marked out the margins of modern, capitalist empires, the once-exceptional and insubstantial began to look for its new place and became crucial to new definitions of the communal, social, and economic, the affective and the historical.

Claimed as documentation of a unifying national spirit in advance of actual states materializing (around the feelings and ideological commitments circulated in novels, films, and other cultural products), popular culture could claim access to a more encompassing idea of “national” or “political” history and complicate negotiations over the narratives of a shared past and present, opening up and limiting the powers of emancipatory ideals such as the “postcolonial.” As an instrument of decolonial politics of belonging and differentiation, following the Cold War and the apparent defeat of “socialism,” popular culture has made room for new insights about the indeterminacy of the relationship between democracy and capitalism and treated race as a force field which operates dynamically as a complex of ideological and affective formations, practiced daily and nightly, along and against other axes of identification and formations of subjectivity.

To think about the relationship between archives and popular culture is thus to think about who and what makes and keeps objects and memories that largely circulate in commercial markets. In conjunction with accelerating information technologies—personal computing, mobile phones, and the internet—popular culture reorganizes thinking about archives and elicits a reconsideration of the status of “culture” as a function of segregation of the producers from the consumers. The means of production of popular culture are now firmly in the hands of the wired populace, unlicensed for the production of mass media in the conventional sense but certainly not unlearned about the new protocols of their making and consumption. With the transformation of the recording media and conceptions of literacy, genres and objects of documentation emerge and disappear at an extraordinary pace, and the time between the moment of recording and the moment of historiography has shrunk beyond measure. Now there may really be “no just way in which the past can be quarantined from the present” because “past and present inform each other, each implies the other” (Said 4).

Who is interested in the careers of consumption or consumables? Who “keeps” or “gathers” them? Do we interfere with their orbits or reflect on their uses or memories? These are questions about public distrust in the origins of pleasure in a commercial society; about the formation of communities and negotiations over the politics of belonging; about challenging hegemonic historiographical paradigms; about technological innovation that redraws distinctions between

materials, spaces, and feelings. Popular culture produces a vast potential archive of public interests and desires and often of their relationship to the powers of commercial markets. Alternative gatherers and collections organize or imagine the substance of such an “archive” on the idea that its matching, adequate historiography could or will exist. Activating popular culture materials as archives propels thinking about their density and consistency as the conditions of possibility for the historiography to come.

Discussions of archives and of popular culture are now advanced by a range of disciplines whose breadth of vision is reflected in this collection of essays. These essays examine how materials of popular culture create continuity and difference between past and present; adumbrate the emergence and persistence of communities across the terrain of generational loss and repression; and disrupt the complacency that normalizes persistent and pervasive injustices of the environments in which we do our work. The essays address questions that emerge in the scholarship about popular culture in the early twenty-first century, across an extraordinary range of geography, and without making totalizing claims about a “global popular culture.” They focus instead on the materials of popular culture particular to their locations, on their makeup and provenance, their relationship to the processes of economic and social change, and their significance for the politics of history and memory. Taking such specific case studies as a vantage point, the authors ask broader questions about archives and popular culture and their complex relationship.

In the first essay in the collection, Lucie Česálková analyzes the afterlives of screen advertising from Czechoslovakia. Česálková studies how late socialist advertising film—a peculiar genre few outsiders would expect to find in a centrally controlled economy—has recently emerged as a vehicle of collective memory that mobilizes a range of affects that serve different political projects. The essay points to the public space created by new media technologies, such as YouTube, that have come to act as accessible sources of material for historiography of the “socialist period” in Eastern Europe, contesting the authority of traditional state-sponsored archival institutions. These new repositories maintain the potential of “socialist” popular culture to be recognized as “contemporary” across generations of viewers with different empirical experiences of “post-socialism,” shared sentiments of

exclusion from the processes of transition and globalization, and few remedies for post-socialist affective and social disorientation.

Stanley Griffin focuses on the political geography that sustains tensions between the production and circulation of popular culture and the materials stored in the official or traditional archives in Antigua. Griffin's essay shows that, in a context where popular culture is habitually excluded from the already limited official archives, calypso functions as an embodied archive or what Diana Taylor calls a "repertoire": the embodied transfer of cultural memory through performance. The author explores how calypso documents, preserves, and enables access to the memory of Antiguan society.

Lizabé Lambrechts and Schalk van der Merwe study the Hidden Years Music Archive, one of the largest popular music archives in South Africa with holdings of alternative popular music from the mid-1960s to the early 2000s. Their essay reveals how this rich and important archive, constituted outside contemporary official or national music projects, provides materials that can be crucial to the rewriting histories of popular cultural practices of the apartheid and its aftermath. The authors build on the case of this popular music archive in South Africa to demonstrate how such collections can provide an important opportunity to revisit and revise dominant historiographical narratives and point to the complex dynamics and negotiations that characterize cultural production in everyday life and generate sources for writing its history.

Zeb Tortorici's essay carries the discussion of the politics of popular culture archives in national contexts further, to address the makeup and circulation of the archives of erotica in contemporary Mexico among mainstream, grassroots, and unorthodox collections. Tracing their relationships destabilizes the connotations of the term "archive," as the materials they hold continue to refer to the broader popular cultural dynamics of production, consumption, and circulation. The essay shows how each deployment of collected materials as archival matter and historical evidence grants them new meanings. Using the clandestine production and circulation of erotica and pornography as a vantage point, Tortorici makes an important call for collaboration among researchers, archivists, and collectors around these materials, emphasizing the existing connections among the praxes of these groups, their methods and approaches.

İlker Hepkaner's essay on the archives of Turkey's Jewish Community retains the focus on grassroots and minority archives in national contexts but brings a transnational view to the strategies for building, claiming, and using an archive. Taking on questions about the most appropriate methodology for the use of the archives of popular culture of the Jewish community in Turkey, Hepkaner shows how popular cultural products by the community and for the community defy distinctions between "high" and "low" culture and can only be aligned with "minority" and "majority" cultures with difficulty. Identifying and analyzing collections assembled in a wide range of historical and institutional conditions, from Jewish neighborhood associations in Istanbul, the Quincentennial Foundation Museum of Turkish Jews, to the Chief Rabbinate of Turkey Foundation Collection at the Harvard College Library's Judaica collection, Hepkaner demonstrates how the adaptations and reconfigurations of these archives chart the transnational diasporic routes of Jews who made their way through present-day Turkey. Finally, the essay critically discusses the questions of access and the possibilities offered by digitization.

Vivian Huang's essay on Asian Americans advances the discussion on minoritarian communities in national contexts and the transnational politics of their archives. To explore these dynamics, Huang studies two performances that incorporate and transform archives while also forming archives themselves. Huang uses "queer mess" as a lens to study Japanese/American gender performance in the Netflix show *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* (2019) and Tina Takemoto's short film, *Looking for Jiro* (2011), in which the artist and scholar performs homoerotic mess hall labor as a gay World War II internee Jiro Onuma. Huang's study of popular culture brings together the affective and the economic dimensions of gender performance in popular culture, making a timely contribution to queer archival theory and praxis.

Discussion of the history of race in the United States and the unorthodox archives available for its writing continues in the essay by William Ross, who examines the Betty and Barney Hill Collection at the University of New Hampshire. This influential collection, which has enjoyed wide interest and inspired many popular culture products, features the objects and documents belonging to an interracial couple who claimed to have been abducted by extraterrestrials.

Studying the processes of handling, interest, audience, authority, and transmission, Ross discusses the opportunities and challenges provided by such controversial archives that document and challenge the influence of popular culture on the creation of repositories of historical evidence and the tools for their critical interpretation. The author's discussion on ethical practices for facilitating user access to the material, plans for digitization, as well as for commercial licensing of the materials are important for archivists working with collections that draw strong public interest and ideological as well as emotional attachments to the narratives that anchor the collection to the institution.

James K. Harris's study of video game consoles advances the discussion on technology and popular culture archives as archives of affective politics in terms of both medium and content. The essay argues that the interest in consoles designed for playing old video games is indicative of a market for nostalgia. The design, marketing, and consumption of these electronic devices, Harris shows, are characterized by "corporate rememory," that is, "a strategy which redeploys the archive not as a comprehensive cataloguing of the past but rather as an idealized self-image that can operate as an advertisement in the present." The essay thus demonstrates how the nostalgic attachment to an idealized image of the past coincides with a reformulation of history that serves financial incentives and priorities in the present and reaches the consumers as an updated outdated technology. Harris finally demonstrates how players engage with the consoles and video game archives in creative ways that can serve as critical interventions into the regulation of access and the substances of such commercialized archival materials.

The final essay in the collection, written by Pai Wang, is also a study of the nostalgic attachment to popular culture archives and the possibilities provided by digital technologies in a different national and political context. Wang analyzes the onstage digital revival of the enormously popular Taiwanese singer, actress, and musician Teresa Teng as a 3-D holographic image "lip synching" to her most popular songs. Wang shows how the nostalgic re-creation and digitalization of the materials of popular culture facilitates a recontextualization of Teng's cultural significance and brings about sentimental unity or affective identification among the fans of the celebrity, across generational, communitarian, and other differences. The essay

demonstrates how technological development restores archival materials to “live” digital performances in the present to “re-discover” them in a range of formats for new uses and new users, who can form new affective attachments to the figure of Teng somehow in disregard of her physical absence.

The work of scholars represented here suggests that the study of the relationship between popular culture and its possible archives provides critical knowledge about the desires that shape our social and political imagination of the future. From Jules Michelet’s nineteenth-century dream of giving the invisible masses of the dead new life in history, to the twenty-first century digital revival of the body and breath of a celebrity beloved by billions: archives and popular culture continue to exist in a relationship of mutual and revitalizing pressure.

Notes

1. While the initial impetus to consider the significance of archives transformed academic historiography under the influence exerted by the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, a growing number of accounts of the “archival turn” in various fields suggest how thoroughgoing this disruption of methodological, disciplinary, and ethical boundaries has been. For examples, see Charles Morris (in rhetorical studies); Wendy Hayden (in writing pedagogy); Ian McLean (in contemporary art); Cheryl Simon (in contemporary art criticism); Jihoon Kim (in documentary film); Augustine Brannigan (in classical social psychology); Kate Eichhorn (in feminism).
2. See the special issue on “Archiving Popular Culture” we coedited at *Archives & Records*, in which professional archivists, librarians, and scholars discuss how the influx of “popular culture” into official repositories of historical archives and records (from digitized images of brittle old newspapers and unlocked secret police archives to craft beer) changes the expectations regarding cultural and professional expertise among those working with such collections.

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