

Discussion questions by category | September 21, 2010
Archival research methods

Topics:

- Concerns with the incomplete nature of archives/nature of texts
- Concerns with researchers usurping archived texts and how the texts are acquired
- Concerns with nature and origins of archived material
- Methodologies for approaching archives
- How are archives useful in literary studies?
- Concerns with the content, style, approach of either article
- Gender and coal mining
- Reading one text to inform the other
- Applications to electronic archives

Concerns with the incomplete nature of archives/nature of texts

1. In Carolyn Steedman’s article on archival methods, she states that “in the archive, you are reading for what is not there, as well as what is” (25). With the idea that researchers are mentally filling in the historical blanks in mind, just how reliable are historical narratives? To what degree researchers’ culture, gender, and/or race affect their narrative portrayals of historical events? In what ways do their subjective finished products contribute to the idea that we can never truly know history?

2. Before I dive into an archive I want to be able to evaluate it. Steedman is good enough in her article to give some questions that might be of help such as “What is it? Who made it? And for what purpose?” which are all good questions but the problem is that she does not provide the reader with concrete methods of answering these questions. She also states that when you are in an archive “you are reading for what is not there, as well as what is” so the question becomes if this is information that no one has ever been through and studied before how does one go about validating the material (Steedman 25)?

3. "Not everything that happened was seen; not everything seen was remembered; not everything remembered was written down; not everything written down was preserved; not everything preserved was found; and not everything found was without man's bias." This article reminded me of this, mainly because I could not get past the published/unpublished autobiographies. Someone made the decision to deem one autobiography "better" than another. Therefore, when using such tools for research—within archives, could one’s research be deemed facetious because one uses unpublished material? In comparison, if someone was doing research on Christ, and he used the Bible but also used the book of Thomas, which was found heretical by the Church, most theologians would say that his work was inaccurate and far-fetched.

4. Apart from having a little difficulty with Steedman's writing style she made several points that I thought were interesting or certainly worth exploring more in depth. The main one was that the archive is as much about what is there as is not there. "...you are reading for what is not there," (25) and "And all reading and writing in the archive has to be done with the knowledge of what is not there—that these are tiny pieces of flotsam, floating on the great dark limitless river of Everything." (26) The last is a little over dramatic but my concern lies in the method for how one figures out what is NOT there. Steedman, mentions the problem but not the fix or if there even is a "fix" or not. Is what is not there always a supposition or can we find something more concrete than that?
How do we figure out what is not there? Aside from stumbling upon something, there must be a methodology of figuring out what is missing and how to find it (or at least record what is no longer available so the missing can give some sense of scale to what is not missing).

Concerns with researchers usurping archived texts and how the texts are acquired

1. Steedman talks about how the historian dives “in the archive, in the silence we can make speak,” but she does not discuss the way in which one should share information that allows the text to speak instead of the historian speaking for the text (22). She romanticizes the relationship between the archives and the historian and says, that the past does not live in the “flotsam” one finds in the archive but “in the head of the historian” (23). Arguably, yes, the interpretation of history can be as subjective as reading literature, but she does not delineate the line between revealing a hidden archival text and appropriating it. My question is how does one represent the text in a manner that allows the text to speak for itself? Would that be accomplished by treating texts the same way I treat literature?

2. It never occurred to me that there was a way to research unpublished literary works. This article really made me want to do archival research. Keith Gildart discovered so much of the coal miners' lifestyle, ways of entertainment and families. My question is, how are items like these brought into archives? Are the coal miners' living families willing to donate them? Do the families get paid for them?

Concerns with nature and origins of archived material

1. Gildart remarks that the challenge for historians reading the autobiographies of miners lies in finding “the moment” when myths merged with reality (155). Oftentimes, the genre of autobiography includes elements of fiction, and so I wonder about the special challenges of reading archives of autobiographies as opposed to archives of informational documents, such as birth records. Reading autobiographies pose the challenge of separating fact from fiction, and perhaps the information from them could be unreliable. Does that matter considering that the perspective from them gives present day readers insight into the lives of past people? Then, does reading autobiographies relate more to cultural studies than to history?

2. What was gained from not making a strict guideline for the autobiographies? It would seem easier to get a more accurate picture of the time if everyone was writing about a similar time span instead of some writing about singular incidents while others write about their entire life as a miner.

3. Oral histories are recorded by professionals who are trained to ask the right questions. Should the same strategy have been used in order to obtain a complete representation of the lives of the miners? In other words, should someone else have written their autobiographies based on specific questions?

Methodologies for approaching archives

1. "The brittleness of trade union solidarity is exposed throughout the texts, which leads on to question the utility of the focus of earlier, largely one-dimensional characterisations of coal miners." Is it truly a question of "utility" or was union involvement merely not relevant for THESE miners in North Wales? Doesn’t emphasizing a more New Historical reading of such accounts change the whole picture in and of itself?

2. In "Archival Methods," Steedman doesn’t give an explicit set of instructions for reading and writing in the archive. What she does manage to illustrate is the perspective a researcher can operate through when negotiating the chasms of things not there. Of particular interest, in only to me, is the
articulation of the "purloined letter." For Steedman, the "purloined letter stands in for anything you might be reading" (25) in the archive, and exemplifies the connection between the epistolary and the erotic. Research in archives leads the scholar to an exciting dynamic in which they are reading something which was not intended for them --there is an intrusion, on our part, that the document’s writer did not, could not, account for. At this point, I’d like our class to analyze how this idea is informed, and informs, genre theory as we discussed it earlier. Steedman says that we are to read in the archive with the understanding that the document at hand was not intended for our eyes. With this in mind, should we approach texts in an archive from a genre theory bent?

**How are archives useful in literary studies?**

1. Gildart's article builds his argument with lots of Historiographical arguments in mind. While reading this article, I couldn't help but think that this was more like the articles I read for three years in History classes. I would like to know how archival research could help me when researching literary arguments. Are their papers within literary studies that draw heavily on archival research? How could I effectively use archival research as a research tool in English?

**Concerns with the content, style, approach of either article**

1. Most of the methods we have studied so far give their readers a fairly clear perception of how to use that particular technique, except for this week's Archival Method. It seems like she skirts around how to actually use archives to a researchers advantage, instead she seem to talk more about the idea of a archive and what it is like to be a part of the archive. Why does she do this? Is it an osmosis process that we should just understand?

2. Although the essay is entitled "Archival Methods," does the author show any scientific methodology to this kind of research? If several historians went to the same archives with the same questions, would they find the same results?

3. In this chapter, Steedman talks about “Archival Methods” as if she is teaching a course on it. She gives numerous books and a brief paragraph about how each of those books contributes a theory or a story about going through archives. However, there are only two pages (pages 24 and 26) where I read information about what it is really like when one goes into one of these record offices. Having some theories about how to research and how it is romanticized by these scholars is good to know, but wouldn’t a more hands on approach be more helpful? Also, since so many things are being added to the internet, why wouldn’t she mention that in her chapter?

4. This article examines the different ways in which the unpublished autobiographies of miners differentiates with the historical view that people have about coal miners. With all the differences, I can’t help but wonder what underlying point she is trying to make about doing archival research. Is she saying that it alone cannot be trusted? Is she saying that it just presents the most common outcomes and ways of thinking? Is she saying that one can never get the full picture of what happened in the past? In Steedman’s chapter she said that one always has to look for the holes in the research, but it didn’t seem like the findings in this article presented the holes. It seemed like it presented a whole other side to this story.

**Gender and coal mining**

1. Keith Gildart discusses the roles and perceptions of women in his article using the information he gathered from unpublished male accounts of coal miners. As a result, women do not get to speak about their own experiences in his piece; men do it for them. Is there a reason that Gildart didn’t draw from the women’s own personal experiences of life in mining communities? Have women who were associated with the mining world that he focused on (New South Wales) ever written
autobiographical accounts of their lives, and if so, how do their accounts affect the characterizations of male coal miners?

2. This article examines the different ways in which the unpublished autobiographies of miners differentiates with the historical view that people have about coal miners. With all the differences, I can’t help but wonder what underlying point she is trying to make about doing archival research. Is she saying that it alone cannot be trusted? Is she saying that it just presents the most common outcomes and ways of thinking? Is she saying that one can never get the full picture of what happened in the past? In Steedman’s chapter she said that one always has to look for the holes in the research, but it didn’t seem like the findings in this article presented the holes. It seemed like it presented a whole other side to this story.

Reading one text to inform the other

1. Steedman states, "You are reading for what is not there, as well as what is." She does not explain what she means by this statement and continues to talk romantically about the archive. Could an example of what is not there be found in Gildart's article when he does not find certain thinks within miner's autobiographies i.e. stereotypical conceptions of the miner?

2. I found the Gildart article very interesting in that the discovery and reading of a set of unpublished autobiographies led the author to information that should change the view of the myth of the miner at least to some extent. I also think it is interesting in light of what I was looking for from Steedman. (He even mentions her but in a different light) Gildart does talk about what might not be there. In fact I think the whole article maintains that the traditional view of the miner, the myth of the miner, is from the labour histories. The eighteen un publishes autobiographies are a small archive that suggest that the labour histories are incomplete. They suggest what is not there. So my question is this, how much of myth, of history, is intentioned leaving out of an archive and how much just happens? And to go along with that, what is it about us humans that we prefer myth, or so it seems? Because Steedman suggest that another part of us longs to uncover the lost unknown archive that might debunk the myth.

Applications to electronic archives

1. Archival research requires much prior preparation, a thorough thought-process before, during and after the research, and a precise ritual. The outcome is very revealing and informative. As demonstrated by Griffin, the researcher will learn a lot from what (s)he finds and what (s)he is unable to find. Since every form of communication was delivered on paper, then much about the personal thoughts and lives of historical figures, famous or not, can be discovered. However, with advancements in technology, these discoveries will be lost. Personal thoughts will be lost in emails and instant messages. I wonder if there is an online method for archiving public networks like Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, blogs, etc.

2. This article refers to the historical fallacy as expressed by Dewey and expresses a rather romantic (author’s words) view of archival research. How does our own research into electronic archives differ from this grand romantic vision? Are we capable of seeing an even larger version of the "Great Story"?