

Global histories

a student
journal

**Conference Review: Unwieldy Archives: The Past, Narratives, & History University of Toronto,
May 2019**

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2019.345>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 5, No. 2 (November 2019), pp. 176-180.
ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:

'Global Histories: A Student Journal' is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. 'Global Histories' is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

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

reviewed by

MARY WALLE

INTRODUCTION

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

PANELS & CONFERENCE KEYNOTE

The opening panel took up questions of archives in relationship to the production of history. The papers—presented by Virginia Grimaldi of York University, Perri Pyle

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

Further panels returned

1 Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 87-109.

to these themes in different temporalities and geographies from the ‘pre-modern’ to working with internet archives of the 1990-2000s. Moreover, they expanded on questions of counter-archives and questioning what is an archive? The conference brought together a variety of disciplines and graduate students at various places in their research. Each panel of graduate students was commented on by a faculty “discussant” who was responsible for commenting on the work as a whole and then presenting initial questions for consideration. While most faculty took the opportunity to keep the attention focused on the graduate students work, offering critical but supportive feedback and questions to begin the discussion period, a few faculty unfortunately took the opportunity to re-center themselves, taking up far too much of the allotted discussion time for their own thoughts and stifling the conversation rather than invigorating it.

Though the presenters were primarily historians, a variety of other disciplines were represented in the presentations and discussions including: literary studies and archival studies. Perri Pyle a presenter completing her M.A. in History & Archival Studies, remarked how refreshing it was to be amongst historians “thinking archivally.” As a history-archivist in training she exists in the often too wide divide between “archivists” and “historians.” Rather than the intersection that she sees it as, she’s experienced her M.A. as

operating in a grey zone between two disciplines—that in her view and for those at this conference—ought to be in closer communication and collaboration.

Finally, the Keynote address—“Thinking Archivally”—by Kirsten Weld (Harvard University) took the participants both a step back to assess a so-called “archival turn” in the social sciences and humanities, in order to ask: has this actually changed the way that historians go about their/our work? Reflecting back to her own experience writing her dissertation which became her first monograph *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, she recalled the intense push back that her adviser gave her when she wanted to analyze the archives themselves rather than merely culling them for ‘virgin knowledge.’ Though the doors for historians to analyze “archives as subject” and not just use them as sources have been opened, the “hangovers” of the modern historical discipline’s nineteenth century origins most often still keep historians, according to Weld, “archivally bound.”

(CRITICAL) PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

At the onset of the conference, the opening of the Scholar Roundtable, and more than one paper—presenters and moderators began with a thoughtful Land Acknowledgements. Questions of archives cannot be disentangled

from questions of colonialism and in the North American context, settler-colonialism. It was fitting then for the coordinating team to begin with a thoughtful Land Acknowledgement, which is “a formal statement that recognizes the unique and enduring relationship that exists between Indigenous Peoples and their traditional territories.”² Though Land Acknowledgements have gained traction in academic settings, one must be conscientious of their performativity without substance.³ As Eve Tuck and KW Yang argue, Land Acknowledgements can often become “moves to innocence, which problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity.”⁴ The Land Acknowledgement at the beginning of the public “Scholars Roundtable” in particular stressed that the acknowledgement itself was not an end but rather and necessarily a part of ongoing work and relationship building. However, no further space was given specifically toward these discussions and given the conference topic, that would have

been important work that could have been highlighted.

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

Coming from a Global History approach, the strong skew of North American institutional representation was disappointing. However, as a fellow graduate student conference organizer, I can appreciate the challenges of creating an accessible conference. The barriers for a graduate conference to recruit and make their conferences

2 “Know the Land Territories Campaign,” LSPIRG Creating Agents of Social Change, October 29, 2019. <http://www.lspirg.org/knowtheland>

3 Some academic institutions now have begun publishing Land Acknowledgement Guides. See for example two North American examples: “Land Acknowledgement,” Indigenous University of Toronto, October 29, 2019. <https://indigenous.utoronto.ca/about/land-acknowledgement/>; “Guide to Indigenous Land Acknowledgement and Territorial Acknowledgements for Cultural Institutions,” October 29, 2019. <http://landacknowledgements.org/>.

4 Eve Tuck and Yang K. Wayne, “Decolonization Is Not A Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.

accessible across geographies are numerous; namely, providing financial support and visa application advising. Lacking both of these, the turn out of Canadians, U.S. citizens, and E.U. citizens was to be expected. Nonetheless, this was a missed opportunity because the questions of “unwieldy” archives cross borders. However, the research papers presented covered a wide geographic scope while taking up questions of archive, history, and power in a variety of ways.

CONCLUSION

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