

Lost in the Archives

Edited by Rebecca Comay. Alphabet City, no. 8. Toronto: Alphabet City Media, Inc., 2002. 776 pp. Out of print. ISBN 0-88784-643-2 (no. 8, 2002).

Founded in Toronto in 1991, Alphabet City produces conferences and exhibitions, taking interdisciplinary approaches to the analysis of global issues. *Lost in the Archives* is the eighth in a continuing series of publications documenting Alphabet City's activities. Previous works have such titles as *Social Insecurity, Fascism and its Ghosts*, and *Nations and Nationalism*.

As described in the corresponding Web site, *Lost in the Archives* starts here:

There is a crisis in the archives. The contemporary world requires that increasingly vast amounts of material be archived and accessed, and this presents unprecedented possibilities and problems for the production, storage, and use of knowledge. With this context in view, *Lost in the Archives* explores the productive potential of memory's failures—its technical dropouts, omissions, burials, eclipses, and denials.¹

As documentation, the work includes a wide variety of contributions, in a variety of media: essays, photographs, fiction, poetry, representations of collections, and exhibitions. The contributors come from diverse backgrounds, but are primarily artists and academics, with many Canadians and a fair sprinkling of Europeans and Americans.

The book is notable for a number of reasons. While it follows the all-too-common habit of invoking archives without listening for the voice of any archivist, it manages to cover nearly eight hundred pages without using the tired old cliché of the “dusty archives.” Instead, it posits a central, even primal role for archives. In this context, we are all archivists. Memory, writ large, is an archives where everyone works away every day. The book illuminates all the processes at play there, few of which are currently sanctioned by the archival profession.

As Rebecca Comay writes in her introduction, “What isn't an archive these days? . . . In these memory-obsessed times—haunted by the demands of history, overwhelmed by the dizzying possibilities of new technologies—the archive presents itself as the ultimate horizon of experience.” (p. 12) Her exploration looks for some boundaries, of categorization, of description, of collection, of interpretation, and, ultimately, of meaning. Her conclusion draws on two strands of thought, post-structuralist and Freudian.

¹ http://www.alphabet-city.org/ac_site/ac8_des1.html

From the former, she argues that there are no meaningful boundaries, only uncompleted journeys, despite an interminable search, glossing over numberless aporia along the way. We can't get there from here; moreover, we're probably not here and there is somewhere else. The reference to interminability hints at the Freudian influence, which makes itself more strongly felt in terms of the concerns with memory. What we remember, what we forget, how we manage the gaps and absences to produce and reproduce usable memories—these perhaps form a more interesting point of attack.

While many have criticized both post-structuralism and Freud for playing with language instead of caring for what happens to actual persons and events, Freudians are more likely to have to come to grips with the facts on the ground simply because of their therapeutic concerns. And readers know the difference. Hence, reading this book, we may respond aesthetically and intellectually to Karen Knorr's photograph of a wolf in a library (labeled "the peripatetic philosopher") or Vid Ingelvcics visual representation of "The Mirror Stage of the Public Museum," but we have a more emotional reaction to Krzysztof Czyzewski's reflections on then and now in the Kosovo.

It all comes together in Ian Balfour's and Rebecca Comay's interview of Geoffrey Hartman: "The Ethics of Witness." Hartman occupies a unique place in a volume marked by repeated references to and the participation of Jacques Derrida. As one of the first and most prominent Americans to tackle deconstruction, from his longtime complementarity as "vigor" to Paul de Man's "rigor" in the so-called Yale School, and through his 1981 work *Saving the Text: Literature/Derrida/Philosophy*, Hartman undoubtedly knows his stuff. Moreover, through his close work with the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Hartman is the closest the book comes to an encounter with a practicing archivist.

Within a complex theoretical discourse, Hartman quite eloquently raises concerns and uses terms that a professional archivist readily recognizes. There are references to events as positive facts and discussions of how to structure and frame interviews so as not to impose some agenda or some narrative framework on the testimony (and in that context Hartman explicitly distances himself from the use of psychoanalysts in the interviews). The meanings of the term "memory" are teased out and contrasted with those of "narrative" and "history." There is a recognition of the proactive nature of oral history, in contrast to the receptive nature of a "bureaucratic or institutionally-mandated archive."

And there are discussions of the basic ingredients of an archival program: preservation, access, description, cataloging, information technology and, as ham with eggs, costs. "Digital modes of recording are easier to alter than analogue modes, so that the testimonies that have to be 'migrated' from analogue tape to digital-optical format must also be preserved in their original analogue version for proof of authenticity. This raises the cost of archival preservation

enormously.” (p. 504) While there would be differences of opinion over his determination of authenticity and his estimates of costs, it is still remarkable to hear this echo of the debates in the archival profession.

This brings us to the leading question. Balfour and Comay wonder, “Could we ask what you make of the philosophical or theoretical questions about the archive, that have lately become a topic, say in Derrida or [Giorgio] Agamben?” Hartman’s response is surprising: “At the moment, I don’t think the implications of this ‘archive fever’ are very clear . . . I am somewhat suspicious or wary, not of the power of their minds and the stimulus of their thought, but of certain generalizations made without a hands-on (that kind of *main-tenant*) experience.” (p. 506) Details follow, but the reference to Hartman’s doing something now as reason to be wary of theory is telling.

It echoes a comment he made earlier in the interview about starting the interviewing process with an imperfect technology: “But we had also to start this project—it was urgent. We couldn’t say to the survivors: come back in twenty years when the technology is perfected . . .” (p. 504) So Hartman accurately identifies the choices at hand: doing something, when the need and the opportunity are at hand, or preparing to do something later, when the implications are fully considered. Clearly, for him, the latter is unthinkable; after all, we can’t get to certitude from here. But his motivation for doing anything is closely linked to the moral and ethical significance of witnessing the Holocaust. He may doubt how the testimonies are prepared; how they may be preserved; and, most important, how they may be used; but he does not doubt the necessity to compile them.

To borrow from Freud, in the spirit of *Lost in the Archives*, we could characterize this approach as “archiving terminable and interminable.”² In his last years in exile in London, Freud looked back on a life marked by failure and frustration. His world had collapsed. How could he reconcile that to his therapeutic hopes?

He concluded that analysts should lower their sights. They should abandon any hope of finally getting to the bottom of things, of telling their patients the truth that would explain everything once and for all. Instead, they should just find a story that worked for the time being, until some fresh trauma came along, which added something new to the mix and demanded another story. And he suggested we should all just get used to illness, that we simply accept the fact that, at best, analysis could only turn crippling neurosis into everyday, routine anxiety.

The purpose of analysis, then, was to come up with a persuasive, explanatory narrative that took the stuff of dreams and trauma and instinct and turned it into

²To paraphrase the title of one of Freud’s last essays, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 23, *Moses and Monotheism, An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), 211.

a story that made sense, that allowed a patient the psychic breathing space to live and work until things changed and a new story was needed. Just something that worked, in other words, something that was not the best, because the best was unattainable, but something that was certainly better.

Substitute archives for analysis, and, *mutatis mutandis*, perhaps there is a moral to *Lost in the Archives*. Whatever we make of loss—physically missing, intellectually curious, historically obscure, aesthetically edgy, personally anxious, personally irritated (and the many contributors to the volume hit all these notes)—an archives offers a potential for encounter and discovery that constitutes its continuing value. And both reader and writer experience that with *Lost in the Archives*.

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Ethics and the Archival Profession: Introduction and Case Studies

By Karen Benedict. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 2003. 91 pp. Available from the Society of American Archivists, \$24.95 members, \$34.95. non-members. ISBN 1-931666-05-9.

The first thing to say about *Ethics and the Archival Profession* is that it is a needed new archives title that presents forty professional ethics case studies. This may appear to be faint praise, but it is not. As the book's excellent bibliography attests, there are many books and journal papers on various aspects of archival ethics. However, there are very few texts principally dedicated to case study analysis. Thus, the appearance of a high quality, up-to-date offering of cases such as *Ethics and the Archival Profession* is important and an appropriate note on which to begin. This review attempts to evaluate *Ethics* from the perspective of its implied purpose—what it set out to do—(might we also say *context* here?), structure, and content. In addition to cases, *Ethics* includes excellent introductory chapters by Benedict on distinctions between ethics and professional conduct, the impact of ethics on institutional practices, and ethical vs. legal behavior. These preliminary chapters offer a broader context in which to consider professional behavior.

The introduction of *Ethics and the Archival Profession* does not explicitly state the book's purpose. Rather, it offers an excellent short explanation of ethics as a branch of moral philosophy and professional ethics in terms of deontological (the rightness or wrongness of actions) and teleological (the good or bad consequences of choices) approaches to the subject. The author notes that the former approach may be prescriptive (or proscriptive) whereas the latter