Unwieldy Archives: The Past, Narratives, & History
University of Toronto, May 2019
The 15th Annual Graduate History Symposium
(1373/1500)

reviewed by
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INTRODUCTION

“Unwieldy Archives: The Past, Narratives, and History” took up Anne Stoler’s call—or more aptly put, challenge—for scholars to move from “archive-as-source to archive-as-subject.”¹ Nineteen graduate students, primarily from North America, gathered to present and discuss their work in May 2019 at Toronto University. Over the course of two days, presenters in a wide variety of ways took up questions of the “unwieldy archive” including: How do we deal with the power and politics of archives? How do we work around—and through—the many silences of the archives we work with? How do archives themselves shape our historical narratives? Presenters, along with faculty discussants, a faculty roundtable, and visiting high school students came together over the course of two days to present, discuss, and reflect on the relationships between the archives they/we use and the histories they/we write.

PANELS & CONFERENCE KEYNOTE

The opening panel took up questions of archives in relationship to the production of history. The papers—presented by Virginia Grimaldi of York University, Perri Pyle of University of Maryland, College Park, and myself—set the tone for a theoretically and methodologically engaged conference. Professor Cindy Ewing from the University of Toronto commented that although historians are generally known for being a “allergic” to theoretical engagement—each of the first papers demonstrated deep theoretical engagement spanning from Foucault to University of Toronto’s own Eve Tuck. Violence and silence—central themes of the conference—were discussed in the first panel and taken up further during a “Scholar’s Roundtable,” co-hosted by the Toronto School District. The panel invited scholars from University of Toronto to reflect on their teaching and research engaging with the violence and silences of archives. Moderated by Lindsay Sidders from University of Toronto, Melanie Newton (University of Toronto), Luis van Isschot (University of Toronto), and Alexandra Logue (University of Toronto) shared reflections from their research and teaching experiences. Their scholarship and teaching challenges the myth that as we have become more “modern” we have become less violent. Pushing the boundaries of what is considered violence, and what violence is sanctioned (i.e. often state and colonial violence), their discussion put front and center their role as teachers and the importance of responsibly navigating historical and present day violences they encounter in the classroom.

Further panels returned

to these themes in different
temporalities and geographies
from the ‘pre-modern’ to working
with internet archives of the 1990-
2000s. Moreover, they expanded
on questions of counter-archives
and questioning what is an archive?
The conference brought together a
variety of disciplines and graduate
students at various places in their
research. Each panel of graduate
students was commented on by
a faculty “discussant” who was
responsible for commenting on the
work as a whole and then presenting
initial questions for consideration.
While most faculty took the
opportunity to keep the attention
focused on the graduate students
work, offering critical but supportive
feedback and questions to begin
the discussion period, a few faculty
unfortunately took the opportunity to
re-center themselves, taking up far
too much of the allotted discussion
time for their own thoughts and
stifling the conversation rather than
invigorating it.
Though the presenters were
primarily historians, a variety of other
disciplines were represented in
the presentations and discussions
including: literary studies and archival
studies. Perri Pyle a presenter
completing her M.A. in History &
Archival Studies, remarked how
refreshing it was to be amongst
historians “thinking archivally.” As a
history-archivist in training she exists
in the often too wide divide between
“archivists” and “historians.” Rather
than the intersection that she sees
it as, she’s experienced her M.A. as
operating in a grey zone between
two disciplines—that in her view and
for those at this conference—ought
to be in closer communication and
collaboration.
Finally, the Keynote address—
“Thinking Archivally”—by Kirsten
Weld (Harvard University) took the
participants both a step back to
assess a so-called “archival turn” in
the social sciences and humanities,
in order to ask: has this actually
changed the way that historians go
about their/our work? Reflecting
back to her own experience writing
her dissertation which became her
first monograph Paper Cadavers:
The Archives of Dictatorship in
Guatemala, she recalled the intense
push back that her adviser gave
her when she wanted to analyze
the archives themselves rather
than merely culling them for ‘virgin
knowledge.’ Though the doors for
historians to analyze “archives as
subject” and not just use them as
sources have been opened, the
“hangovers” of the modern historical
discipline’s nineteenth century origins
most often still keep historians,
according to Weld, “archivally bound.”

(CRITICAL) PUBLIC
ENGAGEMENT

At the onset of the
conference, the opening of the
Scholar Roundtable, and more
than one paper—presenters and
moderators began with a thoughtful
Land Acknowledgements. Questions
of archives cannot be disentangled
from questions of colonialism and in
the North American context, settler-
colonialism. It was fitting then for the
coordinating team to begin with a
thoughtful Land Acknowledgement,
which is “a formal statement that
recognizes the unique and enduring
relationship that exists between
Indigenous Peoples and their
traditional territories.”

Though Land Acknowledgements have gained
traction in academic settings, one
must be conscientious of their
performativity without substance.

As Eve Tuck and KW Yang argue,
Land Acknowledgements can often
become “moves to innocence, which
problematically attempt to reconcile
settler guilt and complicity, and
rescue settler futurity.”

The Land Acknowledgement at the beginning
of the public “Scholars Roundtable”
in particular stressed that the
acknowledgement itself was not an
end but rather and necessarily a part
of ongoing work and relationship
building. However, no further space
was given specifically toward
these discussions and given the
conference topic, that would have
been important work that could have
been highlighted.

As a conference itself
dealing with questions of historical
methods, the coordinating chairs
did an exemplary job in pushing the
boundaries of the common critique
of academics: inaccessibility. There
are many ways that inaccessibility
manifests within academic institutions
and knowledge production, as well
as between academics and “the
public.” There was ample time for
engagement between graduate
students, faculty, and most notably
the public. As previously discussed,
the Scholars Roundtable made space
for the public to engage with a lively
panel of academics all working on
issues of silence and violence in their
work and teaching. More specifically,
high school students were invited
to join the conversation and notably
the moderator asked first for the
questions from high school students,
centering their perspective in a place
that rarely takes them seriously. In
addition, an afternoon workshop on
the relationship between so-called
academic and public historians
opened up space for questions about
employment possibilities, an ever
present topic for graduate students.

Coming from a Global
History approach, the strong skew
of North American institutional
representation was disappointing.
However, as a fellow graduate
student conference organizer, I can
appreciate the challenges of creating
an accessible conference. The
barriers for a graduate conference to
recruit and make their conferences
accessible across geographies are numerous; namely, providing financial support and visa application advising. Lacking both of these, the turn out of Canadians, U.S. citizens, and E.U. citizens was to be expected. Nonetheless, this was a missed opportunity because the questions of “unwieldy” archives cross borders. However, the research papers presented covered a wide geographic scope while taking up questions of archive, history, and power in a variety of ways.

CONCLUSION

In the Scholar’s Roundtable, Melanie Newton commented that “the study of the past is not in relationship to documents. It’s in relationship to people.” The papers presented, as well as the personal dialogues that transpired, brought this issue to the foreground. In doing so the conference overall highlighted the political nature of historical research and writing, not just the politics of the past, but rather the politics of the present. The archives we/they work with are not neutral. They have been carefully constructed, whether by one white woman in the 1950s in the United States or a colonizing regime. Thus, historians too—this conference asserts—must be methodologically, theoretically, and ethically responsible and accountable in the histories we/they write, which rely on them.