

Archivaria

The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists

Review

Sue Breakell and Wendy Russell, eds., *The Materiality of the Archive: Creative Practice in Context*

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Archivaria 99 (Spring 2025), pp. 170-174

Cite this article:

Guerrero, Emily. Review of *The Materiality of the Archive: Creative Practice in Context*, edited by Sue Breakell and Wendy Russell. *Archivaria* 99 (Spring 2025): 170-174. <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/14033>

The Materiality of the Archive: Creative Practice in Context. Sue Breakell and Wendy Russell, eds. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2024. xii, 282 pp. 9780367206017

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We all have our pet professional rants. One of mine: a rumbling suspicion that archives are, more often than not, sites of theory and research for *everyone but* archivists (we who are too busy corralling the materials to have time to write theory and research). The new book *The Materiality of the Archive: Creative Practice in Context*, edited by Sue Breakell and Wendy Russell, both backs me up and offers enlivening possibilities for a critical archival theory that actively centres archival labour. It is probably not a coincidence that the book's central concern is the multimedia world of archives of creative practices. Arts archives are spaces where traditional archival methods are not always fully compatible with the tasks at hand, creating the very conditions that push practitioners into building new theoretical methods and tools.

The seed of the book emerged from a 2016 symposium aimed at “developing interdisciplinary exchange and reflection on archival practices in visual arts contexts” (p. 1), with a specific focus on theories of materiality. As Breakell and Russell sketch out in the introduction, the gathering brought forth a wide range of interests, making it clear that there was a hunger for more consideration of the materiality of archives. The flip side of the coin was a lack of familiarity with archival theory and the specificities of day-to-day archival operations in other disciplines, which tended to engage with “the archive” as a primarily abstract space. Focusing attention on these two needs, *The Materiality of the Archive* is rooted first and foremost in the experiences and expertise of practising archivists. Chapters operate as case studies, at the hearts of which are archives of creative practices – defined broadly to include “fine art, design, craft, film, performance and literature” (p. 2). The texts engage deeply with the complexi-

ties of the materials held within this often-unruly expanse of arts archives. This structuring offers a prime space for “challenging what we might call the paper-based assumptions of the archive” (p. 3). A common division when considering materiality and archives is strict differentiation between document and object, with the former being prioritized within archival theory while the latter is shifted into the subgenres – the “special archive,” the “artist archive,” and, increasingly, the “community archive.” But as *The Materiality of the Archive* insists from its first pages, documents themselves are material and, in their materiality, hold the traces and contexts of their creation. Acknowledging and assessing this materiality opens up new channels to disrupt the veneer of objectivity within archival theory, which has been cracking for some time.

The book is split into quadrants, with each section offering readers a different method for orienting themselves in relation to the archive. Part I, “In the Archive: Practices and Encounters,” brings them right into the room. At hand are the idiosyncrasy of finding aids, the distinctiveness of the corpus of records as a form, and the unacknowledged role of scissors in “shaping photographic documents and objects” (p. 64) in photographic archives. Sue Breakell makes a strong argument for considering the entirety of an archival fonds as one material body. As a processing archivist, I was caught off guard by the accuracy and emotion in her description of the intimacy that comes from searching through every box and file. Breakell is intent on showing that there are relationships among the materials within an artist’s archive which, when taken as a distinct body, can provide “methodological opportunities for understanding the characteristics of archives of creative practice and their conditions of creation” (p. 44). Liz Bruchet picks up a parallel thread in her consideration of Stephen Chaplin’s *A Slade School of Fine Art Archive Reader*. Bruchet was introduced to the *Reader* when beginning work at the Slade School, University College London. Written over several decades by one of the school’s original processing archivists, the *Reader* is a wild combination of finding aid, index, archival process record, and original historical research (as conducted by Chaplin). The resulting interventionist text has proven to be extremely useful to researchers, even as it “spotlights the finding aid as a multivalent and context-specific creation, one that can bring us into contact with subjectivities inherent to archival processes, resources and their authors” (p. 60). In their own ways, the chapters in this section collectively emphasize how, as practising archivists, we bring ourselves into the room alongside the records.

In Part II, “With the Archive: Energy,” the focus shifts to the energy expended, contained, and slowly leaking out of any singular body of records. For consideration: the affective energy held within a jacket made for a lover, the creative energy and artmaking captured within the drafts of a writer’s archive, the work of artists who build entropy into their practices, and the eternal erosion of the film archive. Maryanne Dever inquires closely into a jacket sewn by Sylvia Townsend Warner for her lover Valentine Ackland, which is housed within their shared archive at the Dorset History Centre. Through a deft show-by-tell examination, Dever demonstrates just how many possible avenues of inquiry appear when materiality is taken seriously. The text swiftly moves through fashion history, the growing multinational circulation of textiles, the context of gender expression and lesbianism in 1940s England, and the richness of affect and relationality embedded within this gift to a lover. She is pushing toward an archival method that asks us “to think of the relationship between objects and records in term of an ‘archival bond’ (Duranti 1997; Rudolph 2011), focusing on what connects rather than separates artefacts and more conventional textual holdings, on their potential to illuminate one another” (p. 102). Elodie A. Roy takes up the anxiety of erosion within the film archive, proposing it as “a more urgent, multi-temporal site of enquiry than the paper archive: it appears as a site of accelerated degradation, a laboratory of decay” (p. 146). The uncomfortable but vital reality of materiality lies in its thingness, its tangibility. Thinking through how the meaning of an object shifts as it decays is central to Roy’s project.

Part III, “About the Archive: Technology,” gathers a series of dense and satisfying considerations of how to represent and capture the material reality of an archive via digital tools. Sarah Cain offers a grounded yet expansive overview of the historical lineage of the file system and its uneven translation into digital spaces, while Amanda Egbe presents a mind-bending inquiry into whether analog moving-image archives are also, strictly speaking, paper archives. Egbe’s chapter takes up the methodology of media archaeology to show how “a reading that sees the flow of exchange between networks such as print and optical helps us discern a medium’s performative and technological material or immaterial aspects” (p. 196). This section ends with a chapter by Athanasios Velios, which considers different possible models for “expressing materiality in archival records” (p. 199) (spoiler alert: current archival descriptive standards are extremely insufficient). After a summary of how and why current standards break down, Velios offers a

new conceptual model for representing material elements in archival description, which is both theoretically rich and gratifyingly practical.

Part IV, “Beyond the Archive: Expanding the Frame,” breaks outward, foregrounding questions about what might lie beyond the edges of a singular physical archive and about methods of retaining these traces. Topics of the case studies include contending with colonial displacement, the stories bound up within quilting practices, queer fragmentation as an archival method of refusal, and methods of recording a purposely ephemeral public art project at the Tate Modern. In the chapter from this section that stuck with me the longest, James Lowry and Forget Chaterera-Zambuko share information about the ongoing online exhibition *Lost Unities*. The exhibition responds to the ongoing displacement of the so-called Migrated Archive – “records that were taken to Britain from 37 of its former colonies as they became independent” (p. 220) and are now held at the UK National Archives. In the exhibition, archivists from the countries whose records lie within the Migrated Archive hold placards, staring straight into the camera. The images accompanying this chapter speak plainly, cutting off the suffocating colonial logics of containment and drawn-out, conditional repatriation projects with a simple message: “Bring back our records.” The message could not be clearer: these records are not yours; we want them back. Again and again, the strength of the book is its serious engagement with the thingness of materiality. And as these archivists are telling us, if the things do not belong to you, you should give them back.

Alongside its focus on materiality, the book is also in conversation with expanding areas of archival theory that are rooted in material social realities; both the move toward person-centred practices and a reckoning with the racist and colonial undergirding of much archival theory are present throughout multiple chapters. Despite acknowledging this body of work, the book misses the opportunity to engage seriously with archival scholarship created by and centring persons of colour and Indigenous epistemologies. This is especially clear in Ben Cranfield’s chapter on the dance practice of Trajal Harrell. While framing Harrell’s work around the history of balls and voguing as a kind of “queer fragment,” Cranfield cherry-picks from José Esteban Muñoz’s work to theorize a distinctly queer theory of “the archival fragment” (p. 245) without any engagement with Muñoz’ explicit centring of queer-of-colour epistemologies and without sustained consideration of the specificities of Black American queer

art practices. The book's often-radical focus on materiality and the thingness of records would have been made richer by an engagement with the Indigenous scholarship that takes up relationality and archives and challenges white values of ownership and control.¹

While most of the archives examined in these case studies are housed in major institutions, the resulting theory has much to offer the practices of archivists working in community archives. The concerns – breaking down an object/record division, determining how to leverage materiality to gain a more holistic perspective on a collection, and accommodating the idiosyncrasies of records that are highly networked within the practices of other artists – all overlap deeply with the archival labour being performed in community archives and independent art archives. As noted in the introduction, the explosion of writing and critical thought that has come with the “archival turn in the humanities” has not led to the same attention on archival theory. As an explicit project to address this gap, the book is a needed and effective intervention. *The Materiality of the Archive* offers an exciting map toward an archival theory that is grounded in the day-to-day, file-by-file work of archival labour while simultaneously building space for expansive, playful, and critical scholarship.

1 Recent scholarship on this topic includes Nyssa Komorowski, “The Seashells that Saved the World,” *C Magazine*, no. 158 (Autumn 2024), <https://cmagazine.com/articles/the-seashells-that-saved-the-world>; Jesse Loyer, “Collections Are Our Relatives: Disrupting the Singular, White Man's Joy that Shaped Collections,” in *The Collector and the Collected: Decolonizing Area Studies Librarianship*, ed. Meagan Browndorf, Erin Pappas, and Anna Arays (Sacramento, CA: Library Juice Press, 2021); Bill McLennan, Jordan Wilson, and Karen Duffek, *Where the Power Is: Indigenous Perspectives on Northwest Coast Art* (Vancouver, BC: Figure 1 Publishing, 2021); Allison Mills, “Learning to Listen: Archival Sound Recordings and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property,” *Archivaria* 83 (Spring 2017): 109–24.