Theories and Methodologies

Theorizing Archival Public Humanities Scholarship and Telling Excellent Stories

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"What is an archive?" one of the new graduate students in my literary research methods course asked. No small part of me heard her question as a twist on the old Foucauldian saw, "What is an author?" I wondered for a moment if she was trying to catch me out.

I almost did that annoying professor thing of answering her question with another question or, worse, describing what an archive is by enumerating what it's not. Fortunately, I came to my senses. This student was looking for a definition in a public-facing, not scholar-facing, mode—some baseline place to start, before being hit with the point that *archive* is a fraught, changing word.

My answer to her was inadequate and brief. I knew she'd soon encounter Carolyn Steedman's essay "Archival Methods" in our course readings. It invites readers to reflect on the question, "How do I read in the archive?" (25). Inspired by Steedman and my student's question, I'd like to consider a further question from the perspective of a public humanist: "How do I give shape to what I read in the archive?" or, in academese, "What are the emerging theories of public humanities that ought to inform and transform an archival scholar's practice?"

Answers to both questions must eventually lead beyond abstruse ruminations over terms and their shortcomings into what our responsibilities are as scholars who publish archivally based research and who care about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Although I am particularly concerned with scholarly writing and publishing in this essay, the following ideas aim to be applicable to multimodal scholarly outputs, including audio, video, digital, and event-based formats like lectures and conferences.

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Public humanities are now finding institutional footholds, such as the first peer-reviewed journal on the subject, *Public Humanities*, published by Cambridge University Press beginning in 2024. Some years ago, I wrote about the hows and whys of my own emerging public humanities scholarly practice ("Hows"). In this essay, I extend those remarks through storytelling and theorizing about, and advocating for, the archivally active humanities scholar's greater engagement with public humanities. I also explore the concepts and values that may inspire and undergird such a move.

The collective work categorized under the label "public humanities" is prompting new disciplinary histories. That work has traditionally been described as an outgrowth of movements once labeled "community engagement," "outreach," "service learning," and "public intellectualism," as histories of the field have begun to document (Butin; Jay; Mangum). Such descriptions, as Roopika Risam argues, have tended to overlook or erase earlier public-facing insurgent work by academics of color—work with which new histories of the "rise" of public humanities must come to terms.

Other neglected areas need addressing for scholars to move forward, too. Much of the scholarly writing that has emerged from archival humanities research either hasn't been designed as public-facing or, if it is public-facing, hasn't been valued as on par for excellence with scholar-facing work. More theorizing of archival public humanities scholarship and what it might next be is needed. Also required are more diverse, equitable, and inclusive ways to assess and value archival public humanities scholarship as scholarship.

By "archival public humanities scholarship," I mean a research method and practice informed by findings from rare materials and primary texts that are culled from archives of all kinds, assessed by scholars, then organized in a mode of communication that's deliberately addressed to nonacademic or nonspecialist audiences. By "archives," I mean to include any repository of information collected and organized for preservation, although I'm usually referring in what follows to repositories housed in dedicated physical and online spaces that are overseen by library professionals. (Of course, archiving, curating, and transcribing are skills that may also be taught, learned, and practiced beyond professional settings, including through community education, collaboration, and crowdsourcing. Those forms of archive creation, for and with the public, while important, fall outside the scope of this essay.)

Scholars know that working with archival materials in one's humanities research involves the privilege of time and access. It also requires the expert use of hard-won research skills like data organization, contextualization, pattern recognition, and paleography, to name just a few. Not every humanities scholar gains expertise in each of these archivally focused directions, and that's OK. But for those of us who do, there ought to be an imperative to consider what it means not only to go into an archive and assess what's there (and not there) but to reorient the shape of the knowledge we bring out of an archive and how we communicate it to others. Public humanities must be central to that reorienting.

This is a crucial moment to theorize public humanities, to develop generative and foundational ideas and concepts, and to share emerging aims and methods. Fortunately, such work is advancing quickly (see, e.g., Benneworth; Berkowitz et al.; Bond and Gannon; Brooks et al.; Cooper; Ellison; Griffin; Smulyan). As Rachel Arteaga notes, many articulations of public humanities have so far been presented in term-defining and question-posing modes. Arteaga concludes that such "questions and all that they imply are still very much being answered, in practice as much as in theory," yet she chooses "first-person practitioner" accounts as an especially effective way forward (3). I share her reasoning and predilections.

Accounts that fuse forward-driven theory and vivid anecdote have the added benefit of doing, even in writing addressed to other scholars, what many claim to want public humanities writing to do—to advance methods of storytelling as legitimate forms of theorizing and thus to reach different, and potentially wider, audiences. This mode is in keeping, too, with ideas many scholars cite today with

frequency and urgency, such as those in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *Undercommons*. As Moten puts it in the book's concluding interview,

> [T]he terms are important insofar as they allow you, or invite you, or propel you, or require you, to enter into that social space. But once you enter into that social space, terms are just one part of it, and there's other stuff too. There are things to do, places to go, and people to see in reading and writing—and it's about maybe even trying to figure out some ethically responsible way to be in that world with other things. (108)

Moten was not, of course, talking about scholars in archives. But the applications for his statements to future archival humanities scholarship—if, after reading Harney and Moten, you continue to see that sort of work as important, which I do—are evident and compelling. Archives of all kinds are generative spaces of sociality (literal and figurative), as well as sources of possibly persuasive, evidentiary "other stuff," as problematic as that stuff may be. Indeed, making visible the inadequacy of past records is part of the story to be told through archival research, as widely and ethically as possible.

But the simple fact is that those of us whose research takes us into archives have "places to go" that others, without our academic access and training, mostly don't, or can't, or can't yet. In archives of all kinds, scholars may locate and interpret unique texts and objects that have the potential to revolutionize descriptions of the past and present and thus to shape the future. It is therefore "ethically responsible" that we should look for ways to bring the world of the "other things" we encounter in archival research to far larger audiences. We should also do this in words and ways that are more readily decipherable to nonacademic audiences, so that our research has the potential to resonate far beyond those who are working alongside us in archival spaces. Other archival scholars, librarians, and archivists may be our comrades and colleagues, but, if we seek to share findings and ideas in ethically responsible ways, then these groups must not be the only, or even the primary, audiences for our research.

At present, most scholarly archival research in the humanities takes the form of scholar-facing, not public-facing, writing. One need only go to the lists of archival projects funded by major public and private organizations and libraries to grasp the state of things. Such project titles (most designed to become books) regularly employ scholar-facing, obfuscatory locutions. Read a hundred such titles—or, better yet, ask your best nonacademic friend to read a hundred of them—and you'll see that the vast majority set out to address a rarified audience of other experts. Only a fraction appear to be designed to speak beyond the academy, which is how, for the purposes of this essay, I'll define the public.

Theories of the archive have undergone a seismic shift over the past generation. In critical archive studies, the idea of "archival neutrality" was debunked long ago (Wulf and Strauss). But humanities scholars, archivists, and librarians aren't necessarily having the same deep conversations about this shift in understanding. As Karin Wulf and Amanda Strauss put it, "archivists and librarians on the one side and scholars on the other are not engaging one another's work or are even aware that each has long been engaging with important issues in critical archive studies." They note that "even describing this gap has often implied that librarians and archivists are not scholars," although they keep those terms in place to try to reexamine the "sides," as do I.

Scholars who draw on archival research have admirably "pushed to the fore questions of how we understand these periods and subjects as inextricable from an accounting of the historical materials they produced and the repositories that hold them," as Wulf and Strauss write. Scholars have carefully described archives as flawed spaces and emphasized that their materials tell, at best, a partial story about the cultural past. If histories are often written and told by victors, then major archives, too, have been organized by (and are largely made up of) what these once-empowered people collected and sought to preserve. When scholars have studied archives qua archives, they've pointedly addressed the voices that have been silenced in archival collections (Habib; Thomas; Lowe 43–72; Lowry).

But librarians and archivists have been having these conversations for decades, too. As Wulf and Strauss argue, "The issues of power and privilege in the creation and preservation of rare materials are not limited to materials related to settler colonialism, slavery, or incarceration, but rather pervade all manner of materials that are now 'archival.'" Critical archive studies regularly considers the allure of archives, archival futures, archival activism, and perceptions of archives and truth (Farge 1–17; Brown; Wallace; Burton). A growing body of such work offers academic humanists the opportunity to understand that archives "have narratives of their own that need to be carefully, figuratively 'read' before their materials can be fully appreciated and most effectively used" (Blouin and Rosenberg 208).

Critical archive studies has also prompted library and museum professionals to change once-dominant practices, not only in collections development and cataloging but in movements toward greater patron access with fewer gatekeeping obstacles to use rare materials. Indeed, critical archive studies may be said to be far ahead of humanities scholarship in its rigorous theorizing about increasing archival access as a matter of social justice. Among humanities scholars, there is (as of yet) no similar discipline-wide imperative to reconceive our scholarship itself to invite greater access, in a project linked to social justice.

Scholars who work in archives have now documented carefully how the structure and holdings of major archives are often limiting and damaging, but we have largely been having these conversations among ourselves, in terms that often aren't readable to nonexperts. To be sure, we haven't yet done enough to consider the negative ramifications of what comes of the "other stuff" we find (and don't find) in archives of all kinds. There's more work to do there. But we have collectively, so far, set out to share our findings with a shockingly small number of other people, primarily other humanities scholars, in scholar-facing books and academic journals based on a print model.

It's important to say this clearly: When we as scholars deliberately "go public" with our archival research findings, this isn't just a trendy thing or a nice idea. It should also be seen as a response to social justice imperatives that put our research methods where we say our theories of diversity, equity, and inclusion already are—and where most museum professionals' practices already are. (Museums also regularly produce archivally informed public writing in their digital and physical signage and, occasionally, in exhibition catalogs.) Crafting public-facing archival humanities scholarship would align more closely with prevailing calls for a shift in the content and questions of humanities study. It would not only seek to describe the full range of the human experience (and especially the things humans create) as it's captured in cultural texts of all kinds. It would also attempt to deliver those descriptive findings to a fuller range of human readers and viewers.

As we continue to scrutinize past and present archival evidence and previous scholarly *content* for meeting (or failing to meet) admirable calls for social justice, we must also reassess what we are doing with our findings. We must examine the *forms* these findings are taking, to consider whom they include and exclude. Exclusionary scholarly practices go far beyond academic journal firewalls or expensive hardcover books. Open access alone won't solve the problems described here. To seek to build the same old thing, but open, then assume "they will come" is not enough. The exclusions that arise from the manner, mode, style, and tone that archivally engaged scholars have traditionally and even exclusively chosen—which our disciplines continue to prioritize in professional status—are just as problematic and pressing.

Archival public humanities scholars must vocally reject the naysayer's argument that we're somehow dumbing down our findings when we reorient them to reach nonacademic readers. We must continue to refuse the imputation that we're selling out or turning our backs on "our own kind"—fellow scholars or our disciplines—by doing it. More academics ought to try to speak beyond the academy through archivally informed, well-researched public humanities scholarship, as Merve Emre, Gretchen Gerzina, Saidiya Hartman, Jill Lepore, and others have done. Choosing the

register of public-facing writing ought to be part of what all academic researchers do sometimes.

If we place a value on expanding diversity and inclusion in our humanities disciplines, then it must not be only in the content and contexts of our work and in the range of voices we are unearthing, centering, and representing. It must also involve a transformation of how we use our own voices, by deliberately presenting material differently and by writing and speaking differently, as if nonacademic audiences mattered the most to us, not the least.

How does one do this? A good place to begin to recast some of your scholarly writing is with Tilar Mazzeo's *How to Write a Bestseller*, addressed to academics considering going public with their research findings. Her book provides a step-by-step guide for reframing academic arguments into nonfiction storytelling. Although it doesn't specifically focus on archival research or delve deeply into the social-justice-inspired reasons for addressing a nonacademic audience, those concerns certainly inform the book.

Archival research, which may rely on public or private support, is, or ought to be, theorized as a public good. To do our part, then, archivally active and informed humanists must show a strong commitment to sharing what we use and piece together in archival spaces with the public audiences who often don't (yet) know about but who might be interested in archives of all kinds, and what might come out of them.

I'd like to speak personally here, because the ideas I've laid out so far have arisen from a particular time and set of experiences. I wasn't trained in archival research until after receiving my doctorate in English literature with certification in women's studies. I went to graduate school in the 1990s, in a moment saturated with critical theory and continental philosophy. As an assistant professor, I got funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) to travel to England, for the first time in my life, to participate in a seminar on biography and biographical evidence, touring archives and gaining archival research training.

It was during that government-funded opportunity that I became committed to using archival materials in my emerging work on British women's writings, although I didn't think too deeply about giving any new shape to my writing. I continued to consider other scholars as my principal audience. My prose used tortured locutions. I used a lot of too-clever "(Re)"s in my article titles. I crafted book chapters with off-putting, obscure primary source quotes like "'One Generation Passeth Away, and Another Cometh': Anna Letitia Barbauld's Late Literary Work." I see now that anyone who didn't already share my excitement about Barbauld was unlikely to stomach reading beyond the words "passeth" and "cometh."

It was in conceiving my third book, *The Making of Jane Austen*, that I started thinking differently about how and why I should reach out to a wider audience with my archival findings. Not incidentally, this was the first book that wouldn't "count" toward my tenure or promotion. I had both. I was admittedly taking less of a professional risk by shifting the audience to which I was writing about my discoveries. But this was the first moment in which I was struck by the disconnect between what I was finding in the archives and the modes in which (and audiences to which) those findings might be presented.

My archival research illuminated just how warped most previous versions of Austen's reception history were. Generations of scholars and critics had presumed that the best evidence for understanding Austen's legacy came from other intellectuals and family sources. That approach had produced a lot of half-baked scholarship, because it either ignored popular culture or called it lightweight and inconsequential, especially before the landmark BBC series of *Pride and Prejudice* in 1995. Austen's earlier popular reception was in fact demonstrably the opposite—heavy and consequential. But I wouldn't have been able to piece together this alternative history of Austen's afterlife without access to physical and digital archival evidence. The evidence showed that Austen's iconicity owed a great deal to the largely forgotten and unsung work of artists, activists, actors, dramatists, directors, teachers, and politicians who'd been written out of her literary history.

Confronted with the staggering amount of archival material on Austen's reception, I also recognized more fully than ever before the great privilege I enjoyed in gaining access to it. That I hadn't had that realization earlier in my career is absolutely on me, but in my defense, the research support I got became more generous as my career progressed. This access moved me differently, because of its scale. Doing this work relied not only on my training in paleography and knowledge of how to locate hard-to-find materials. It also relied on time and money to travel, on learning how to navigate peculiar digital and physical archival systems, on asking the right questions, and on quickly grasping the meanings and value of what was sitting in front of me. Taken together, it allowed for the construction of an alternative reception history for Austen, much of which hadn't been previously told.

So how could I hope to begin to fix the problem of previous scholars who'd largely ignored the impact of Austen's popular creators and audiences from the 1820s to the 1990s if I chose to write to a narrow audience, using the usual jargon? Especially with these findings, I couldn't continue the scholarly hypocrisy of principally addressing other scholar-experts. I felt an urgent responsibility to share my research more widely, while realizing it was going to be on me to forge new pathways to reach that desired audience. I set out to learn how to write and organize my ideas differently. (I'm still learning.) I also experimented with multimodal ways to connect with audiences beyond the academy who cared about Austen, literature, women, history, and books. (I'm still experimenting.)

To gauge whether I was hitting the mark, I sought out nonacademic readers and listeners as ad hoc peer reviewers of my book manuscript. I asked, or paid attention to, where I was keeping their attention or losing them. It helped that I was working with strange-but-true stories, including that of George Pellew, the late-nineteenth-century Harvard student who published the first known Austen "dissertation" in 1883. That fact had long been repeated. What hadn't been previously told was that Pellew, who died young, was said to have come back from the dead. The famous medium who allegedly channeled his spirit was even once quizzed about Jane Austen by Pellew's former Harvard professors. It would have been criminally wrong to retell Pellew's Austen dissertation story without a lighter touch or by using distancing words like "cometh" and "passeth."

For me, these methods and findings led to the (all-too-obvious) theory. Repeatedly producing and consuming scholar-facing scholarship may also be a recipe for replicating limited, mistaken ideas. Some academics may think we're "dumbing down" scholarly research when we "go public." On the contrary, I'd suggest we're sometimes dumbing ourselves down (or propping ourselves up?) with insufficiently diverse and equitable ideas when we repeatedly, exclusively speak to other scholars. That's how we'd missed for so long, for example, the fact that queer-adapted Austen texts and performances were alive and well in the 1860s, 1890s, and 1930s. We didn't need queer theory of the 1990s to "invent" that history, even if the theoretical terms helped scholars like me recognize historical evidence of it (Looser, "Queering").

Despite my privileges in gaining access, I encountered plenty of obstacles in the archives. One library I visited limited scholars to fifty photocopies per year, with no personal photography allowed. Another brought scholars just one object at a time, with a frustratingly slow request and retrieval process. It meant I might see half a dozen things in a day from a collection of hundreds of objects. Unfortunately, I didn't have months to spend there. Such constraints may arise out of security concerns or lamentable shortages in staffing, but they're also realities of the archival research process. A responsible theory and practice of public humanities in the archive should seek greater transparency about research time, costs, and challenges. We ought to pull back the curtain to tell harder archival truths of all kinds to the public. The future of archives depends on greater public understanding about their value and limitations. Theories of work in the archive need to be recast as stories, too, in public humanities modes.

My experience with the book on Austen's reception meant that, when I returned to a

long-simmering biographical project, I was determined to write it as narrative nonfiction, with endnotes that allowed the tracing of my archival tracks. *Sister Novelists* is a dual biography of two once-famous, long-forgotten, and pioneering historical-novelist sisters, Jane Porter (1775–1850) and Anna Maria Porter (1778–1832). The biography draws on some seven thousand unpublished Porter-related items in three archives in the United States. It tells the story of how these remarkable letters came down to us—or, rather, for a long time, failed to—and how that had an impact on the Porters' losing their stature in literary history.

I wanted readers to have a glimpse of the intensive research process involved, so I began the book with a story of working in the archives, and I dedicated the biography to the librarians, archivists, and collectors who make the stories possible. By the time *Sister Novelists* was completed, I'd forged partnerships with librarians, curators, archivists, and catalogers who guided me and, in pandemic circumstances, went to great lengths to provide virtual and digital access. I wanted readers to have a bird's-eye view into the collaborative nature of archival research.

Another aim of the book was for the Porters to be returned to a more prominent place in literary history, which I believe they deserve. To try to realize that hope, I decided to take the case directly to readers outside the academy, not only to scholars. It was my previous work on Austen's legacy that led me to consider the importance of letting popular and scholarly audiences alike have the chance to reconsider the story of the Porters. The jury is out on whether that appeal to the public was an effective research strategy. What's clear to me from the experience is that more of us archival scholars might reimagine our collective responsibilities to public audiences and to our research subjects at the same time.

Of course, creating the conditions for succeeding in that work isn't just up to the individual scholar. It's also up to institutions that employ many of us and support academic research. Understandable concerns have been raised about public humanities scholarship's impact on a career path. We need changed policies to ensure that administrators and external reviewers don't punish archival scholars for public-facing work (Stein and Daniels 5). We need more professional organizations to make it clear that accessible public humanities research may also be valued for excellence or at least that it will no longer be devalued because it may not initially have gone through traditional peer review. More statements and initiatives, modeled on the MLA's *Guidelines for Evaluating Publicly Engaged Humanities Scholarship in Language and Literature Programs* (MLA Ad Hoc Committee) and Public Humanities Incubator Program ("MLA Public Humanities Incubator"), are needed.

So is more dedicated funding for producing public-facing archival work. The NEH has led the way, operating its Public Scholar Award since 2015. (I was an NEH Public Scholar in 2018, in support of *Sister Novelists*.) In its current iteration, it supports experienced authors, encouraging "academic writers in the humanities to communicate the significance of their research to the broadest possible range of readers" ("Public Scholars"). To date, few other fellowship programs have followed the lead of the NEH. Most archival funding continues to go to scholars proposing scholar-facing projects. Because fellowship selection committees are often made up of those who've previously received funding, it's hardly a recipe for innovation.

There's no question that academic publishers would like scholars to move more quickly in the direction of producing public-facing books. In 2023, I attended a session titled What Editors Want at the Biographers International Organization conference. One university press editor admitted that, because the academic library market has collapsed for monographs, he was acquiring well-researched nonfiction books only if they were also accessibly written and deliberately public-facing. University presses may end up being the main drivers of change in archival humanities scholarship.

Or perhaps more archival humanities scholars will recognize that speaking primarily to other scholars is damaging to efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, regardless of any merits of content. Scholar-facing work has traditionally

been seen as more excellent, because it supposedly demonstrates greater intellectual heft—best read by the most expert and fit audiences, though few. But shouldn't we turn this thinking on its head? Scholar-facing writing might instead be seen as less excellent, because it severely limits the potential audience for and impact of its findings. It also seems to take unwarranted pride in its exclusionary argot.

I want to be clear: I'm not advocating for doing away with scholar-facing, peer-reviewed scholarship. That would make no sense. It serves a purpose. This essay, after all, is scholar-facing, peer-reviewed work. Ideally, however, archival humanities research would strive for outcomes that are both-and, not either-or. Most of its findings would prompt the production of both scholar-facing and public-facing outputs (Looser, "Necessity").

For myself, I'm happy to declare an intention to set aside writing books pitched only to other scholars. I anticipate writing archivally researched nonfiction for readers who won't need a PhD to grasp what's going on in the book's pages. When I'm questioning the questions, or redescribing things by enumerating what they're not, however, I'll continue to turn to our invaluable, refereed, scholar-facing journals, where issues of theory and methodology rightly drive conversations. At present, we need more scholarly journals (like this one) to regularly devote space to public humanities as a subject and a practice. It may help undo some of the damage that's been wrought by generations of echo-chamber scholarship. It could also strengthen the humanities within the academy, just as it promises to do beyond it.

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