

## EDITORIAL

### Literary archives, materiality and the digital

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In the field of literary studies, critical engagement with the materiality of archived artefacts has been rather limited and, as Johanna Drucker observes, ‘locked in a peculiar straight-jacket literalism’ characterised by ‘little actual skill in the undertaking’.<sup>1</sup> The advent of the digital and the debates concerning the material status of digitised and born-digital collections, however, have brought a new intensity to reflections on the materially embodied status of traditional archival collections. Indeed, as various contributors to this special issue demonstrate, the arrival of digital technologies has provided a unique vantage point from which to theorise materiality anew and to address questions that were inadequately explored or unsuccessfully resolved in relation to traditional analogue sources and that we now recognise persist in relation to digital forms and formats. That is to say, these technologies have highlighted the assumptions and blind spots that have structured our existing practices and paradigms, pushing us to a fuller recognition, for example, of the relationship between matter and meaning and about the difference a specific medium makes. This is what Katherine Hayles identifies as the ‘something gained’<sup>2</sup> in an area of discussion often characterised by anxious discourses of ‘loss’. Thus, we have begun to understand how archived paper fonds – or individual documents – might be understood to do things or perform in ways that the digitised or born-digital cannot, and vice versa. This distinction, in turn, has generated novel research questions about how we work with such artefacts.

The articles in this issue take up some of these questions, as they invite several others: how might the availability or otherwise of digital surrogates transform the conditions of scholarly engagement for specific literary holdings? Do different modes of material instantiation produce different objects of study? Do these objects demand different (and possibly new) methods? How might specific digital endeavours better meet the needs and expectations of literary researchers? Why choose *not* to digitise? These are just some of the provocations offered by authors in this special issue. The inspiration for the issue came from the inaugural meeting of the Archive Futures Research Network at the Grande Bibliothèque in Montreal in June 2013. That gathering brought archivists and information science specialists together with humanities researchers to track some of the new conversations taking place around materiality and method in the context of the increasingly digitally mediated nature of archives, archiving and archive-based humanities research. Although participants recognised the major shifts that digital innovations are producing in the conceptual and practical dimensions of building and maintaining literary archives and in the forms of research conducted within and around them, they were keen to explore these issues on a less macro and more granular level so as to tease out how such shifts organise specific inquiries and interventions. What follows from this is a series of articles that join the practical and speculative in useful and occasionally provocative ways.

Critical to the articles in this special issue is a recognition that the digital environment researchers and archivists are confronting not only radically transforms the very ‘stuff’ we study or otherwise work with, but also radically revises familiar knowledge-making practices. At the same time, we are also witnessing the emptying-out of common distinctions and a convergence of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of our engagements with archived and archivable materials. This process of defamiliarisation is explored in Hannah McGregor’s essay in this issue, which reflects on her contribution to the collaborative digitisation of *The Western Home Monthly* (1899–1932), a Winnipeg-based middlebrow magazine. Digitisation, as McGregor emphasises, materially reorganises the periodical and in the process reshapes periodical studies. It throws into relief ‘how magazines function as media’ and offers altogether new – and ultimately more appropriate – reading strategies. Rejecting the fantasy of transparency, McGregor concludes that the digital does not simply preserve and distribute, but rather offers a ‘creative and critical intervention into the scholar’s understanding of the archive’. The revelatory potential of the digital as a research environment is also stressed by Mark Byron, who examines modernist poet Ezra Pound’s engagement with medieval manuscript forms: these forms are characterised by ‘variegated and discontinuous text surfaces mediated by glosses and annotations’. Byron highlights the way the most basic digital textual forms emulate these venerable textual features half-forgotten outside of Medieval Studies and thus can be surprisingly well suited to revealing how ‘material forms of inscription directly shape the identity and meaning of texts’.

Digital information environments are routinely celebrated for their potential to open up research opportunities by providing improved access and by ‘freeing [the physical object] from the shackles tying it to one place’.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as Canadian archivist Ala Rekrut observes, questions of trustworthiness and authenticity have featured strongly in discussions of how researchers respond to digital surrogates. A long-time advocate of the need for cultivating ‘material literacy’<sup>4</sup> or sensitivity to the ‘materials that constitute and support the written text or images’, Rekrut tackles the issue of how the materially embodied nature of original materials might be better recognised in the digital representation of analogue records and featured more prominently in how the integrity of such representations is understood and guaranteed. At stake here, as Rekrut stresses, is the issue of how different instantiations of records ‘shape both the questions that can be asked of the records and the stories they can tell’. This point resonates with Katherine Biber, who interrogates the evidentiary status of a prison diary created during the incarceration of Jimmy Governor, Australia’s ‘last proclaimed outlaw’ and the historical figure behind the fictional creation Jimmy Blacksmith.<sup>5</sup> More familiar to us as a literary genre, the conditions of its composition, circulation and preservation define and classify this diary differently: as a legal artefact and an atypical trace of a very particular system of colonial administration, surveillance and recordkeeping. Biber seeks to understand the ‘career’ of this document and its law-making potential, at the same time as marking out how her engagements with this ‘small bound volume’ are troubled and reorganised by its shifting iterations across microfilm, photocopies and ultimately researcher-generated digital images.

Not all of the articles in this special issue offer analyses of specific digital initiatives: instead, several reflect on the persistence of the more familiar paper formats and seek to highlight the unique capacities of those formats in the face of what often appears as the inevitability of digitisation. In ‘Beyond Digitisation’, Kate Eichhorn examines three instances of contemporary feminist collections for which decisions were made not to embrace digitisation projects, although funds were potentially available and

the collections likely to be in demand. Eichhorn analyses how digitisation may indeed be less of a priority when a collection is defined by its specific materiality (as in the case of photocopied and handmade ‘zines’) or when substantial political and symbolic capital is bound up in a collection’s exclusive availability in a particular physical repository. While concerns are sometimes expressed as to the future ontological status of collections that are not digitised, Eichhorn makes clear that this is not necessarily the only or best means by which particular collections may become known or knowable. In a similar manner, Maryanne Dever takes up the question of why some researchers might continue to work with original materials rather than digital surrogates and investigates what a focus on materiality may offer that more conventional approaches to archived literary papers cannot. Via an analysis of the literary papers of Australian writer Eve Langley in which she pays due attention to paper’s under-explored potential, Dever argues not only for a rereading of Langley’s creativity, but also for acknowledgement of paper’s presence as an integral dimension of the experience of ‘working in the archive’.

Our reflections conclude with a contribution by archivist David Sutton based on his keynote address delivered on the occasion of the 50th birthday of Yale University’s celebrated Beinecke Library in 2013. Sutton examines the unique status of modern literary manuscripts and the issues that attach to their preservation in dispersed locations, before speculating on ‘twenty-first-century literary manuscripts’. He highlights the preservation challenges that currently attach to hybrid and born-digital literary collections and how little we know as yet about their users and potential users. He concludes by affirming that ‘literary manuscripts have a fascinating and exciting future’ and, at the same time, speculates that ‘the status and nature of literary manuscripts 10 years hence is probably more uncertain than for any 10-year period since 1700’.

This special issue’s themes receive further attention in a series of reviews of recently published works, including the long-awaited translation of Arlette Farge’s phenomenological account of archival practice, *Le Gout de l’Archive*. First published in 1989, Farge’s study naturally pre-dates the emergence of the digital technologies that preoccupy most of the contributors here and yet her unusual attention to the experience of ‘being in the archive’ connects to new considerations of the embodied nature of archival work and the material conditions of such work. Interestingly, as Marguerite Deslauriers observes in her review, the English title *The Allure of the Archives* fails to capture the full sense of the original title, which ‘refers both to a taste *of* the archive, and a taste *for* the archive’. Gill Partington’s review of the edited volume *Libraries, Literatures and Archives* provides a useful analysis of the difficulties and challenges that accompany the increasingly interesting if testing project of bringing contemporary critical theory into some form of productive dialogue with ‘the practice-based knowledge of Library and Information Science’. The reviews section also highlights important new publications from Jerome McGann, Kate Eichhorn and Lisa Gitelman on the role of the digital in remaking the Humanities, on archiving activism and on the media history of paperwork respectively.

### Endnotes

1. Johanna Drucker, ‘Entity to Event: From Literal, Mechanistic Materiality to Probabilistic Materiality’, *Parallax*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2009, p. 7.
2. N Katherine Hayles, ‘Translating Media: Why We Should Rethink Textuality’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2003, p. 263.

3. Jon Rimmer, Claire Warwick, Ann Blandford, Jeremy Gow and George Buchanan, 'An Examination of the Physical and the Digital Qualities of Humanities Research', *Information Processing and Management*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2008, p. 1377.
4. Ala Rekrut, 'Material Literacy: Reading Records as Material Culture', *Archivaria*, vol. 60, Fall 2005, pp. 11–37.
5. Thomas Keneally, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1972 and *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, Fred Schepisi (dir.), 1978.