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[Digital] Archive

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1000 words + references

ARCHIVE (definition only = 1550 words; with references = 1900 words)

Digital, electronic, and hypertextual ARCHIVES have come to represent online and virtual environments that transcend the traditional repository of material artifacts typically housed in a library or other institution (Price 2008:para 3). Physical archives claim to amass anything that gives evidence of a time that has passed and “is essential for a civilized community” (*OED*). Traditional institutions define an archive as a rare book library, emphasizing the collecting of codex and manuscript representations of writing, authorship, and history. Most rare book and manuscript divisions also collect, preserve, and archive non-traditional forms of printed material and unconventional literary objects. This type of institutional archive is guided by principles of preserving history and an assumption that a *complete* collection will reveal not only that moment, but also its beginning, ending, and connection to other moments. Voss and Werner articulate the duality of the archive as both physical space and, now, an imaginative site, both of which are governed by ideological imperatives (1999:i).

Since 1996, the *digital* archive has revised the traditional institutional archive to represent both a democratizing endeavor and a scholarly enterprise (Manoff 2004:9). An archive, if truly liberal in its collecting, represents an attempt to preserve and record multiple meta-narratives (Voss & Werner). Curators and special collections directors become editors and architects of digital archives to produce “an amassing of material and a shaping of it” (Price 2008:para 9). However, the digital archive’s instability threatens these meta-narratives because of its potential for endless accumulation.

Jon Saklofske, among others, proposes that merely offering the materials in a digital archive without editorial intervention is impossible, though Peter Robinson suggests that an archive “is where an impersonal presentation might warrant readerly freedom . . . archives typically provide the data but no tools” (2004:para 3).

At first, digital archive and scholarly/critical edition were used interchangeably, but with the interruption of tools, databases, and multimedia objects, the archive now comes to represent something wholly different than its original definition. Flanders notes that “the digital edition could thus, in some settings, be understood more as an archive of source material with an editorial layer built on top: the one operating as the established and immutable facts of the text, and the other operating as the changing domain of human perspective and interpretation” (2005:60). The digital archive requires, even demands, a set of computational and analytical tools to remix the data. In opposition to Robinson, even the tools become part of the editorial intervention.

The most current debate surrounding tools and digital archives occurred in the 2007 *PMLA* with Ed Folsom’s promiscuous claim that The Whitman Archive is, in fact, a database and thus disavowing the long history that attend scholarly editions and digital archives. The database, for Folsom represents “malleable and portable information” (2007:1575-1576). Jerome McGann counters that a database is a prosthetic used to amplify the original material and returns database to its mechanical instantiation instead of the vast metaphor described by Folsom. With a variant on the argument, Meredith McGill proposes that databases offer a “remediation” of archives, not a transformation or a liberation (1593, 1595) as was supposed originally about digital archives. Folsom answers many of these salvos by reversing the typical hierarchical relationship and posits that archives are contained within databases, as if archives have a taxonomy beyond the database. These essential debates articulate an authenticity battle between database and archive that perhaps stems from academic desire to control, or editorialize, cultural

records of knowledge. Kenneth Price requests that we flatten this discourse to allow for plasticity (2009) and create a supple vocabulary for digital scholarly editions and archives.

Most scholarly editors of critical editions (both print and digital) will claim that a digital archive can contain an edition but that belies the original nature of “archive” itself – a messy compilation of materials. By revising the definition of “archive” to include the original material, its digital surrogates, its database, its tools, even its visual representation also becomes part of the archive – but not in so messy a heap. With digital archives, we move beyond the physical repository or final resting place of a particular material object. In the digital archive, an object continues to acquire meaning based on users’ organization of the material (beyond editorial control of the primary architect), based on the continued re-mixing, re-using, and re-presentation of the object.

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SEE ALSO: preservation and archivization; critical edition; hypertextuality; literary movements and electronic texts; materiality; database