



## The subjectivity of archives: Learning from, with, and resisting archives and archival sources in teaching and learning history

Samantha Cutrara  
*York University*

**ABSTRACT:** In this article, I reflect on my experience managing the development of online archives to argue that the subjectivities of the archives and the sources within them need to be at the forefront of how educators and researchers use archived primary sources. I direct my argument toward a critique of historical thinking approach to using primary sources in the study of the past, and instead emphasize the deconstructive possibilities of creating archives, creating metadata, resisting metadata, and being open to artistic interpretations of sources.

**KEYWORDS:** Archives; digital archives; digital humanities; deconstruction; primary sources; history teaching; historical thinking

The current trend on historical thinking in history education has a focus on students using primary, archival sources to develop the skills found in a historian's toolbox. Primary sources are good fodder for teaching and learning history because of how they provide evidence for multiple voices and perspectives on, and in, the past (Britt, Perrfetti, Van Dyke, & Gabrys, 2000). History teachers have been excited to bring primary sources into their classrooms, even if research shows that they can struggle with how to effectively use them in their lessons (Barton, 2005; Barton & Marks, 2000; Friedman, 2006; Patterson, Lucas, & Kithinji, 2012; Woestman & Ragland, 2010). Despite these challenges, the focus on developing students' historical thinking through the examination of primary sources has been advocated as a way for the politics of interpretation and inclusion to stay out of history curriculum (Lee, 1991) and serve the development of a cosmopolitan future through the reasonable and logical skills-based examination of sources from the past (Seixas, 2012).

However, even with a focus on primary source inquiry, we can never escape the power or politics within history. The historical method used by many Western historians is not a neutral schema for coming to a reasoned or logical interpretation of the past. Nor is "reason" or "logic" neutral frames for understanding reality. The historical method, the standards of reason and logic, and much of how we come to understand the past and present in the Western world come from traditions of Western liberalism situated within genealogies of colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, and patriarchy (Tuhivai Smith, 2008). Recognising how these ideas operate in our epistemologies is an important part of learning about the past and the ways the past affects the present.

In this way, teaching students how to engage with primary, archival sources, does not mean that power or politics become circumvented in the study of history, but rather,

PLEASE CITE AS: Cutrara, S. (2019). The Subjectivity of Archives: Learning from, with, and resisting archives and archival sources in teaching and learning history. *Historical Encounters: A journal of historical consciousness, historical cultures, and history education*, 6(1), 117-132.

sublimated, which may be worse (Brown & Davis-Brown, 1998). My interest in history education is to advocate for *leaning into* the power and politics in our study of history, and embrace them, along with emotionality and affect, in how we teach and learn national narratives (Cutrara, forthcoming). In this, a teaching and learning focus on primary sources, on archival sources, can be more than just fodder for practicing the historical method. Primary sources, and the archives that hold them, can serve as invitations for understanding the ways in which traces of the past are activated through our subjectivities and the stories we bring, and allow to emerge, from the subjectivities within these sources.

While I have been developing history education strategies for the past fifteen years, even working in and with different archives to develop their education programs, it was not until I project managed a Digital Humanities and Social Science (DHSS) project for York University (Toronto, Ontario, Canada) that I began thinking about the impact archival theory could have on teaching and learning history. Before that project I certainly recognized the exclusionary nature of archives, but I often talked about them as something we had to work around and challenge rather than a function and symptom of the archive itself. I still had this idea that archives were an official, and somewhat objective, repositories of old papers and photographs; incomplete and imperfect, but structurally sound.

Through this project though, I came to realize that the power and politics of the archives are reflected in what is excluded from the archives, but also what is *included*: what sources we can and do access, and the technologies and discourses that facilitate the access and use of these sources. With this focus, it also became clear(er) the impossibility of ever thinking of archives, and the materials within them, as objective.

Archives, like anything, are latent with subjective and political decisions that shape and are shaped by processes of knowledge production (Duff & Harris, 2002). Archives thus function as gatekeepers – keeping less useful materials and records out – but also as vaults – securely, keeping useful materials and records in. With a focus on the *inclusions* in archives, we can begin to recognize the layers of subjectivities woven into archival sources and the power, politics, and affect that can be found within them.

In this paper I reflect on my experience managing a team of graduate students developing online archives to highlight the ways in which subjectivity is bound into the creation, and thus subsequent use, of archives and the records within them. From these reflections I expand my thoughts to the K-12 curriculum and argue that the disciplinary, Historical Thinking approach to teaching and learning history fails to use the subjectivities of archiving, creation, use, and interpretation as the bases for a reflective and *affective* approach to history education in ways, I argue, that a poststructural approach to history is able to do. Finally, I end this article by identifying ways educators can use archives to highlight the subjective interpretation for students; specifically by inviting them to create, resist, and interpret the metadata of archival sources. Through these reflections I will argue for the deconstructive and subjective power of archival sources in teaching and learning history and encourage the activation of these ideas in pedagogy and practice.

## Creating (Subjective) Online Archives

In 2018, I was hired as a Curriculum Specialist through the Office of the Vice Provost Academic (VPA) at York University to manage a Digital Humanities and Social Science (DHSS) project that resulted in four online archives and four online exhibits created from materials aligned with four Organized Research Units (ORUs): Centre for Refugee Studies, Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC), Harriet Tubman Institute, and York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR). Elements of these works, completed

by graduate students with a background in the topic but not archival or museological theory, were then extrapolated by myself and the Director of Digital Scholarship Infrastructure at York University Library, to create an Instructor's Guide on best pedagogical practices for doing DHSS into the classroom (Cutrara, 2018a).

The co-manager of the project, Anna St. Onge, Director, Digital Scholarship Infrastructure at York University Libraries, who by training is an archivist, worked early on with the ORU directors to select materials for possible digitization. The collection of these materials could be large, but the first task of our Graduate Assistants was to narrow these collections down to 200 unique items for digitization. These 200 items then would serve as the corpus for an online archive and exhibit (for more on this project see Cutrara, 2018b).

At this stage in the project, my role was similar to that of a graduate supervisor: I talked to students about possible organizational frameworks, I provided readings to support different strands of their thinking, and I supported their independent decision-making about how their digital archives and exhibits could be developed and publically presented. Because of this role, the resulting online archives had little to do with my decision-making. In fact, I did not even see the materials the students had used in their archives and exhibits until they presented them at the end of the term. Instead, my role at this stage was to turn the projects, and the conversations leading up to the projects, into an instructors' guide on how to replicate elements of these works in an undergraduate classroom (Cutrara, 2018a). In this, I was an observer of the process and a shaper of how this process could be more explicitly pedagogical. I was coming to this work not from a "history education" perspective, but from the perspective of a general educational strategist who needed to create useful and critical supports for faculty that aligned with different institutional commitments: access and community engagement (the VPA's portfolio), e-learning and experiential learning (elements of funding), and knowledge mobilization and archival organization (interests of ORUs).

The work of the graduate students took place over the course of one term. Both my co-manager and myself estimated that students would take two to four weeks to choose their 200 images for digitization, which would then leave ten to twelve weeks for digitization and curation. However we found that two and a half months into the project and students were still negotiating which records they would choose for their digital archive. While students were not always able to articulate their criteria for decision-making for their archives, the duration of the decision-making suggested a greater negotiation of the task than we expected. Because we would be taking their work and transforming it into best practices for doing DHSS, my co-manager and I felt strongly that we could not rush the GAs' process. We wanted to see, and respect, how future students without archival or DHSS expertise, would handle the work if they were assigned for a course, and so these students were showing us that this work carried a heavier load that we expected.

Thus, to support our students' decision-making, my co-manager and I engaged in more conversations with them archival practice and theory. I, in particular, had to think more directly about how I could frame students' experiences of creating an archive as an assignment a faculty member may want for their undergraduate students and the theory that could best frame this work. I thought the archive would just be the place where students would get materials for their exhibits. Now, I had to begin thinking of the pedagogical possibilities of the archives on their own.

Drawing on research related to creating digital archives, I guided students through thinking of the archives as a *creation*, a piece of work that needed thoughtfulness and documentation to argue for its existence (Bacon, 2013). The archive was not just a large, technical piece of work that needed to be completed, but a creative and subjective representation of a series of decisions about importance and visibility of the record. The archive would "reveal those

decisions, making clear the curatorial process of archive creation” (Whatley, 2013, p. 175). In this way, I discussed with the students, the archive is “a threshold landscape, at once a stage and an underground through which unconscious patterning and conscious reasoning play out” (Bacon, 2013, p. 91). I further emphasized to the students that they should not expect to accurately *reproduce* a moment or moments in time through the “correct” organization of the materials they had. Instead, their work was a *(re)construction* of a moment or moments in time though the *(re)valuation* and *(re)presentation* of materials (Whatley, 2013, p. 175). More specifically, their archive was a *(re)construction* not because they were putting the original meaning back together again – where, perhaps, some of their hesitation lay – but a *(re)construction* because they were constructing meaning *again* (and again and again) through the organization, publication, and ultimate use of these materials.

In our discussions, I also emphasized that in a digital space, archives and archival sources can take on new lives and possibilities that resist or expand traditional archival practice. Because people would not be accessing digital archives in traditional ways – in a reading room, with set viewing hours, wearing white gloves, under the watchful eye of the archivist to ensure materials are kept together in their original order – digital archives could be created with the freedom to explore multiple ways and means of organization and description. Students could imagine the future user in their archive and be aware of, and even empowered by, the uses that we cannot predict and may never know. In this way, argues Sarah Whatley (2013) in reflecting on her process of creating an online dance archive, “digital archives are always to some extent interactive... The user can establish varying relationships with the archive, clicking quickly between screens to view several objects in close succession...” (Whatley, 2013, p. 174). This approach to using, and creating, archives with multiple screens and objects interacting in one place is very much like how we interact with data in our digital lives. Why cannot one’s experience browsing the internet be the starting point for our archival creation? Why must we, in creating our own archives, align to an archival tradition far from our present digital experiences? In an attempt to use these questions to inspire my students, I emphasized that they are bestowing the “gifts” of integration, customization, and accessibility to the materials they were working with (Purdy, 2011), and they should feel excited by this possibility, not fearful.

But still, even being inspired by these ideas, where do you begin? How do you augment the possibilities and recognize the limitations of a (digital) archive? How do you *(re)construct* an archive and what right do you have to do so?

One student, for example, had boxes and boxes of photographic negatives and from these she was to choose 200 images for her archive. How does she begin? Does she go through each set of negatives to find the pictures of the topic she was most interested in? (According to archival practice, the short answer to that is “no”). Does she just pick at random, and then what is random and what if the random is boring? Does the fact that she is a content-matter expert work in her favour, or does her level of knowledge work as an “expert blind spot” (Nathan & Petrosino, 2003) in creating useable work for others?

Another student came to our first meeting with a completely drafted archive before seeing materials. Much of her engagement with the project was wayfinding how to reconcile what she expected to do with the task and format ahead of her. Was her work valid if she was not writing an essay? Was her work academic if she was not identifying a coherent argument? Where could her academic training fit when the materials she was using resisted being organized with the logic of that training?

A third student spent much of her time cross-listing dates and places on photographic slides with a biography written about the creator, to try to uncover a narrative from hundreds of these slides. But there was no “narrative” to uncover; these were just raw materials. How

they were be presented to the public (their “narrative,” however loose) depended on how she framed them. Would this project work better if she knew more about the topic? Would this project be easier if she saw more materials? When should she stop deliberating and begin creating? What right did she have to do that work given that she was not an archivist?

All these students’ questions were valid but also never ending because their questions, and their engagements with the work, kept shifting in ways that were grounded in the materials they had. Rarely did students have overlapping questions even though they were doing the same work. Students’ questions constantly sprung from the unique interaction between the student and the materials they were working with. What happened was that the shape of this work, the ways these works became shaped, became grounded in the primary sources regardless of how students originally intended or wanted to use the materials. It was in the act of (re)constructing a digital archive that made students to take several epistemological steps back and realize that what they knew, and how they engaged in knowing, was bound to a narrative that was abstracted from the materials they had. In other words, in having the “raw” sources in front of them, students had to change their expectation about the established narrative they expected these materials to fit into to, and create something that better reflected the materials in front of them.

Concurrent to this, students also came to see how they were giving rise to narratives within the materials, not (simply) narrating materials. Students were creating new pathways for knowing by virtue of the new materials they were making visible. They were the ones (re)constructing these materials for a future, unknowable, but ever present, user into a narrative that may or may not fit how the user needed them. They were the ones determining how the archive (the materials, the experience(s)) would be (re)constructed – constructed again and again and again because they were creating how they could be accessed (Whatley, 2013, p. 175) even as the materials and the act of organizing them challenged them to confront what they had yet to know.

From my vantage point as a manager of these projects, I saw that students were becoming engaged in an implicit *deconstruction* of knowledge in the ways that made them more conscious of the ways knowledge is constructed. As a manager of these projects, I saw the ways students *witnessed* the deconstruction of how they came to know and be known through their work creating archives (Biesta, 2009; Derrida, 1978). In this way, in ways we did not envision, students encountered “difficult knowledge” in this project – which Roger Simon (2014), drawing on Pitt and Britzman (2003)’s work on the pedagogical encounter with social trauma, defined as “those moments when knowledge appears disturbingly foreign or inconceivable to the self, bringing oneself up against the limits of what one is willing and capable of understanding” (p. 12) – not in the materials themselves, but the task ahead of them.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) wrote that silences enter historical production at four moments: the making of sources, the making of archives, making of narratives, and the retroactive significance of “making” history. Conversely, voices *enter* historical production at these moments too. First, when the sources are being created, by the creator and the individuals represented in the sources. Second, when the sources are being organized, by the creators and/or their designates and/or the archivist (Douglas, 2018). Third, when the sources are organized for use, by the archivist, curator, digitizer, and/or those involved in outreach and promotion (Cutrara, 2016). Finally, voices enter historical production when the sources are used by historians, storytellers, artists, or anyone who views and uses the sources.

Postmodern historians have shown that history is not a canonical narrative of the past, but rather a medium for constantly refashioning, remolding, and retelling what happened in the past (Foucault, 1980; Jenkins, 1997; Scott, 2001). They have highlighted that voices in and

out of the narrative act as “fantasy echoes” of the past, the imperfect and incomplete reverberation of an ideal defined by the imperfections of the present (Scott, 2001). In this way, even with solid historical evidence, history remains a “fantasized narrative that imposes sequential order on otherwise chaotic and contingent occurrences” (Scott, 2001, p. 290). Iain Chambers writes that history is a “re-presentation, a simulation of what has been lost to it.” History is not a series of “raw, bleeding facts,” but rather comes to us as “textual production, in narratives woven by desire (for truth) and a will (for power)” (Chambers, 1997, p. 80). These narratives are woven with evidence, but at the end of the day, even with the best of evidence examined in the most logical way, “all history is a production – a deliberate selection, ordering, and evaluation of past events, experiences and processes” (Harvey Wallace quoted in Kaye, 1991, p. 71).

In creating a digital archive, students recognized and felt the weight of (be)coming one of the voices in the sources that will weave future narratives together. In creating an online archive, students’ voices would be added to a cacophony of other voices in ways that shaped and will shape what others could/would/may hear from these sources in the future. Yet in order to complete this work, students had to humble themselves to the sources and listen to what the sources were already saying. To recognize the pieces of the record that will contribute to the a “fantasy echo” of the stories that could come after (Scott, 2001).

By creating the digital archives in this project, students came to learn how the sources “spoke for themselves.” Yes, a reductive and problematic statement, but also true. The sources “spoke” with the tools available, constraints of the project, and students’ own interests and subject positions, but the sources still “spoke” in ways that *guided* the tools that were available, *guided* the ways the constraints would be negotiated, and *guided* which of the students’ interests and perspectives that came to predominate. Yes, the students shaped and created digital archives, but the shape and creation of their decisions were found by the voices, the subjectivities, of the sources already. Students’ voices in this project added to the cacophony of voices already found within the sources.

## Teaching with Subjective Archives and Archival Documents

I have been a vocal critic of the use of the Historical Thinking framework in elementary and secondary schools because it structures history into a discipline in ways, I have argued, that leaves little room for relationality, affect, politics, and positionality (Cutrara, 2010, 2018c, forthcoming). But I am not a critic of using primary source in the study of the past. This is a key distinction. Examining and responding to primary sources has shown to be an effective ways for challenging students’ understanding of historical construction, since primary sources can provide evidence for histories that may or may not correspond to the textbook version of history and provide students with the multimedia they have come to expect in instruction (Barton, 2001a, 2001b, 2005; Cutrara, 2016; Darling, 2008; Masur, 1998; Moss, 2010; Poyntz, 2008; Sandwell, 2004, 2008).

However, if our approach to using primary sources is based on the rationale that young people need to develop a toolkit for recognizing and wading through competing accounts of the past, then built into this rationale is the implicit belief that students cannot *already* recognize competing accounts in the past. That they cannot *already* see how and why different people would create different accounts of the past and present. Yet young people, especially young people who by virtue of their positioning in a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist world, already understand the differing voices that frame the world (Cutrara, forthcoming; Epstein, 2010). This is why many young people articulate that there are two kinds of history: the kind taught in school and the kind taught in their communities (Waters,

2005). This is also why many racialized students tune out of school-based history: they do not see their lives and stories being recognized and valued in these settings (Dei, 1997).

The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking, conceptualized by Peter Seixas (Seixas, 2017, May 10), came from his early research in which he identified that while young people could use their analytical skills to look critically at textbook or popular portrayals of history, they lost the ability to critique history when working with personal stories told by family or community members (Seixas, 1993, 1994, 1997). Seixas' work evolved to argue that not being able to critically examine all narratives of the past, including one's own, does the same disservice as blindly relying on the opinions of authorities (Seixas, 1999). The Benchmarks of Historical Thinking developed as a way for students to advance a reasoned and critical historical consciousness, rather than simply intensifying a subjective and personal one, by having students learn how to progressively develop the skills of analysis and critique in their study of history (Seixas, 2002). The central thrust of Historical Thinking, therefore, is based on the premise that students' subjective criteria for determining historical significance is uncritical and, if left alone, will remain too personal, too subjective, for the national cohesion could come from focusing on the questions "we all have" about who we are and how we came to be (Seixas, 2006).

Yet the criteria young people use for defining historical significance is no more flawed than any criteria; even the criteria used by archivists (Duff & Harris, 2002). We can never escape subjectivity of critique and interpretation because critique and interpretation is based on subjectivity. Thinking we can move past subjectivity in one's study of history is an exercise in privilege and a denial of power. Rather than identifying a more "objective" way into the past, an impossibility by any measure, what students need is to find ways to navigate dominant narratives, find themselves within them, and challenge how they come to be positioned within these narratives. This knowledge can then guide students to making transformative change for themselves, their communities, and the world. This approach to history education is a *radical* notion of challenging what is known and come to be known, in order to provide greater spaces for equity and justice.

Thus, I too see the value in using primary, archival sources to teach and learn history, but this project has shown how primary sources can invite a rumination of voices within the sources – all the voices, the ones we can hear and the ones we do not – instead of simply being the fodder for assessing the validity of evidence. This project highlights the questions we can ask about ourselves within the sources; questions such as: How come this source has been saved and available for use and not others? What has been gained from this source being saved? What has been lost? Would this source have different meaning(s) if saved in a different context or positioned in different ways? How have others used or challenged this source? How can I add to this work? Who am I in, or because of, this source and others like it?

While some proponents of Historical Thinking may identify that Historical Thinking allows, even invites, these questions into a student's study of history, I argue that a poststructural or postmodern investigation into these questions can allow for greater conversations about power and privilege through and *in* the discipline of history, in ways that the Historical Thinking approach does not do. A focus on the discipline of history fails to account for or invite the voices that have been systematically silenced because of the discipline itself (Cutrara, 2018c; Lerner, 1975; Tuhiwai Smith, 2008). A focus on historians' skills also mirrors what Anderson (2015) refers to as Dewey's "quest for certainty" (p. 83-83); an argument for refining students' application of the historical method to get to the most reasoned, most logical perspective on the past. But the past as a certainty, as a logical and reasoned determination, is an impossibility. Instead, in history education, as well as in other

formal and informal ways we learn about the past, we need to take the opportunity to explore the ways in which our epistemologies determine whose voices and experiences will be heard more than others, in order for us to provide greater space for the voices that have not been heard.

This focus, and these questions, is what Derrida (1978) calls *deconstruction* or, using Gert Biesta (2009)'s definition, the witness to the *affirmation* of what is excluded. Deconstruction is not an act, even if discursively that is how the term is used; but rather a witness to how the centre cannot hold, the *differance* inherent in knowledge, the ways language structures and controls meaning leaving the Other out of what and how we know. Deconstruction is an affirmation of what is excluded and is an opening space for justice by preparing for its coming, giving "voice to what has been systematically silenced" (Crowley, 1989, p. 9).

Poststructural educational theorist Avner Segall (2008) stresses that new ways of viewing the past are not necessarily the result of new findings, but rather new ways of interpreting and exploring what is already available (p. 119). A deconstructive approach to history invites teaching and learning to be conducted with a "critical eye/I" that interrogates what is produced and silenced through history (Segall, 2008, p. 123). Learning with a critical eye/I, invites students to question and evaluate the knowledge they receive and in the process think about who they are within this knowledge. This in turn provides students with the ability to choose how they are going to read and engage with the material and each other (Segall, 2008, p. 126). To witness the ways the stories that are produced limit the spaces available for other stories to thrive.

Thus, working with primary sources does not make teaching learning history more objective or less political. In fact, as Brown and Davis-Brown (1998) note, because of the ways in which the technologies of archival work are obscured from the final, organized results, archival materials have become infused with politics through the affirmation of omission. Instead, thinking of archival primary sources as fragments of the past allows us to witness the deconstruction of knowledge by inviting subjectivities, imagination, affect, power, and politics into how we learn and study history. In this way, sources in the archives, and the archives themselves, should not be understood as objects of objectivity, but rather as evidence of the subjectivities that shape and mold what we can come to know. With an emphasis on their subjectivities, archival documents can invite us to activate our own narratives related to these sources so that we can overtly and explicitly place our subjectivities within them. It is this inclusion and connection with history that makes students most excited about learning about the past (Cutrara, forthcoming; Waters, 2005).

While this work can certainly be done without digital tools, our project showed how engaging in the Digital Humanities and Social Science (DHSS) can invite this work to be done in more public-facing and collaborative ways. With an eye to knowledge mobilization, DHSS invites academic work out of the classroom and encourages students to be cognizant of something larger than just their own processes. What would this archive be like for the creator of the work? For the widow of the work? For community members? Would these people the materials differently? Why and how so? How can we design our archives to invite others into the organization and interpretation of the sources we have digitized? With a focus on immediate, public facing interaction, a DHSS approach can invite and be aware of interactions that go beyond how archived material may have traditionally been organized and how the digital archive provides the gifts of integration, customization, and accessibility (Purdy, 2011).

## **Creating, Resisting, and Activating the Subjectivities of the Archives through Metadata**



Watching the creation of digital archives by non-archivists in our Digital Humanities and Social Science project highlighted the subjectivity of archives and their potential for witnessing the deconstruction of hegemonic knowledge through their creation. In this, the creation of the archives demonstrated the power and politics of archival inclusion as much as it did archival exclusion. However, managing these projects also demonstrated that the subjectivities of the archives could be engaged in without creating a digital archive. In particular, the subjectivity of the archives can be engaged in as pedagogical tasks that focus on the metadata of primary sources.

Metadata is data about data. Metadata are the descriptions,<sup>1</sup> tags, keywords, and/or subject headings that a person – perhaps an archivist, perhaps a creator, perhaps a person who wants to find a photo in their phone quicker – ascribes to a record. Datum tagged to a digital object (a photo, document, video) can allow a digital object to be found, organized, categorized in a systematic way.

Traditionally, it was believed that in archival description, an archivist should “aspire to the role of impartial craftsperson” and “remain out of the hurley-burley of power relations” (Duff & Harris, 2002, p. 264). Metadata standards such as the Dublin Core have developed as an attempt to standardize metadata and extend this impartiality across digital platforms. However, impartiality and standardization of metadata are impossible. Even archival theorists Wendy Duff and Verne Harris have written that archival description and metadata ascription are not objective tags, but a process of storytelling, of “intertwining facts with narratives, observation with interpretation” (p. 276).

In our Digital Humanities and Social Science project for York University, the research team and I engaged heavily with K.J. Rawson (2017)’s article “The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description: Classifying images of gender transgression” to anchor our discussions about the subjectivity inherent in metadata. Through our conversations, we became witness to the *deconstruction* of knowledge found within metadata because Rawson, a non-archivist, shared the complex, subjective, and political process of ascribing metadata to archival objects that illustrated historical evidence of gender transgression. Rawson explored how different investments with records lead to different attributes being seen and tagged, and how a presentist view of what was recorded does not always legitimacy describe what the record was created to portray.

Funnily, even in working in archives, I assumed the metadata was set. I assumed that description and metadata were untouchable bodies of text that those working in the archives had to respect; Or, using Duff and Harris’ metaphor, that metadata was a “cocoon” that could be captured and polished by the archivist, but not designed to be cracked (p. 284). But Rawson’s article highlighted how *a person* cocoons that text; *a person* writes those descriptions; *a person* with subjective criteria defines the terms, and thus ideas, that framed the sources. *A person* makes these documents come to light. And so I question, how can we engage in this conversation if we are not aware that a conversation even took place?

In writing the main body of this paper, I kept wanting to be drawn back on reflecting how our students demonstrated the subjectivities of the archives through the creation of their metadata, however, in all honesty, although our students were drawn to and intrigued with the subjectivity of metadata, none of them explicitly engaged in the intellectual or creative engagements with metadata that explored this argument *in situ*. Their archival descriptions were fairly straightforward and their reflection on metadata came in later articulations of their projects (Challenger, 2018; De Loera, 2018). However, one of the reasons why the students did not actively engage in the creative, transgressive, and/or critical creation of metadata is because, by the end of the project, they just did not have the temporal or mental space for

engaging in this added layer of critical investment. In one term, they had created an archive and an exhibit, so developing critical metadata was beyond the scope of what the students could complete. Instead, however, in reflecting on students' completed work, I have also identified three ways to engaging with metadata that can bring the discussion of the subjectivities of the archives into the classroom: through metadata creation, metadata resistance, and arts-based activations of metadata.

The first way that students could engage in the subjectivities of the archives is for students to create metadata for an already archived source. Using any archival document, one could ask their students to assign the document a title, a description, and corresponding keywords. Student could then compare their title, description, and keywords to another student's or to the officially ascribed metadata. By looking at similarities and differences amongst the metadata, the class could engage in a discussion of the ways metadata are contingent on subjectivities of the archivist and that this then shapes how and what stories can be told.

For example, one could ask students if the description and keywords they assigned to a document would be sufficient if that was the only way one could search for and find that document. One could ask their students if the description and keywords they assigned to the document honoured the past or opened up space for the future? Drawing on Rawson (2017) who demonstrates the past/futureness of metadata creation for gender and sexuality, are we ascribing metadata to archival records that demonstrates the ways in which people in the past understood themselves, or the ways that people in the future will come to understand them? What are the potentials, possibilities, and limitations of either approach?

Inviting students into this process, opening the gates of the archival description to them, allowing them to know that things like metadata are available for their intervention, is work that can invite an empowered and deconstructive way into understanding the creation of history and historical narratives. In this way, understanding and creating metadata can be a pedagogical strategy for understanding the subjectivities of archives.

Secondly, in understanding the subjectivity of metadata there are also opportunities to *resist* metadata; to leave metadata behind and explore primary, archival sources without metadata to guide this work. In thinking about and discussing metadata throughout the project, the arbitrariness of metadata came to light. The students in the project were from history, political science, geography, and anthology; the managers of the project included an archivist working in a library and a K-12 education specialist working in higher education. We all saw, used, and looked for different things in a single archived source, and all of the things we saw and the uses we envisioned were correct.

Thus, to resist metadata, encourage students to forgo official metadata and *browse*, rather than *search*, the archives. This can allow student to see, to witness, the stories outside the metadata sources had been assigned. Ask students to articulate what they found through browsing the archive, to articulate the "serendipity" of their archival research (Bishop, 2017), when they were not (as) bound to the metadata and search criteria that traditionally predetermined the routes to those sources.

I have engaged in this activity as an outreach strategy for identifying the ordinariness of people in photographic archives – an activity I have identified as a social justice method for increasing representation and visibility in the archives (Cutrara, 2018a), something that is particularly important for marginalized communities (Caswell, Migoni, Geraci, & Cifor, 2017). Remembering that records exist separate from the metadata that has been ascribed to them, outside the stories the archivists told (Duff & Harris, 2002, p. 267), can find new sources, or new ways into the sources, that can result in powerful stories being found.

The final avenue for understanding the subjectivities of archives is the potential for art – for performance, fiction, and creative nonfiction, for the explicit invitation for affect, emotion,

narrative, and story – in how archives and archival sources are used and organized. While we had limited artistic imaginings in our project, readings from dance and performance archives inspired excitement from our students to be further embrace these possibilities. Emma Willis (2013), for example, writes of performances based on archival material from the Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocide in Cambodia, formerly Khmer Rouge prison S21, and that “the archive may be powerfully activated through performed responses which use fiction, play, voice, movement and so on.” “These” she continues, “do not undermine the integrity of the archive, but *deepen* the ways in which we might engage with what it represents” (Willis, 2013, p. 111 my emphasis). This underscores Bacon (2013)’s argument that the ways forward for archival practice is the “renewed relationship with creatively and the collective [which] undoubtedly lie within the practice of performative space in art, as field that invites us to value and explore our imagination and grasp its essential role in the organizing of historical and social space” (p. 91). All histories are fictions, perhaps some less fictitious than others, but to invite imagination and affect into our study of the past opens up new layers of understanding that are unavailable with a reverence for sources that the traditional use of archives may bring (Purdy, 2011). As we discussed with digital archives, a person could be working at home clicking through multiple screens and developing a path through the records in ways the creator (of the records, of the archive, of the digital portal) would never be able to predict (Whatley, 2013, p. 174). What kind of story can those (different) records tell?

The intersection between art, possibility, subjectivity, affect, in our study of, and with, archives may better enable us work to through the voices we find in the past in ways we cannot (yet) imagine and in ways that invite readings beyond the records themselves. In this way, activating the subjectivities of the past within archived sources through performance, fiction, creative non-fiction may allow us to hear a multidimensional and subjective past better than the records alone. And perhaps this is what embracing the subjectivity of the archives can allow us to do in our teaching and learning: to hear voices that push us outside of our own subjective ways of understanding the past and to a more empathetic ear to who and what else has been possible in the past and could be possible for the future. By giving “voice to what has been systematically silenced,” we open up space for the other by preparing for its coming (Crowley, 1989, p. 9).

## Final Thoughts

In managing the DHSS project, I wanted the students to get to creating an exhibit as fast as possible: Quickly choose the images/documents for the archive and move on to developing an aesthetically pleasing exhibit that married raw materials with argument and story. However, in the project, it was the archive itself that took time. It was the archive itself that challenged and pushed. It was the archive itself that acted, and will continue to act, as a sponge for the subjectivities of those who created it, the reasons why it was created, and ways it will be used. Archives can highlight the archaeology of knowledge (Foucault, 1972), but also the *architecture* of knowledge: the ways words and ideas build meaning into records of the past. Archives can help witness the deconstruction of knowledge and the (re)construction of justice: the ways words and ideas obfuscate Otherness and the ways we can reveal the coming of the Other by being open to how and in what ways we come to know (Biesta, 2009; Derrida, 1978). This is not something to be feared, but to be embraced. To be embraced as a teaching practice, a learning practice, and a practice for research. It is in this embracing of deconstruction in teaching and learning history, that subjectivity of the past, of history, of the archive can emerge, and it is by embracing the subjectivities of archives that primary sources can invite us to teach and learn new ways through the past.

## References

- Anderson, M. (2015). The Case Against 'Critical Thinking Skills': In pursuit of a humanizing pedagogy. *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 46, 83-89.
- Bacon, J. L. (2013). Unstable Archives: Languages and myths of the visible. In G. Borggeen & R. Gade (Eds.), *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (pp. 73-91). University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Barton, K. C. (2001a). A Sociocultural Perspective on Children's Understanding of Historical Change: Comparative findings from Northern Ireland and the United States. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(4), 881-913.
- Barton, K. C. (2001b). "You'd be wanting to know about the past": Social contexts of children's historical understanding in Northern Ireland and the USA. *Comparative Education*, 37(1), 89-106.
- Barton, K. C. (2005). Primary Sources in History: Breaking through the myths. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 86(10), 745-753.
- Barton, K. C., & Marks, M. J. (2000). "I need to shut up and let them talk ,ore': Beginning teachers reflect on children's understanding of social studies.
- Biesta, G. (2009). Witnessing Deconstruction in Education: Why quasi-transcendentalism matters. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 43(3), 391-404.
- Bishop, C. (2017). The Serendipity of Connectivity: piecing together women's lives in the digital archive. *Women's History Review*, 26(5), 766-780.
- Britt, M. A., Perrfetti, C. A., Van Dyke, J. A., & Gabrys, G. (2000). The Sourcer's Apprentice: A tool for document-supported history instruction. In P. N. Stearns, P. Seixas, & S. Wineburg (Eds.), *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and international perspectives*. (pp. 437-470). New York New York University Press.
- Brown, R. H., & Davis-Brown, B. (1998). The making of memory: the politics of archives, libraries and museums in the construction of national consciousness. *History of the Human Sciences*, 11(4), 17-32.
- Caswell, M., Migoni, A. A., Geraci, N., & Cifor, M. (2017). 'To be able to imagine otherwise': Community archives and the importance of representation. *Archives and Records*, 38(1), 5-26. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/23257962.2016.1260445>
- Challenger, D. (2018). "Metadata for thought": Reflections on creating digital projects for a non-DH history course. *Doing Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in your Classroom*. Retrieved from <https://pressbooks.library.yorku.ca/dhssinstructorsguide/chapter/metadata-for-thought-dchallenger/>
- Chambers, I. (1997). Migrancy, Culture, Identity. In K. Jenkins (Ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (pp. 77-81). Great Britian: Routledge.
- Cutrara, S. (2010). To Placate or Provoke? A critical review of the disciplines approach to history curriculum. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*, 7(2), 86-109.
- Cutrara, S. (Presentor). (2016, June 1, 2016). Using Primary Sources as a Form of Social Justice. Canada's History Visual History Webinar Series. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tai9KMaRLsE>

- Cutrara, S. (2018a). Doing Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Your Classroom. Retrieved from <https://pressbooks.library.yorku.ca/dhssinstructorsguide/>
- Cutrara, S. (2018b). Our Project. Doing Digital Humanities and Social Sciences in Your Classroom. Retrieved from <https://pressbooks.library.yorku.ca/dhssinstructorsguide/chapter/our-project/>
- Cutrara, S. (2018c). The Settler Grammar of Canadian History Curriculum: Why Historical Thinking is unable to respond to the TRC's Calls to Action. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, 41(1), 250-275.
- Cutrara, S. (forthcoming). *Imagining a New 'We': Meaningful learning in Canadian history education*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Darling, L. F. (2008). Using Artifacts to Foster Historical Inquiry. In R. Case & P. Clark (Eds.), *The Anthology of Social Studies (Vol. Volume 1: Issues and Strategies for Elementary Teachers)*, pp. 283-289). Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.
- De Loera, W. A. M. (2018). The Process of Making a Digital Archive. *The Making of a Digital Archive, by a Non-Archivist*. Retrieved from <https://scalar.library.yorku.ca/the-making-of-a-digital-archive/the-process-of-making-a-digital-archive>
- Dei, G. J. S. (1997). *Reconstructing 'Dropout': A critical ethnography of the dynamics of Black students' disengagement from school*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and Difference* (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Douglas, J. (2018). A Call to Rethink Archival Creation: Exploring types of creation in personal archives. *Archival Science*, 18(1), 29-49. doi:10.1007/s10502-018-9285-8
- Duff, W. M., & Harris, V. (2002). Stories and Names: Archival description as narrating records and constructing meanings. *Archival Science*, 2(3-4), 263-285. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435625>
- Epstein, T. (2010). *Interpreting National History: Race, identity, and pedagogy in classrooms and communities*: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge*, trans. AM Sheridan Smith. London: Tavistock.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History* (D. F. Bouchard & S. Simon, Trans.). In D. F. Bouchard (Ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected essays and interviews* (pp. 139-164). New York: Cornell University Press.
- Friedman, A. M. (2006). World History Teachers' Use of Digital Primary Sources: The effect of training. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 34(1), 124-141.
- Jenkins, K. (Ed.) (1997). *The Postmodern History Reader*. Great Britain: Routledge.
- Kaye, H. J. (1991). *The Powers of the Past: Reflections on the crisis and the promise of history*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lee, P. (1991). Historical Knowledge and the National Curriculum. In R. Aldrich (Ed.), *History in the National Curriculum* (pp. 35-65). Great Britain: Institute of Education.
- Lerner, G. (1975). Placing Women in History: Definitions and Challenges. *Feminist Studies*, 3(1/2), 5-14.

- Masur, L. P. (1998). 'Pictures have now become a necessity': The use of images in American history textbook. *The Journal of American History*, 1409-1424.
- Moss, M. (2010). *Toward the Visualization of History: The past as image*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Nathan, M. J., & Petrosino, A. (2003). Expert Blind Spot Among Preservice Teachers. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(4), 905-928. doi:10.3102/00028312040004905
- Patterson, N. C., Lucas, A. G., & Kithinji, M. (2012). Higher Order Thinking in Social Studies: An analysis of primary source document use. *Social Studies Research & Practice* (Board of Trustees of the University of Alabama), 7(3).
- Pitt, A., & Britzman, D. (2003). Speculations on Qualities of Difficult Knowledge in Teaching and Learning: An experiment in psychoanalytic research. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16(6), 755-776.
- Poyntz, S. (2008). Images of the Past: Using film to teach history. In R. Case & P. Clark (Eds.), *The Anthology of Social Studies* (Vol. Volume 2: Issues and Strategies for Secondary Teachers, pp. 336-347). Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.
- Purdy, J. P. (2011). Three Gifts of Digital Archives. *Journal of Literacy and Technology*, 12(3), 24-49.
- Rawson, K. J. (2017). The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description: Classifying images of gender transgression. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 1-25. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2017.1347951>
- Sandwell, R. (2004). 'Who Killed William Robinson?': Exploring a nineteenth-century murder on-line. *Social Education*, 68(3), 210-214.
- Sandwell, R. (2008). Using Primary Documents in Social Studies and History. In R. Case & P. Clark (Eds.), *The Anthology of Social Studies* (Vol. Volume 2: Issues and Strategies for Secondary Teachers, pp. 295-307). Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.
- Scott, J. W. (2001). Fantasy Echo: History and the construction of identity. *Critical Inquiry*, 27(2).
- Segall, A. (2008). Teaching a 'Critical' History. In R. Case & P. Clark (Eds.), *The Anthology of Social Studies* (Vol. Volume 2: Issues and Strategies for Secondary Teachers, pp. 119-128). Vancouver: Pacific Educational Press.
- Seixas, P. (1993). Historical Understanding among Adolescents in a Multicultural Setting. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 23(3), 301-327.
- Seixas, P. (1994). Students' Understanding of Historical Significance. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, XXII(3), 281-304.
- Seixas, P. (1997). Mapping the Terrain of Historical Significance. *Social Education*, 61(1), 22-.
- Seixas, P. (1999). Beyond 'Content' and 'Pedagogy': In search of a way to talk about history education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 31(3), 317-337. doi:10.1080/002202799183151
- Seixas, P. (2002). The Purposes of Teaching Canadian History. *Canadian Social Studies*, 36(2), 1-7.

- Seixas, P. (2006). What is Historical Consciousness? In R. Sandwell (Ed.), *To the Past: History education, public memory, and citizenship in Canada* (pp. 11-22). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Seixas, P. (2012). Indigenous Historical Consciousness: An oxymoron or a dialogue? In M. Carretero, M. Asensio, & M. Rodríguez-Moneo (Eds.), *History Education and the Construction of National Identities* (pp. 125-138). Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Seixas, P. (2017, May 10). [2017 Historical Thinking Summer Institute - Registration Reminder and update].
- Simon, R. I. (2014). *A pedagogy of witnessing: Curatorial practice and the pursuit of social justice*: Suny Press.
- Trouillot, M.-R. (1995). *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*: Beacon Press.
- Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2008). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London: Zed Books.
- Waters, T. (2005). Why Students Think There are Two Kinds of American History. *The History Teacher*, 39(1), 1-7.
- Whatley, S. (2013). Dance Encounters Online: Digital archives and performance. In G. Borggeen & R. Gade (Eds.), *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (pp. 163-180). University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Willis, E. (2013). 'All This is Left': Performing and reperforming archives of Khmer Rouge violence. In G. Borggeen & R. Gade (Eds.), *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (pp. 108-130). University of Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press.
- Woestman, K. A., & Ragland, R. G. (2010). Lost in Translation: The use of primary sources in teaching history *The Teaching American History Project* (pp. 80-96): Routledge.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Traditionally archivists write archival *descriptions* of archival records, but with the growth of digital records the discourse of *metadata* is often conflated with description, especially for a non-archivist audience. In this paper, especially because we were working in a digital space, I blend the concept of archival description with that of metadata to acknowledge that this work does blur the tradition of archival description and the new work of metadata.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge that this work was created on land that is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee, the Métis, and most recently, the territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit River. The territory was the subject of the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant, an agreement between the Iroquois Confederacy and the Ojibwe and allied nations to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. This territory is also covered by the Upper Canada Treaties. Today, the meeting place of Toronto (from the Haudenosaunee word Tkaronto) is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and the author is grateful to have the opportunity to write, study, teach, and learn in the community, on this territory.

### **About the Author**

Dr. Samantha Cutrara has a PhD from York University in Education (2012). Her work has focused on meaningful learning in Canadian history education, and she has become an expert in her field of teaching and learning history in both traditional and non-traditional sites of education. Dr. Cutrara is currently a Curriculum Specialist in the Office of the Vice Provost Academic at York University.