Invisible in 'The Archive': Librarians, Archivists, and The Caswell Test

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“Invisible in ‘The Archive’: Librarians, Archivists, and The Caswell Test”

by Bridget Whearty

for “Medieval(ist) Librarians and Archivists: A Roundtable,” May 11, 2018
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A performance script, plus related slides.

[TITLE SLIDE / SLIDE 1]

One of the great benefits of being a libraries postdoc was eavesdropping. As a postdoctoral fellow in data curation for medieval studies, I got to hear how librarians, archivists, and other library-employed professionals talked when faculty were not present.

Getting to keep my mouth shut and my ears open for two years fundamentally transformed how I think about libraries and archives. Although the change itself took place over time, one particular moment sticks in my mind. At a gathering I overheard a colleague, a woman I quite admire, say (this is not a direct quote): “When I find a something that says it’s on ‘the archive,’ I do a keyword search for ‘archivist.’ If that word doesn’t appear, I don’t read it—because it is not really about archives.”

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1 This speaker was Amy Hildreth Chen, a subject area PhD turned library professional (and member of my Council on Libraries and Information Resources (CLIR) Postdoctoral cohort) whose work and thinking as greatly influenced my own.
I would later learn that this sentiment is common among archivists—and that it has a name: the “Tansey Test,” after Digital Archivist and Records Manager Eira Tansey.  

[SLIDE 2]

“The Tansey Test” even has an online tool that tests for whether or not a piece of scholarly output, or news coverage passes the test.

So, my question is for us today, on our roundtable on “Medieval(ist) Librarians and Archivists)” at the 53rd gathering of The International Congress for Medieval Studies: do we pass “The Tansey Test”?

In a word: Barely.

[SLIDE 3]

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2 I was introduced to The Tansey Test by Myron Groover, personal correspondence, May 7, 2018.
In 53 meetings spanning 56 years, the word “archivist” has appeared in a title—either for a full session or an individual paper—exactly once before this roundtable—in a 2009 workshop entitled “Making Digital Data Live Forever: Survival Tips for Digital Archivists.”

To be sure, mine is a small and idiosyncratic sample and ought not be taken as a statistically significant data set; however, looking at the pattern established by our own recent history, a few important details emerge. First, based on institutional affiliations of speakers, it is important to emphasize that archivists have long been welcome at Kalamazoo, and, if their paper titles are any indication, they tend to speak about archival matters with great insight and precision.

Put in a less self-congratulatory way: archivists are welcome when they talk about medieval things. But for 56 years, medievalists do not seem to have talked much about archivist things, nor about living librarians and archivists. Instead, and this is the second detail that emerges from my study of the past 53 programs, we increasingly talk about “the archive”3—especially in recent years, as a general thing, an abstract space.

I confess that when scholars write and talk about “the archive,” I have no idea what we mean.

This is not to say that I have not done the reading. I quite enjoy anything by Michael Clanchy, adore Lawrence Warners’s *The Myth of Piers Plowman: Constructing a Medieval Literary Archive* (2014) and have been dazzled by *Shaping the Archive in Late Medieval England* (2017) by Sarah Elliott Novacich. Moving outside medievalist circles, I swooned over Arlette La Farge’s *Allure of the Archives* and my reading notes for Carolyn Steedman’s *Dust: The Archive*

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3 Medievalists are not alone in this growing popularity of “the archive.” For an overview of the way other fields have leveraged this term, see Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4.1 (2004): 9-25.
and Cultural History are, often, more a full transcription. I like so much about that book. And yes, I’ve done my time with Foucault’s *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Derrida’s *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (although I’m not much of a Freudian).

Still, the problem for me when humanists talk about “the archive” remains a yawning lack of precision. Which archives? Where? When? Gathered and then organized according to what principles? Funded by whom, initially? Funded by whom, today? Who works there??

[SLIDE 4]

Surely “the archive” did not burst into existence fully formed—like Athena popping from Zeus’s brow.

I’m not alone in wondering about this. Archivists and librarians have noticed that “the archive” humanists rhapsodize about is a curiously depopulated place. In “The Archive’ is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies,” M. L. Caswell notes

For archival studies scholars and practicing archivists, archives—emphasis on the ‘s’—are collections of records, material and immaterial, analog and digital…, the

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4 I realize this declaration may undermine my authority among archivists who have cogent and persuasive objections to the text, and I bow to the expertise and authority of those who do the daily work in and of archives. What I found (and what I continue to find) so moving about *Dust* is the way that it challenges the even more abstract readings of “the archive” popularized by English translations of Derrida and repeoples archives, reminding readers repeatedly of the bodies that may have sickened and suffered and the minds that labored to make and maintain the specific collections on which scholarly labor often depends.
institutions that steward them, the places where they are physically located, and the processes that designated them ‘archival,’”

whereas

“for humanities scholars, ‘the archive’ denotes a hypothetical wonderland.”

In their special issue of *Archive Journal* devoted to the subject “Radical Archives,” Lisa Darms and Kate Eichhorn note the pervasive erasure of archivists.

Darms explains “‘The Archive’ is a subject that theorists have been mining deeply for decades; but this theoretical archive has tended toward the abstract, seldom engaging with actual archival materials, and even more rarely with actual archivists.”

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Eichhord connects the invisibility of archivists to Gayatri Spivak’s work on the figure of speech known as “catechresis”:

“The catachresis is, at its essence, a misuse or perversion of language,” Eichorn writes,

As Gayatri Spivak suggests, the catachresis may also be used to describe those words or concepts that refer to a group of people, yet point to no one (for example, concepts such as “the worker” and “the community” historically have not rendered people visible, but rather have done the opposite, eliminating the need to look for the subjects who fall under these labels).”

[SLIDE 7]

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In Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice, Randall C. Jimmerson praises historians for beginning “to recognize that archives are not simply locations to examine authentic and reliable records of the past, but are also active agents in shaping what we know of human history. The historians’ discourse, however, often posits ‘the archive’ as an uninhabited landscape awaiting discovery (and implicitly, conquest) by intrepid explorers.”

[SLIDE 8]
There is an unsettling similarity between narratives spun about archives and narratives spun by and about historical figures like Hiram Bingham III. A Yale University lecturer, in the early twentieth century, Bingham claimed to have made the “scientific discovery” of a lost, ruined city—Machu Picchu.9

In point of fact, Machu Picchu wasn’t lost. As Amy Cox Hall persuasively argues, any revisions to the historical narrative that seek some earlier Anglo, male “discoverer” still contribute to a highly “racialized myth of discovery”—constantly eliding the people who lived there and knew the city.10 People who had, in fact, “inhabited the area long before any of those discoverers arrived on the scene”—the local experts who shared their knowledge with the supposed “discoverers.”11

One may recall an incident last fall, [SLIDE – TWITTER SCREENSHOT] in which a scholar shared a snapshot of a letter by Bertrand Russell on Twitter, with the caption: “Of all the letters I’ve unearthed in archives, this is by far the best.”12

[SLIDE 9, PART 1]

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9 On the importance of framing this explicitly as “scientific,” see Amy Cox Hall, Framing a Lost City: Science, Photography, and the Making of Machu Picchu, 16.
10 Hall, 18.
11 Hall, 18.
12 https://twitter.com/guywalters/status/913299775885365248
To which McMaster Archives & Research Collections replied, “Glad you enjoyed! We catalogued it 40-some years ago…”

[SLIDE 9, PART 2]

13 https://twitter.com/MacResColls/status/913738441686384640
Spend time in archivist circles and you’ll find any number of memes like this [SLIDE 10], cheerfully and pointedly mocking the speed with which academics forget the people who have helped and supported us. You will also find slides like this [SLIDE 11].

STRATEGY: DON’T BE AN ASSHOLE

- Archival work is labour; takes time & expertise. It is:
  - Highly specialised.
  - Complex & easy to fuck up; people are (usually) trying.
  - Frequently under-resourced & exploitative.
- Recognise & acknowledge archival labour.
  - “Discovered in the archives”
  - Cite; express gratitude where due.
  - Archives often depend on user recognition to survive.

Reproduced with permission by the author—Myron Groover

Archives and Rare Books Librarian, McMaster University
from an archivist-led session for grad student researchers on “how to use special collections and archives.”

I suspect most in this room must be familiar with the Bechdel Test – a measure of basic representation of women in media, originating in 1985, in the comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*.

**[SLIDE 12, PART 1]**

But for any who haven’t encountered it recently, it involves testing a movie to see if [**SLIDE 12, PART 2**]

1. It has at least 2 women in it, who
2. Talk to each other, about
3. Something besides a man.
As we launch into today’s discussion of new approaches to archives, and libraries, and the people who run and work in them, I’d like to propose that specificity and visibility need to become our rule.

With gratitude to Alison Bechdel and Eira Tensey, I’d like to propose something we might call The Caswell Test, in honor M. L. Caswell, whose article “‘The Archive’ is not An Archives” has provided an important intellectual foundation for my arguments today:

The Caswell Test might look something like this:

When we write about libraries and archives and especially when we want to write about “the archive,” we must...

1. have at least 2 (ideally more) ARCHIVISTS and/or LIBRARIANS in our argument, who
2. appear not just as support staff in paratextual ‘thank you’ notes but as valued interlocutors and intellectual equals in the main body of our arguments, and who
3. we don’t just talk about, but we talk with and listen to— that is we must read and cite more librarians’ and archivists’ own publications, just like we read and cite other valued experts and authorities.  

This point bears repeating: it is not enough to simply cite librarians and archivists, acknowledging their expertise in the conversations we have with them when we visit libraries and archives. We must actually read LIS criticism and scholarship—this is a robust, rigorous, and dynamic field with its own trends, thought leaders, and major debates. As Chen reminded me in the preparation of this talk, to thank archivists or librarians for their help but fail to acknowledge and read the scholarship they produce reifies problematic hierarchies (often carrying gender, class,
As M. L. Caswell pointedly notes, “In essence, humanities scholarship is suffering from a failure of interdisciplinarity when it comes to archives.”

It is not an issue of a single scholar’s ignorance, but a failure across the humanities. I can think of no other field whose erasure in this way would be acceptable, let alone the norm.

As I make this argument, it is important to to be clear: this final rule is deeply indebted to the work of M. L. Caswell. The meme-able, Bechdel-esque form is my own. But the arguments are Caswell’s, which is why the test I propose carries her name.
from M. L. Caswell, “‘The Archive’ is not an archives”

- “In essence, humanities scholarship is suffering from a failure of interdisciplinarity when it comes to archives” (paragraph 4)
- “The refusal of humanities scholars to engage with scholarship in archival studies is a gendered and classed failure in which humanities scholars — even those whose work focuses on gender and class — have been blind to the intellectual contributions and labor of a field that has been construed as predominantly female, professional (that is, not academic), and service-oriented, and as such, unworthy of engagement” (paragraph 5)
- “It is not an issue of a single scholar’s ignorance, but a failure across the humanities. I can think of no other field whose erasure in this way would be acceptable, let alone the norm. It is impossible, for example, to think of humanities scholarship that engages the law without citing legal scholarship, or medical anthropology that does not take seriously the existence and knowledge base of doctors, even while remaining critical of that knowledge base” (paragraph 28)

Understanding the workers and forces that shaped the books we study is a central part of being a responsible medievalist. Extending that to include librarians and archivists means we’re better, more rigorously information literate, researchers, scholars, and medievalists.

It also means we’re better people and better feminists.

And finally, archives and archivists are under threat. As Eira Tansey cogently notes, “When archival work is marginalized or made invisible, it has downstream effects on the continued survival of archives.”17 When we elide the workers upon whose labors libraries and archives depend, we contribute to the illusion that there isn’t any work being done there so it’s not like anyone needs to be paid.

My undergraduate alma mater has been in the news these last few weeks. They have a new president there: he’s not quite 40, and does not have a PhD. What he does have is a “Strategy for Distinction” that involves getting rid of 50 faculty positions, primarily in the humanities.

Make no mistake—we teaching- and research-oriented faculty are at risk.18 Some of us are on the chopping block. Some of us have already been chopped.

18 My use of the term “teaching- and research-oriented faculty” here is a reminder that many academic librarians also hold faculty status within their institutions, a point which some professors seem to forget and overlook. For an overview of the types of instructor and library-located worker, and the ways that we must strive to better understand each other’s working conditions, see Bridget Whearty, Marta Brunner, Carrie Johnston, and Ece Turnator, “Creating Contact Zones in a ‘Post-Truth’ Era: Perspectives on Librarian/Faculty Collaboration in Information Literacy Instruction,” in A Splendid Torch: Learning and Teaching in Today’s Academic Libraries, (September 2017). 42-43. Citable URL: https://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub174/pub174.pdf
But as reading the published scholarship of Eira Tansey reminds us—it is never just faculty or humanities positions that are at risk.

In this new gilded age, where grotesque austerity measures are the norm—medievalists, archivists, librarians, professors—we can be sure of it: we fight together, or we die alone.

Coda, June 5, 2018:

I wrote this talk for what I believed would be an audience primarily of current and aspiring professors and academics. (I was not entirely right in that.)

Because of my expected audience, though, there is a noticeable slant in some of my language that prioritizes the professor/grad-student-aspiring-to-be-a-professor perspective and subtly reinforces the hierarchies and values that, at the same time, I sought to expose and challenge. This point was brought up in the discussion of the talk, both in the room and on Twitter (see threads originating with the hashtags #Kzoo2018 #s317 for some of this discussion).

I initially thought that I might rewrite the talk to deal with this before publicly sharing my performance script. Upon reflection, however, at time of writing this coda I have not made that revision—nor do I anticipate having the time to do that critique justice for the next several months. I have, however, promoted The Caswell Test in a two-minute talk given at the Ignite Talks at HILT 2018 (Humanities Intensive Learning and Teaching, Philadelphia), where I was an instructor, with Dot Porter, in a course on Digital Surrogates.

Given my current time constraints, and my desire to share this idea—and, frankly, my call to arms—I have posted the largely unchanged performance script to Binghamton University Library’s institutional repository.

It is my hope that The Caswell Test takes root and flourishes. Holding ourselves and our colleagues to this standard will result in better scholarship and better interdisciplinary advocacy for us all.

*My thanks to Amy Hildren Chen, Myron Groover, and Patricia Hswe for their helpful critiques and support as I developed this talk.*