

Moments of Being-in-the-Archive

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This paper adopts a constellation or patchwork writing structure to examine five encounters with archival materials and practices occurring over the span of 15 years. We observe how these encounters were characterised by strong, spontaneous reactions including emotions such as disgust and shame—in reference either to the archival objects themselves or our relationship to them—and semi-conscious behavioural acts. We argue that paying attention to such responses facilitates new and complementary modes of investigation into key questions of archival research including reflections on ownership, ethics, responsibilities and the role of archival discovery in the creation of new knowledge. These modes are embodied and affective, and insist upon the materiality of the objects with which they are concerned. They attempt to harness the rich potential of the fleeting moments of affect that are commonly experienced by archival researchers, but rarely the primary focus of their enquiries. As such, our investigation is in dialogue with Susan Howe’s investigations of ‘insignificant visual and verbal textualities and textiles’ and constitutes an attempt to answer Maryanne Dever’s call that we ‘refocus our attention’ on the experiential knowledge offered by the archive and ‘allow for new and different questions and research pathways to emerge’—new archival methodologies that embrace the full embodied and affective experience of ‘being-in-the-archive’.



Introduction

The following discussion both chronicles and performs two archival researchers' reflections on 15 years' accumulation of theoretical and experiential knowledge from their current position in a newly post-pandemic and chronically precarious academic landscape. It consists of four vignettes, which relate moments of archival affect and encounter in terms of 'an embodied mode of attentiveness that involves us in acts of sensing, perceiving, feeling, registering, and engaging' (Felski, 2015: 176). The focus on the spontaneous nature of these encounters has its correlative in recent enquiries by neuroscientists and behavioural psychologists into the function and purpose of insight; that is, a solution to a problem that appears as if from nowhere. Moments of insight are commonly experienced alongside positive emotions, principally joy or happiness and a release of tension. Two findings from these fields of enquiry are particularly key for our current discussion. The first is well-known to literary scholars under a different guise: the idea that solutions arrived at through insight are recalled easily and with intensity (Tik et al., 2018: 3248); the neurological equivalent of Virginia Woolf's sudden and short 'moments of being', in which reality is experienced vividly and without mediation. For Woolf, such moments are often arrived at via a shock or insight (1939: 70). Her formulation underpins Maryanne Dever's concept of 'being-in-the-archive' (2019: 12). The second concerns evidence that it may be possible to identify when an insight is occurring from a thinker's affective and somatic responses (Kounios and Beeman, 2014). Not all the emotions recalled in our vignettes are positive, but all were experienced intensely and are remembered now with detail and affective force. It is our suggestion here that somatic and affective responses to our archival encounters may be indicative of cognitive sparking, and that such reactions to what could be thought of as 'insignificant visual and verbal textualities and textiles' may in fact form a gateway to new forms of knowing that are inaccessible via primarily rational, elaborative or step-by-step thought processes (Howe, 2014: 21).

The vignettes consider archival encounters which could be thought of as the scraps of our research: experiences which have not been the primary focus of previous work, but which nevertheless insist that they have something to offer. This piece reconsiders and refashions such moments of being-in-the-archive and gathers these scraps into a form of patchwork. Our decision to place one vignette (or patch) next to another within the familiar container of the journal article works paratactically and weaves conceptions and articulations of archival encounters together, whether links between them are made explicit or not. This deliberately open and suggestive approach enables a mode of reading across and between the vignettes which is intentionally generative and multidirectional.

Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1940) offers a pathway for associative, as opposed to linear, patterns of thought that characterises ideas or insights as stars in a constellation. In this method, no direct connections are drawn, say, between the figure of Paul Klee's angel, blown backwards through the wreckage of the 20th century, and the chess-playing automaton Benjamin names for historical materialism, but the two concepts are positioned together to make up part of the wider system of thought represented by his most famous essay, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. A dialogue, or dialectic, develops between them without authorial exposition. The flat hierarchy Benjamin uses to present his ideas has spawned a dynasty of kindred creative and theoretical works that operate on similar principles, modified and re-expressed according to the bodies of knowledge to which they relate and to which they are related.¹ In *The Rings of Saturn*, for example, W. G. Sebald moves between descriptions of the 'wretched bodies' of East Anglian textiles workers 'strapped to looms made of wooden frames and rails' (2002: 282), weaving ceaselessly as night falls around them, to children in Nazi Germany being taught sericulture by steaming pupal silkworms and unspooling the resulting thread (293–4). The evil that governs and enables both moments is intuited as we read them together. In Sebald's case, the sculpting of the work deliberately arranges these images and others within the same narrative structure or patchwork. Other theorists remark how, for them, two or more ideas can come together more spontaneously. In an appropriately bodily metaphor in *No Archive Will Restore You*, Julietta Singh articulates how, for her, the word 'archive' has become inextricably connected with Argentine political prisoners storing subversive literature in their vaginal canals and speaks of the two things as having 'become sutured in my thought' (2018: 27). While the coming together of these concepts is perhaps involuntary or happens of its own accord, their subsequent pair-bonding is confirmed in Singh's linguistic expression of the suture.

Various moments of synchronicity and *correspondance*, to use Benjamin's term (1999: 180–1), present themselves in the discussions below: while one of us was being told off in the National Archives in West London, for instance, the other was across town squeezing her heavily pregnant frame between a kitchen table and chair, trying not to watch a cat vomit. Exactly a decade separates the tomatoes frozen in Norwich and their distant relatives' takeover of a Leicestershire greenhouse. Two vignettes are intimately bound up with the challenges of early parenthood. Such correspondences are catalysts for understanding; the puncta that help to call us back to what we define here as 'moments of archival affect' and insist not only on their co-existence but on

¹ Principally used in adaptation studies, the concept of a flat hierarchy places different creative outputs in an equal relationship to one another rather than conferring preferential status on, e.g., the 'original' text that is adapted or interpreted elsewhere (see, e.g., Hutcheon, 2014).

their significance, too. We contend that the acts and emotional responses triggered by such moments contain forms of knowledge that are, as Susan Howe has suggested in *Spontaneous Particularities*, made accessible by virtue of their disruptive power: the epistemic jolt, or insight, afforded by their precarious spontaneity ‘coming as it does from an opposite direction’ (2014: 18). By paying attention to these forms of knowledge, we consider what has not yet been fully explored in current archival practice and theory, and hope to generate—in response to Dever’s closing call in *Paper, Materiality and the Archived Page* that we need to ‘refocus our attention’ on the experiential knowledge offered by the archive and ‘allow for new and different questions and research pathways to emerge’ (2019: 105)—new archival methodologies that embrace the full embodied and affective experience of being-in-the-archive.

For these reasons, our approach here insists on the interconnectedness and rich potentiality of physical, emotional and intellectual experiences in the vignettes we relate and refuses to privilege either academic or creative texts in our body of references. We align with Singh, who ‘cannot parse the difference between these modes’ (2018: 26) and insist that both are present in the affective archival encounter. Wilson et al. maintain that creative insight is ‘felt instead of explained’ (2004: 4)—our contention is that in order to deepen and extend the kinds of reading and thinking that experiences of the archive might make possible, our work with and in the archive can and should engage with what is felt, both emotionally and somatically. Like Sara Ahmed, we see the archive as a material and affective space, offering a multiple ‘contact zone’ rich with potential. Our articulation of different kinds of engagement with different kinds of archives does not ‘simply interweave the personal and the public’, affective and intellectual, institutional and every day, but shows how these ‘take shape through each other, or even how they shape each other’ (2014: 14).

We are in no way arguing for the redundancy of current methods of engaging with archive materials. Advances in information science concerning the development of metadata, genetic work and renewed attention to description of the physicality of artefacts are vital to the adaptability, resilience and visibility of the archive. Rather, we suggest that the embodied nature of the encounter with the physical archive must be acknowledged and accounted for in addition to these, because of how this makes fuller modes of knowing and valuing the archive possible. It is our intention to open up and explore new possibilities rather than determine or foreclose what directions such work might take—an intention mirrored in the mode and form of this piece, which works through a process of ‘attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling—of forging links between things that were previously unconnected’ (Felski, 2015: 174).

The seams around and through this patchwork piece draw from a range of interlinked critical approaches which offer a framework for the vignettes. Our thinking is in dialogue with the affective turn in archive studies, as well as with the postcritical turn in literary studies. Both schools of thought acknowledge the material reality of the objects they study—artefacts in an archive, a collection of words on a screen or page—but also leave room for imaginative empathy and for the emotional, not to say spiritual, responses Greenblatt has categorised as ‘resonance and wonder’ (1990: 19). Such positions insist that ‘affective and analytical aspects of meaning are closely intertwined’—that the initial emotional response is a kind of fore-knowledge—and are open to how ‘details vibrate and resonate with special force when they hook up with our passions and predilections, our affectively soaked histories and memories’ (Felski, 2015: 178). Hence our attention to these moments of being-in-the-archive which have remained with us, sometimes for more than a decade, insisting upon their usefulness and import for our understanding of archival practices and forms of knowing. While the vignettes describe encounters with archival details, texts and objects, our focus is not so much on their material existence as ‘things’ in the world, but on what is provoked and enabled by the contact between researcher and object. In this, our consideration of archival materiality follows Dever’s interest in—as she puts it about paper—archival objects’ ‘capacities’: what they ‘can do’; the objects are seen as ‘dynamic or lively’, ‘neither fixed nor given, but which manifest ... in our interactions with’ them (2019: 17).

The vignettes articulate moments of archival affect within our cumulative experiences of working with archives, and much of the significance and potential as well as the potential interconnectedness of these experiences has been sharpened by the processes of reflection and written articulation that take place here. In other words, the possibility for these preoccupations and experiences to inform our archival methods and practices is often something we were unaware of at the time; something which has come to light through the processes of our subsequent scholarship and thinking together since, and which may yet offer up insights for future work. As for Howe, here archives have potential as a ‘visionary spirit, a deposit from a future yet to come’ (2014: 17). The creative-critical mode of this piece enables us to trace and draw out the intellectual potentialities and value of what perhaps began as inarticulate, or certainly unarticulated, experiences in the archive, and through this not only to argue for but to begin to explore Dever’s hopes for ‘an expanded hermeneutics that ... can more readily account for what then happens in our encounters with’ archival objects (2019: 105).

Frozen Assets

Barbara, 2010

While reflecting on her own archival encounters, literary scholar Sophie Oliver has remarked how the existence of an archival artefact in the present has the power to ‘collapse ... historical time’, bringing the subject into a different, deeper mode of contact with the past and possible future contexts and circumstances that make that object significant (2022). Her observation recalls the Benjaminian concept of the monad: a moment when the flow of thinking suddenly stops and the shock of that cessation ‘blast[s] a specific era out of the homogenous course of history’ to fuse with others and with the present (Benjamin, 1999: 254).

I experienced such an encounter during lockdown in 2020, when I had taken to working in the greenhouse at the bottom of our garden. It was warm enough with the sun on it, sufficiently away from the house and sufficiently outdoors to be a retreat. We were growing tomatoes from seed, and over the early summer their dark green foliage spread across the greenhouse and filled the air with their sharp, distinctive scent. I was away from my archives, as well as everything else, and guiltily enjoying the ‘just-do-what-you-can’ work from home edict issued from my institution. It is a curious feature of those chaotic and tragic months that they were simultaneously the most humane I have experienced, a single lustrum of understanding and compassion hanging apart from what seem like constant expectations to excel, succeed and exude brilliance. Surrounded by my tomatoes, curled in a comfortably bucket-shaped garden chair, I wandered back in memory to a similar moment outside the flow of regular time, when I was house-sitting for Nonia. We were both PhD students and new parents, and I was in the process of moving from East London to be closer to the University of East Anglia. My son was six months old, and I was preparing to return to research. It had been an itinerant year, with three weeks spent in Bath while my partner recorded an album and a month living with my parents to save money ahead of our big move to the country. We house-hunted in Norfolk whilst caring for my friends’ cats, home and considerable kitchen garden. Their polytunnel was packed full of ripening tomatoes which I watered with a hosepipe every night, the damp leaves releasing that same jagged bouquet I was to encounter a decade later, in another county and in markedly different material circumstances.

The tomatoes all ripened while my friends were away. I thought this was a shame, given the care that had been put into them from seed to vine to fruit, all the feeding and sheltering and mitigation of the elements. Not to worry, they said. Just pop them into the freezer, whole, as many as it would hold. Okay, then. The freezer bags were blue, with two tough handles and a white square in which to label their contents, usually with

a block for the date. I, however, did not limit myself to the standard naming conventions the bags offered, but began adding details to the labels about the circumstances in which the tomatoes had been harvested: what we had done that day as a family, or whether it had been windy or calm, sunny or wet when I picked them from the polytunnel. I considered how silly, even pointless this was, even as I was doing it. It was unlikely anyone would read this information when the tomatoes were eventually retrieved from the freezer on a tired evening after work, or during a fraught weekend when no-one had time or energy to make it to the shop. The writing might have worn off. And if they did read my daily tomato updates, my friends might well think I had lost it, cracked by the stress of parenthood, the return to studies and moving house. This self-bemusement did not, however, deter me. It felt important. The 12 years that follow this moment, spent working with archival material inside and outside formal institutional settings, observing the emotional affects and surprising behaviours elicited by encounters with archival objects and considering how and why we preserve certain artefacts or ideas for an imagined future have helped me to understand that importance.

Engagements with archival materials occur via a number of different roles that carry specific responsibilities and positions in relation to the archival object. These roles are sometimes fixed, for example one might work as an archivist or curator for multiple collections or objects, or be tasked with ensuring that collections are handled according to a given set of rules familiar to anyone who has entered a reading room: no food, no flash photography and definitely no ink. Outside the institution, however, these roles are less formal and are in flux. In the case of my friends' kitchen garden I was a temporary custodian, taking care of the tomatoes on behalf of their owners. I kept them in good order while they were growing and, as a good conservator, preserved them appropriately for future use. As an archivist, I discovered that the mechanism offered for cataloguing these items—a designated space for a name and date—was insufficient for recording what I considered pertinent to a full understanding and appreciation of the objects themselves. People might grow tomatoes because they like eating them; a home-grown tomato is more flavourful and less watery than its bland supermarket cousin. But that is not, usually, their only reason. A love of time spent outdoors, the satisfaction of nurturing a living thing and a desire for self-sufficiency are also usually involved, though to differing degrees. I was, I think, trying to capture some elements of this wider emotional and embodied experience—the elements that render the experience significant—through my semi-conscious labelling. I was driven to preserve something beyond the bare physicality of the object itself.

Dever diagnoses such behaviour as an 'auto-archival impulse' (2019: 40), and her case studies articulate both why this information is needed and what drives actors to

record it. Arguing that existing metadata standards privilege textual attributes, she calls for better mechanisms by which the contexts and material qualities of archived objects might be codified (2019: 12–13). She gives the example of an author’s archive in which sticky notes have been attached to manuscript drafts and other documents. Here, much of the meaning of the notes is lost unless they are read (spatially, not figuratively) alongside the texts on which they comment. The tomatoes’ ‘relations of proximity’—the site of their growth, knowledge of the people who grew them and so on—were different, but no less ‘an aspect of the embodied person’s interactions with things’ (Hallam and Hockey, 2001, cited in Dever, 2019: 17).

Dever’s approach encompasses individual as well as institutional archival encounters, and the epistemic power of the informal collection and its care is manifest in her figuration of the ‘dark archive’. She uses this term to describe materials collected and preserved for an imagined future rather than for use in the present,

a collection compiled ... as a material guarantee against destruction, loss, indifference and forgetting. In a practical sense a ‘dark archive’ is a failsafe against the possibility of disaster and ultimately the means of recovery (Dever, 2019: 84).

Melodramatic words when applied to a tomato crop, perhaps, but in a prosaic sense I was arresting their physical decay and acting on a desire to preserve what was a unique, tender and bittersweet moment in the personal histories of me and my friend. For Dever, the dark archive is a safe haven for ideas and ways of life not tolerated in the present, but infused with the possibility that, one day, they may come into the light. She writes of queer intimacies, ephemeral traces of taboo relationships and under-appreciated manuscripts whose caretakers are convinced will ultimately reach the readers that are their due.

One of our primary contentions in this paper is that, to appreciate the full range of affects that might illuminate our encounters with archival objects, we must look outside institutional structures. This way of thinking announced itself in my lockdown greenhouse, when enforced absence from The Archive gestured to the existence of multiple domestic archives and to the behaviours that materialise when an owner or custodian wishes to preserve an object, compose directions for its future interpretation, or use it as a conduit for understanding.

Outside the institution, archival experiences often relate to the personal belongings of an absent body. This may happen when a colleague changes job and leaves behind what they no longer need or want, or when—as in Nonia’s case—a friend cannot take objects with them to a new destination. Most universally, though, it is the death of a

loved one that brings about an encounter with what has suddenly become not only an archive but an index to, even surrogate for, the one who is lost. Inevitably, such inheritance is ambivalent, ‘entangled’, as Dever puts it, ‘with mourning and memory’ (2019: 20). She cites the example of Sylvia Townsend Warner, who became responsible for the voluminous literary estate of her partner Valentine Ackland after her death. Dever characterises the vast archive as something that ‘fell to’ Warner to rationalise and preserve (2019: 20), something that she was ‘left to manage’ (75).

Amongst such material remains, as Oliver has observed, clothing—garments worn by the deceased, still bearing their scent and in some cases even their form—can provoke memory and affect to an unrivalled degree (2022). Clothing is often used in visual culture to communicate the emotional and psychological impacts of bereavement. In the 1999 film *American Beauty*, for example, the protagonist’s newly widowed wife throws herself, keening, into a rail of his immaculately ordered shirts; in Sarah Franckom’s ground-breaking production of *Hamlet* (film version, 2015), the corpse of Ophelia is represented by a dress seen just a few scenes ago on the then-living girl.

Clothing can also constitute a dark archive in Dever’s understanding of the concept. In Ang Lee’s film adaptation of Annie Proulx’s 1999 short story *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), the action closes on Ennis, a middle-aged white American, alone in his trailer home. He opens his wardrobe to reveal a picture of the eponymous mountain fixed to the inside of the door, with two shirts, tucked one inside the other, hung alongside it. The audience recognises these as belonging to Ennis and his lover Jack. Ennis and Jack meet and fall in love on the mountain, and Jack is later murdered. Ennis survives, the film implies, due to his profound reticence and reclusive lifestyle. The story is set in 1960s Wyoming, and the film was released in 2005; in this way, a story about clothing that was literally closeted by a man barely able to articulate his own desires, in public or in private, collapses time and space between a setting in which gay sex was not only vilified but criminalised and a millennial, global society endowed with the means and will to recover this oppressed past.

Oliver’s enquiries into the role of clothing in archival theory and practice are rooted in an ambivalent inheritance of her own: the gift of a ‘cotton house gown’ that belonged to the postcolonial writer Jean Rhys, whom Oliver has studied (2021). In contemplating her complex engagement with this ‘new, surreal possession’, Oliver insists that a focus on clothing, and on the domestic, enables ‘counter-narratives of the past’ similar to those created by Rhys herself (2021). Rhys’s most famous work, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is an empathetic re-imagining of *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of the Caribbean-born first wife of Edward Rochester. Oliver explains that Rhys viewed *Jane Eyre* as ‘frozen assets, material to be repossessed and given new meaning in the present moment’ (2021);

Rhys's dress performed a similar function for Oliver who, like Nonia and I in 2010, was a new parent at the time of her encounter, re-navigating her place in the world.

As I stored and labelled that crop of tomatoes, I was also freezing the nascent affects and theoretical insights to which my auto-archival impulse gave life. Its incidental and unplanned propagation in my consciousness a decade later throws retrospective light on the original moment (Brooks, 1984: 92), illuminating not only the objects and my treatment of them, but also my dimly-grasped sense of their significance. The original act was spontaneous: I have reflected on it at leisure. These are the materials that might now be unpacked and put to good use.

Uncomfortable Custodianship

Nonia, 2009

Perhaps it was a desire for contact, the desire to access a trace, to locate as many people as I could who had known the (then very much neglected) 1960s experimental writer Ann Quin and who were still alive, then phoning or meeting with them to find out more and to somehow get closer to her and her work. As a postgraduate researcher at the very beginning of a PhD project, I did not have any real sense of what scholarly purposes such contact could or would fulfil, only that for some reason it ought to be done, to be stored up for future use. I knew I needed to have contact with Quin's contacts before they too died and their memories, stories and insights were lost. I was driven by a feeling of no time to waste and some kind of archival impulse even though at this point in my pre-career, I did not really know what an archive was or what its purposes might be. As Singh puts it, as a literary scholar, archival work is often 'the thing you say you are doing well before you are actually doing it, and well before you understand what the stakes are of gathering and interpreting it' (2018: 23).

Quin's fellow avant-garde writer and friend Alan Burns was one of the first of these contacts with whom I met, in his bedsit, which was a small part of his ex-wife Carol's flat in North London. When I first visited, one bright spring morning in 2008, he greeted me warmly and offered tea and several types of cake as we sat in his small, sparsely decorated space and talked of Quin. The experience of being in a stranger's bedsitting room was intimate and awkward, but he was friendly and keen to talk. He showed me photographs and reminisced about his first impressions of Quin, what he called her peculiar way of looking at the world, and recalled times spent with her and Carol at the then married couple's cottage in Dorset, where the three of them spent evenings reading modernist writing aloud—Ezra Pound, no less. I recorded and subsequently wrote up a transcript of our discussion, a resource which remains as yet

largely untapped, saved on my computer in a folder called ‘transcripts of interviews-answers’ alongside several others: part of an unofficial Ann Quin Archive, in limbo for possible but increasingly unlikely future use.

As one of a small group of British experimental writers associated with Quin, it was Alan I had known about and written to. But during that visit it became clear Carol had her own stories and memories of Quin too and that she wanted to share these with me; insisted upon it, in fact. After my time with Alan, who was tired and diabetic and should not have been eating cakes anyway, she said, Carol invited me into the rest of the flat, to have lunch with her in the kitchen. Her space was a contrast to his, the study and large living room crammed with furniture, books and piles of paper, with shelves up to the ceiling and above the doors. There was art on the walls—some of it her own—and all sorts of objects on the surfaces, sofas and coffee table: cushions in faded colours, shabby cat beds, a small television, small ceramic tiles and pots, family photographs, cards and postcards. The galley-kitchen was a tiny, chaotic space crammed with tins and jars of dried pulses and rice, pans and pots, cups, plants and cat food. The chairs and table were along the side wall. I was heavily pregnant at the time and did not have space to sit comfortably.

Over lunch, Carol shared memories of times spent with Quin, memories that were different, conflicting versions of the stories Alan had shared, memories more fraught with jealousy, desire and frustration. She told me about how she had kept Quin’s letters and manuscripts. She wanted to write a book about her—perhaps we could write it together, Carol said. As she talked, her desires for possession and control over this correspondence and over the story of Ann Quin became clear. Her desires seemed so much fiercer and more legitimate than my own vague, inarticulate and unformed archival desires in the position as ‘scholar’, and this sense of my own potential illegitimacy in relation to these memories and materials of Quin was uncomfortable. Carol also had several cats. One of them was being sick as we sat talking and eating; I squirmed in my seat.

Although at the time physical discomfort and revulsion distracted me from my notetaking, it is now clear that precisely this aspect of the experience, which has so vividly stayed with me, offered an insight not only relevant to Quin, but for reflecting more widely on forms of archival knowledge and on the uncomfortable ethical position in which researchers can find themselves in relation to informal and private archive materials. This embodied scene of discomfort, desire and disgust offers a way into thinking about and understanding the precarious position of Quin’s archive, how her archive deepens our understanding of her work, my uncomfortable position in relation to this collection of private materials and Carol’s ambivalent position as the custodian

of much of her surviving archive. Quin's other papers are scattered, held in private hands or correspondents' archives, or were apparently lost, or perhaps thrown away and destroyed by estate agents in 1973 after they had been covered in, bizarrely enough, cat excrements in Quin's sub-let flat. Beyond my own embodied experience then, this archive already carried with it not only the possibility of contact, but the sticky traces of disgust too.

When encountering the archive, Ahmed reminds us that 'some forms of contact are presented and authorised through writing', others 'will be missing, will be erased, even though they may leave their trace' (2014: 14). This idea of the trace as both a presence and absence of contact—which I experienced in encounters with people who had known the now absent Quin and in the coincidence of cat excretions—can be thought about in terms of Ahmed's notion of how disgust 'operates as a contact zone' (2014: 87). Within this framework, my feelings of repulsion and discomfort in response to a lack of physical space, and because of my proximity to both Carol's hungry desires and her cat's vomit, offer a way into knowing something about how archives are always a 'contact zone', always bound up with ambivalent wants and needs. We can think of this in relation to Dever's call that we focus on the dynamic capacities of interactions between archival objects and researchers, that perhaps the disturbance created by the contact between them can enable new kinds of knowing in and about the archive to emerge (2019).

On subsequent visits—and in response to Carol's increasingly emotive and incoherent emails—I became increasingly uncomfortable about what I was doing there, more unsure of what I wanted and what scholarly purposes such affective interactions could serve, aware that my professional interviewer/researcher role had become something different and more ethically uncertain. This discomfort was sharpened when Carol allowed me to take away and photocopy her entire collection of Quin materials—although of course I nevertheless snapped up the chance—and then gave me copies of transcripts she had paid for too. What was I to do with these copied archive materials? File them away and keep them on a shelf for scholarship yet to come? Was I becoming the unwilling and uncomfortable custodian of Quin's archive?

More recently, worried by a lack of response to my emails, I sent Carol a postcard. Weeks later, a woman whose name I forgot to note down phoned and told me she was now living in Carol's flat and was calling in response to my card. After spending some time in a residential home, Carol had died, she told me. She went on to say more: the flat had been overflowing with stuff when she had viewed it, but was completely emptied by the time she moved in. She did not know what had happened to everything. Did this mean I was now the only keeper of Carol's Quin archive? Or had she given copies to the other scholars I know had visited her? Did they too have

shelves full of unofficial archive materials? And what was my position in relation to this ‘dark archive’ stored up for an as yet unknown future use (Dever, 2019: 84)? Dever asks whether custodianship of posthumous archive materials kept in private hands, whether desired or accidental, might be thought of as a ‘dead weight’. This weight can be experienced as ‘affective intensity’ and might enable the making of ‘posthumous literary reputations’; it also, of course, ‘might register in terms of scholarly investments in editorial and publication projects’ as a mode of enabling scholarly ambition (2019: 20).

While Carol’s impulse to keep an archive of Quin materials was driven by complex emotions and desires brought about by their intimacy and direct contact, my caretaking was involuntary and ambivalent. I have since published a book on Quin which drew on a small amount of this material, but much of it remains in the dark, in potential. This unofficial archive of copied pages and note-form word documents feels potentially useful, but for what? It is useful, of course, for enabling the scholarly recovery of Quin, to bring her work to new readers perhaps and to re-insert her work into discussions of mid-century experimental writing, but surely also useful in terms of my own career as a researcher, as Dever’s reference to scholarly ambition suggests (2019). This position in relation to Quin’s archive is uncomfortable and raises ethical questions connected to desire, possession, privilege and access. Though her tongue is firmly in cheek, Singh reminds us that as literary scholars, ‘calling what you study an “archive” gives it heft, grants it the status of an intellectual pursuit’ (2018: 23).

My House, My Rules

Barbara, 2013 and 2008

My first full time academic job post-PhD was as a Research Associate (RA) on the Complete Works of Evelyn Waugh project, for which I am now co-executive editor. Our aim is to publish all of Waugh’s works and personal writings in hefty critical volumes (at the time of writing, we are 12 down and 31 to go). Evelyn Waugh’s grandson, Alexander, is our general editor with especial responsibility for the volumes of letters and diaries. As RA, one of my first jobs was to visit Alexander down in Somerset. There, at his family home, he had amassed a large collection of transcripts and secondary materials about his grandfather. It was an exciting, yet daunting prospect.

It is a long way from Leicester to Somerset, via an indirect train. On my first visit, the Birmingham to Taunton leg was severely delayed and my anxiety grew with each apologetic announcement. But Alexander hung on, waiting at the station in a Volkswagen liberally spattered with red, West-country mud. When we finally met, he took my suitcase and asked, ‘Now, would you like a glass of wine?’ It was lunch time and yes, I would like one very much.

Alexander's collection was stored in an archive room fitted with a dehumidifier and organised in a series of manila folders and box files. These would be pulled out as research need dictated and subsequently replaced, lost, or stacked on the sofa or under the cat. He had recently acquired the personal archive of Winnifred Bogaards, who had made Waugh her life's study, shipped from Canada in two large cardboard boxes which were now awaiting integration into Alexander's scheme. Bogaards had been a heavy smoker, he said, and told me that the boxes had undergone some form of fumigation before he was allowed to have them. They still stank, and the smell of long-vanished tobacco leeches into our fingertips as we dug into, identified, filed and sorted the yellowing sheets. There were floppy disks, fat envelopes that closed with a button-and-twine system I have not seen used anywhere else, and thick, brittle images taken from microfilm whose flaking black backgrounds threatened to extinguish their blurry white texts.

Incorporating Bogaards' papers into the main run of archival holdings took several months of visits, punctuated by regular runs for more office supplies. Box files bulged and had to be re-distributed; metal shelves groaned under their weight. One night when we were almost done, I sat in Alexander's kitchen with a glass of Saint-Aubin Premier Cru while he prepared a guinea fowl, de-trussing its legs as we discussed the day's work. By then, I was accustomed to the speed with which his mind moved between subjects, pulling a fact from the depths and holding it up to the light for a second before connecting it to another, then another. I took notes to help guide us back, when necessary, to our original point of departure. This evening, halfway through one of these torpedo-rapid conversations some date or name eluded him and had to be found without delay. Alexander wiped his hands on his trousers, disappeared to his archive and returned with a folder that might contain the answer. He passed it over to me, a smudged oval of guinea-fowl grease marking where each of his fingers had grasped the card.

I did not want to take the poultry-smear folder, but neither did I want Alexander to think me overly fastidious. I murmured something about archival preservation and took the document between finger and thumb. It was only a bit of guinea fowl, said Alexander.

There was nothing particularly precious about the manila folder or even, materially speaking, the letters it contained. These were not originals, but transcripts. Few institutional archives are willing to use their limited resources to acquire photocopies or transcriptions unless as part of a larger, more 'authentic' collection. Nevertheless, such cavalier behaviour, exemplified in the passing of a grease-stained, possibly salmonella-carrying folder into my squeamish hand, would be impossible in a formal setting. Alexander's archive was indisputably his, initially through right of inheritance,

then earned through hard work, long years of seeking out materials, investing in their transcription and upkeep and honing unrivalled knowledge of their contents. Like most people who accrue and care for a personal collection, Alexander is owner, curator, discoverer and gatekeeper of his own archive. He can do what he likes with his own stuff.

While it did not present itself in this way at the time, the guinea-fouled folder incident has since formed a Benjaminian *correspondance* in my memory with an earlier archival horror. This took place at the National Archives (TNA) in Kew, where the roles of researcher and gatekeeper are clearly demarcated with entry passes, uniforms and published rules of engagement.

It was in 2008, at the end of a frustrating day, which had begun in a packed Overland train from Dalston Kingsland to Richmond. My bag was heavy and my back sore before I even made it to the building. On entry to the TNA's reading rooms, you had to pass through an electronic barrier, carrying your personal effects in a clear plastic bag, watched over by security staff wearing royal blue blazers. I remember that one employee noticed my pencil was rubber-tipped, apparently in violation of institution rules and confiscated it.

Not many people owned camera phones in 2008, and their use was not yet common in the archive. Most copying was done by coin- or card-operated machines, so unless your visit occurred at the perfect point of time in your research and you already had a perfect knowledge of the archive's holdings, deciding which documents would be the most useful to you going forward demanded subtle acts of academic prophesy. Every mis-oriented scan ate into your capital, and every journey between reading desk and copier ate into your time. I had just one day at the TNA to get all the information and make all the copies I needed, or thought I might need, and by a quarter to five I was in a mad panic.

Like any other professional archive, TNA is clear about the number of boxes, documents or items a researcher can keep on her desk. I think in Kew it was three. In any case, at some point I had one over the limit in front of me, because I was rushing, and had messed up my well-trodden route between reserve shelf, desk and copier. A blue-jacketed member of staff made her way over to me and admonished me for my mistake before embarking on a lengthy re-cap of all the protocols for the appropriate handling of documents while I stared at the clock behind her head, cheeks burning and eyes watering, mourning each lost minute of my remaining time. I was ablaze with anger, humiliated in front of an audience of my peers. Who was this woman, flexing her petty authority, to criticise my behaviour? Did it make her feel important to make me feel small? Could she not see she was wasting my time?

It is only in recounting this story that I feel a second source of shame. In the hierarchy of archival roles, I know that I felt superior to my rebuker. I might not have been an expert in my subject matter, yet, but I soon would be. I was engaging with archival material to seek out new knowledge and further intellectual enquiry. What higher purpose was she serving?

Researchers often break rules in the archive, usually by accident, rarely on purpose and sometimes through desperation. Being told off in a reading room can represent something of a rite of passage for an archival researcher. We share our stories of being caught out, laughing, rolling our eyes. ‘I mean’, as one (possibly) patriotic researcher recently tweeted, ‘are you even a French historian if an archivist hasn’t yelled at you?’ (Barton, 2023). Of course we, the researchers, know how to look after materials and it is ludicrous to apply that rule about gum so inflexibly. The laugh masks our wounded pride, our feelings of disenfranchisement. But what is the source of that franchise in the first place? Just who do we think we are?

I was a desperate researcher at Kew and meant no harm. At the same time, I know that both my initial trespass and, more especially, my response to being told off were informed by a nascent sense of entitlement. The attitude is rife in academia and epitomises a sense of spiritual or moral entitlement to archival ownership that is allied to the persistent idea that The Archive is the lodestone of academic enquiry. In *No Archive Will Restore You*, Singh acknowledges and examines this position whilst puncturing its sanctity, figuring the archive as ‘pure tease’, with researchers ‘unabashedly shoving borrowed dollar bills down its skimpy thong’ (2018: 22). Recalling her initiation into US grad school culture, she reflects that the archive’s ability to legitimatise and elevate a research topic led to the term’s use to ‘simply [mean] what you are studying ... Your archive is an expected declaration—a pronouncement that makes manifest your worth and belonging in the great halls of higher learning’ (2018: 23). One result of this narrative, its collateral damage, is the belief that researchers’ interactions with archival material are the only significant or authentic ones, and the value of any other may be judged by the extent to which it serves intellectual enquiry. At its worst, it enables researchers to believe that serving *them* and serving ‘intellectual enquiry’ are one and the same. I have, for example, heard some Oxford undergraduates deride the Bodleian Libraries staff who deliver book requests to them in the reading room as ‘Bod Trolls’.

In ‘Archive Fever’, Derrida famously writes of the potential tyranny of the *archon*, the gatekeeper to the archive, the controller of knowledge (1995). Archons decide who can or cannot access the knowledge and status-giving contents of the archive, and so have power over the humble supplicant (including the power to confiscate her pencil). In the specific context of the TNA reading room, both the woman who told me off and

the man who confiscated my pencil held power over me, invested in them by their employer (the TNA, after all, is a department of the UK government). It is uncomfortable but necessary for me to admit that the fury released by my humiliation was, at least in part, a refusal of this temporary and contingent power. Anywhere outside that reading room, even if I did not realise it then, I did and do have more power than either of my perceived adversaries. I am white. I am middle-class. And, if nothing else, by God am I educated. My friend Alexander is also all three things, to which he adds the rights and responsibilities of custodianship. His rules of engagement might be different, but he could refuse my access to his archive just as surely as the TNA, or the British Museum, or the Bodleian. More surely, in fact, given that his archive was also his home. There are many wholesome reasons, professional and personal, why I care more for his good opinion than I did for that of the security staff at the TNA. It is only now that I am prepared to examine some other, unwanted reasons for the disparity.

The unknown and unowned appeal to social status I made in 2008 was the obverse to the insecurity and precarity of my situation at the time. I was made to feel like an imposter; denied the kudos of the archive of which I suspected I was unworthy and yet was already beginning to feel. At 23, I was still out to prove my academic credentials, not yet having learnt that this is a thankless task. Singh's researchers stuff 'borrowed' notes into the archival thong because they are struggling against economic precarity and existential insecurity that can only be trounced by becoming one of the 'chosen ones', intellects whose work is so brilliant that they are admitted to the 'almost mythical land of tenure-track work' (2018: 21). They own nothing, but are staking claims that they hope will come good. At the National Archives, my own claims were denied. But, even as I lift a hand to my still-burning face, I refuse to make a fetish of my shame.

Touch

Nonia, 2015

My entanglement with Doris Lessing's archive began by chance in about 2015. I was working on an edited collection on 1960s experimental writing with Kaye Mitchell and we were looking for a contribution on Lessing. Although I had read and taught some of her fiction, I was not by any means a specialist or even a Lessing scholar, but given that her substantive personal archive—running to 130 boxes of materials—is housed in the British Archive for Contemporary Writing in the basement of the University of East Anglia library, it seemed a good opportunity to engage with that largely untapped material to see whether it could provide a way in to thinking about her experimental writing. So, I offered to have a go at putting together a chapter on Lessing for our collection.

I had some experience of working with archive materials by this point, though virtually no experience of being in an archive in institutional terms, and I had not (and to a large extent still have not) developed any kind of systematic approach. What drew me to working with archives was the singular and immersive nature of the activity (not least meaning time away from email and other administrative tasks) and the possibility of discovery—although at the time I thought of this in terms of new objects rather than (re)new(ed) modes of engagement. I booked into the archive reading room and began in a rather haphazard way to read through some of Lessing's correspondence. I had already read and written on Muriel Spark and we had a contribution on her 1960s writing for the edited collection, so the archive material between Lessing and Spark seemed like a good place to begin. Leaving my bag, pens, snacks and even my water bottle in the locker outside, I entered the reading room. In there it was just me, my notebook and the pale brown cardboard box of correspondence the archivist had put out for me next to a clear container of pencils on a small wooden desk by the window. But I did not take any notes, I just sat reading well into the afternoon, enjoying the silence and the warm natural light, holding up page after page of letters and faxes, each encased in its own plastic sleeve.

I did not know what I would find or even really what I was looking for except for a vague notion that these important and interesting female writers of the 20th century might discuss the experimental forms of their work and their creative processes. I hoped the archive materials would provide a way in to thinking about Lessing's writing, be a form of original research that might give my proposed chapter an edge. What I found was a compelling and moving articulation of Spark's and Lessing's experiences as women writers; a discussion of their writing methods, yes, but also of their experiences of ageing and of illness, of feeling increasingly vulnerable, invisible and overlooked, of struggling to understand or engage with changing technologies. There was also much humour, irony and defiance which complicated this narrative of decline. Yet illuminating and engaging as the content of their correspondence was, what I became most captivated by was the textures of the materials—particularly the faxes—by what I was feeling and learning through touch. This haptic experience was different to the desire to access a trace in my encounters with Quin's archive, different to the possibility of contact with an actual DNA trace in terms of touching materials touched by the writer.

The faxes between Lessing and Spark are degraded and wearing away, their surface is imprinted with age and criss-crossed with lines. On contact, they feel nearly worn out, soft and silky in your hands, so light and flimsy, too, a sign of inevitable—maybe imminent—disintegration. The faxes are more recent than many of Lessing's letters,

but their thin, low-quality paper has prematurely aged, the writing is fading and discoloured, sometimes hard to read. Many have been transcribed and the original documents are carefully preserved and encased in plastic wallets, primarily there to be looked at and ideally not to be handled, and only then with the utmost care. Faxes themselves are, of course, already copies, facsimiles of an original written document or letter which is sometimes preserved and sometimes lost, and the specific transient and fragile form of the faxes themselves seemed to enable a particular kind of haptic knowledge, one absent from the original documents the faxes are a copy of and lost in subsequent archival transcriptions.

What preoccupied me—the materiality of the faxes between Lessing and Spark—was not connected to my proposed chapter on Lessing’s experimental writing of the 1960s, was not instrumental to my work at the time. But it seemed a rich and suggestive archival discovery, too significant to ignore. I loved how this insistent experience offered insights which resisted and exceeded my instrumental desire—just as the very different experience of proximity between archive materials and cat sick had too. I had not found what I was looking for but had instead an unexpected tactile encounter which in turn became the focus of enquiry, a reminder of how the manuscript page ‘has the capacity to ... impinge rather awkwardly on our activities’ as Dever puts it (2019: 10). The specific materiality of the faxes was a clear reminder that the thingness of archival objects and our encounter with them is not incidental to the kinds of knowledge or understanding the archive enables, in fact sometimes it is key. The faxes were archival objects of, in Dever’s words, ‘heightened materiality’ where ‘the status of these documents as paper comes to the fore’ (2013: 174; 2019: 6). The peculiarly textured and particularly affective quality of the faxes insisted upon ‘the possibilities of the page itself’, where we cannot ‘separate meaning from materiality’ or ‘ignore the material instantiation of the texts with which we work’ (2019: 9); in fact, insight and understanding are made possible by our physical interactions with such archival objects.

So, my engagement with Lessing’s archive materials did not lead to a chapter on the creative processes behind *The Golden Notebook* or some other suitable topic for a book on 1960s avant-garde fiction as I had intended, but to an ongoing reflection on the significance of haptic experiences in archives, and how these might demand and enable fresh kinds of reading and ways of knowing. The heightened materiality of these faxes is an integral part of their meaning. In this they offer a particularly clear example of how, by acknowledging and taking into account our sensory and embodied engagement with archival artefacts, our scholarly work with archives may be challenged, enriched and opened up. Given the content of the Lessing–Spark correspondence, the experiences of handling these faxes are particularly suggestive because of how the textures of

these materials, experienced through touch, enable an embodied mode of reading that deepens and extends engagement with, and understanding of, the content and focus of the materials. The feel of the faxes not only seemed to suggest the ageing skin of these writers, but, as a technology, as well as in the cheap and disintegrating form of their paper, faxes offer a possible metaphor for wider cultural ideas about age and ageing, in terms of the pessimistic notion that what was once seen as useful and timely or relevant is assumed to be becoming useless or outdated. The delicate and depleted material qualities of the faxes mean that these materials not only describe, but suggest and seem to participate in, the processes and experiences of ageing. They offer a particularly useful example of archive objects in which ‘the actual or threatened disappearance of a paper document suddenly makes its distinctive materially embodied nature present to us’ (Dever, 2019: 6).

In this, the faxes raise a particular question about the ethics of care in relation to archive materials. By cataloguing and enclosing each of these fragile objects in their own plastic jacket and by keeping them inside a box on a shelf in a space with controlled temperature and humidity conditions, the archivists in the British Archive for Contemporary Writing aim to preserve these artefacts from degradation as much as possible, to prevent them from being worn out. The archivist’s role as official carer and custodian demands that the faxes are ‘shut carefully away, outside an economy of use, inaccessible to touch’ (Howe, 2014: 24).

Yet while looking at these objects can communicate some aspects of their textures and textualities, it is only by touching the faxes that their potential to enrich and deepen our ways of thinking about and understanding the correspondence becomes clear. It is only through touch that the faxes can be encountered not just by the mind and eye but in a fully embodied way which reanimates the objects. In this, the archival researcher does not ‘subject the words alone to their interpretive gaze’ but takes into account the full ‘possibilities of the page’ (Dever, 2019: 9). At the same time, to fully engage with these materials, for haptic knowledge of them to be possible, for this to lead to deeper ways of reading the correspondence, damage seems inevitable. This difficulty reveals an inextricable connection between the potential for discovery and the potential for damage when it comes to knowing archival objects through touch. As Dever (2019) and Howe (2014) both point out, there are wider implications for archive scholarship in terms of focussing on materiality, of accounting for, describing and including the encounter with materiality and its possibility for meaning making. The knowledge potential of these kinds of questions and insights, created and enabled by the embodied encounter with physical archives, is only fully coming into focus in light of our recent and increasing absence from such spaces—during times of Covid restrictions, when,

for example, Barbara's thinking about archives was happening in a greenhouse instead of The Archive, or as the physical archive itself begins to increasingly be replaced by the digital, a virtual form and space in which such encounters cannot happen.

Conclusion

In her series of crime novels, the French archaeologist, historian and writer Fred Vargas describes the thought patterns of her detective-protagonist in ways that recall the joys and pitfalls of the patchwork method we have adopted throughout this piece:

... [He] did not shape and combine ideas and judgements ... Everything always seemed to be linked to everything else, in a network of little pathways where sounds, smells, flashes of light, memories, images, echoes, and grains of dust mingled together (2008: 91–2).

Similarly, when thinking about the revelatory potential of chance encounters with precarious material details in the archive, Howe quotes from Henry James's *Roderick Hudson* (1875): 'Where, for the complete expression of one's subject, does a particular relation stop?' The answer is 'relations stop nowhere' (2014: 24). The form, method and content of this essay has aimed to show how, by placing accounts of archive encounters in parataxis, an understanding of the knowledge potential of such experiences emerges out of the connections and juxtapositions between them. The resulting piece is deliberately suggestive in order not to foreclose the potential knowledges enabled by such an endeavour: not only does some of our work with these archival objects and materials remain unfinished or in potential, but so too do the directions that attending to these might take us.

The spontaneous nature of the archival moments and affects we investigate has been mirrored in the process of writing the paper itself. For example, neither of us articulated an intention to foreground facsimiles and copies of original documents in our vignettes. The fact that both of us did so, however, allows us to consider how the reproduced-ness of the objects actually aids our understanding of them and furthers other, articulated aims of this paper. In the case of the Lessing and Spark faxes, the material condition of the papers seemed in greater sympathy with their content—that is, discussions of ageing and bodily vulnerability—than might be so with an autograph manuscript or even a typescript. The freedom with which Alexander and Barbara could engage with his personally held photocopies of original letters allowed for an intellectual encounter framed by friendship and not bound by the (very necessary) restrictions placed on more financially valuable, formally housed original items. Reconceptualising archival copies

not as poor seconds or surrogates but as bearers of different and additional forms of knowledge can help to de-fetishise the original archival object, to which access may be predicated on financial privilege, professional status and sufficient time and ability to travel. Given that these copies are of little interest to cash-strapped institutions who must prioritise their spending, they habitually form part of the network of informal archives that interact with our daily and domestic life.

Reviewing our personal histories of archival engagement has also drawn attention to our movements through social and academic spaces and hierarchies. As PhD students and new parents, we wanted to feel legitimate, to believe we were doing well at things we did not yet know how to do at all. Dismissive, perhaps, of the cultural and social capital we already possessed, we craved the endorsement of the archive: to be seen as ‘real researchers’. We are aware that the confidence to say we no longer recognise such a category—and indeed to be in a position now to rethink notions of archival knowledge—is located in structures of power to which we, however ambivalently and uncomfortably, belong and help to shape.

The critical-creative and multidirectional nature of our patchwork form is fitting for our subject matter and argument here, which aims to participate in scholarly work by those such as Dever and Howe, who ask that we rethink what aspects of working with archives might be included, might have epistemological value. Our particular aim has been to respond to Dever’s hope for ‘an expanded hermeneutics that ... can more readily account for what then happens in our encounters with’ archival objects (2019: 105, as quoted in the introduction to this article). Our vignettes both investigate the insights, feelings and potential meanings of particular encounters, and reflect upon the questions which each moment of being-in-the-archive raises for our wider scholarly work in and with archives. Our purpose has been to take the time to consider transient and surprising experiences, to explore and get a sense of how and why such experiences seemed to insist upon their significance. The cumulative effect of our piece demonstrates how the embodied and affective experiences of working with archival materials is an essential and integral part of our scholarly work rather than incidental to it. In this way, the form, focus and process of our piece has revealed what opportunities for insight might be enabled when we foreground such experiences as a mode of enquiry and the focus of our scholarly work.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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