

Archival Methods in Auto/biographical Research

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This chapter draws on my research in the Archives and Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library (NYPL). This involved me working with auto/biographical documents of women trade unionists in the garment industry in the first half of the twentieth century, and more particularly with the papers of Rose Pesotta (1896-1965) and Fannia Cohn (1885-1962), two of the very few women vice-presidents in the history of a predominantly women's union, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). Among the many themes that have arisen from my research and which have informed a range of conference papers, methodology workshops, journal articles and books, in this chapter I explore auto/biographical paths within the archive, something which informs all my work on this project. The chapter unfolds in three moves: imaging, living and writing the archive.

Imagining the Archive

The questions we carry with us into an archive are important because they will have shaped the preparatory work we have done for the research, which is both theoretical and practical. It is the time before the researcher arrives at the archive that I want to consider here, by raising a seemingly simple question: when does archival work begin? Looking back at my journeys in a number of archives in the UK, France and the USA where I have conducted research over the past twenty years, one of the patterns I can discern is that of multiple beginnings. Following a research question and immersing ourselves in the relevant literature is of course a recurrent mode of tracking and identifying archival sources, but it is only one of many. Sometimes beginnings emerge while we already work in an archive and we encounter a line of writing, a document, a person or a source that we want to trace further. But even when such new beginnings emerge in the middle of a process, they still demand planning and preparation to be realised as concrete archival projects.

Archival research is a process that is conceived as part of a wider research project, but which develops its own life, puts forward its own demands and requires specific responses to the questions and problems it raises. The latter are both intellectual and material and always interrelated as such. The material conditions of possibility for archival research always include intricate space/time arrangements, both local and global. Take for example my NYPL project on the papers of women trade-unionists. This started through my reading of autobiographical documents of seamstresses in the first half of the twentieth century; Rose Pesotta emerged as an intriguing figure in this body of literature, and this is how I decided to follow her in the archive. The only way I could have access to her papers was physically to visit the New York Public Library; but in order to secure funding, I had to make sure that her papers were not available in any digitised or other form that would be accessible in different and possibly cheaper ways.

But once in the archive and new beginnings emerge, around people, documents and sources that had not been thought about when designing the research. In my case with Pesotta's papers, two new projects erupted from the archive: a) the importance of women workers' education, a theme that made me return to the NYPL the following year to work with Fannia Cohn's papers; and b) Pesotta's epistolary friendship with Emma Goldman through her involvement in the anarchist labour movement, something that sent me to Emma Goldman's papers at Berkeley the following year as well (Tamboukou, Good night and good-bye).

Living the archive: space/time/matter rhythms

No matter how well we have prepared, once we find ourselves in an archive, we have to adapt to new conditions and contexts, synchronise ourselves with its space/time rhythms, and in this way become organically entangled in it. It should be remembered here that archives and libraries are powerful power/knowledge institutions and like other organisations impose strict time/space restrictions and regulations. Over the years I have worked in archives, I have understood that allowing myself time to get to know these rules and adapt to different archive systems, as well as to the diverse rules and regulations prevailing, is as important as finding, reading or transcribing documents. In this light, 'start slowly' would be my suggestion for researchers visiting an archive for the first time. But as the research proceeds, we also have to take into consideration that speediness and slowness should be considered in their interrelation, for archival research is a question of rhythm, and it is the depth of the understandings that result that we are primarily interested in.

What is also important to bear in mind is that researchers need not upset the archivists they will need to work with. The archive is their workplace, while we researchers will only temporarily reside there. In this light, a researcher cannot just storm an archive and do things instantly from the beginning, no matter how experienced, well-published or famous they are.

It is also worth remembering that a researcher's relationship with archivists may continue well after leaving the archive in question. They are the people we may need to contact for additional or missing information, or if more photocopies are needed, for instance. It is these archivists who will also facilitate permission to reproduce and other copyright processes when the stage of publishing research outputs is reached. Archivists are thus importantly involved in the whole research process and acknowledging their contribution should be part of archival research ethics more widely.

In raising these concerns, my point is that the materiality and sociality of the archive is crucial for the entire research process and that as researchers we should not separate the physical, social and intellectual dimensions of the archival research we carry out. But what does it mean to become organically involved in an archive? I address this question by drawing on Henri Lefebvre's ideas about the 'rhythmanalysis' of different spaces.

'What we live are rhythms, rhythms experienced subjectively', Lefebvre wrote in his major work, *The Production of Space* (206). But it was only at the end of his academic life, when perhaps he had more time to

indulge his love for music (being a pianist as well as an intellectual and activist) that he wrote a small book on *Rhythmanalysis*.

In following Lefebvre's method of rhythmanalysis, I have this considered space/time rhythms as constitutive of archival practices and therefore of the knowledges that can derive from archival research. An archive is a dynamic space traversed and indeed constituted by multiple rhythms and is thus open to new ideas and encounters. Moreover, an archive is not restricted within buildings or other architectural arrangements, majestic though some of them might be. Conceived as an entanglement of space/time rhythms, the archive extends into the world, both in terms of its immediate locality as well as with reference to its global position in colonial histories, as influentially discussed by Ann Stoler. (*Along the Archival Grain*)

During the summer of my research in the NYPL, I followed the rhythms of New York, a city that was the hub of the US garment industry in the first half of the twentieth century. Living in the 'fashion district' of middle Manhattan and walking up and down streets still full of garment workshops was thus a spatial experience that was entangled in the daily rhythms of my archival understanding. Indeed, spatial and temporal serendipities had an unexpected impact on my research. When I went to New York in summer 2011, I chose my accommodation in the 'fashion district': it was within walking distance from the NYPL and it felt comfortable as I had not lived in New York before. It was quite accidentally that my visit in 2011 coincided with the centenary commemoration of the *Triangle Fire*, one of the most tragic events in the history of the garment industry in the US, when 146 young immigrant women garment workers died while trying to escape the burning building wherein they were locked (see Stein). Reading women's immediate impressions of this event in their letters was thus a moving experience framed within different temporalities: 'I suppose you are still waiting for the letter of which I spoke to you in my card of last week yet. I could not write, I could not do anything for the last two or three weeks, the Triangle tragedy had a terrible affect upon me', Pauline Newman (1887-1986) wrote to her friend Rose Schneiderman (1882-1972) on 12 April 1911, just a month after the disaster. (Rose Schneiderman Papers) For Cohn, the Triangle Fire was not just a shock, but also a turning point in her life, as she wrote in an autobiographical letter to a friend much later in her life. (see Tamboukou *The Autobiographical you*, 271)

Reading these letters a hundred years later in the heart of a city that staged a series of mnemonic practices to remember these events, and also reflecting upon women's current position in the world of work, had a significant impact upon my own affective understanding in the archive. Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that a relation of contemporaneity allows historical time to unfold and disrupts 'the empty, secular and homogeneous time of history' (*Provincializing Europe*, 113). In this light, leaping into *Triangle Fire* times and places became a condition of possibility for a genealogical understanding of the hardships of women garment workers' lives. I read Pauline Newman's letters in the archives of the Tamiment Library, which is literally round the corner from the Triangle Fire Building, after having visited the exhibition that the students of New York University had co-curated as part of the commemoration events. This opened up a third space of understanding where 'time present and time past collapsed'

(Dinshaw, *Temporalities*, 121). Indeed, by reading letters written in different times - just after the event, as well as forty years later - by women who had witnessed it, and who had also worked to make it part of the history of political struggles around women's labour, made me feel like a body immersed in multiple and heterogeneous times.

Thus, during my research at the NYPL archives, my actuality as a researcher was becoming a blurring sensation of past and present images, spaces and times. This co-existence of different spacialities, temporalities and urban rhythms influenced my understanding, as well as my theoretical and methodological orientations within the archive. Attention to 'rhythmanalysis' places the researcher in the middle of his/her sense-data, thus challenging the distinction between subjects and objects of research, the world as it is and the world as we perceive it. As I have written elsewhere, archival research can be considered in parallel with the epistemological restrictions and limitations of any scientific experiment conducted within a laboratory, including acknowledging that the way an archival project is set up will effect its outcomes and findings (Tamboukou, *Archival Research*). It is while living/thinking in between other spaces and different temporalities and in the realm of the sociological imagination that ideas have emerged, themes have been followed, ideas have been coined, and also 'narrative personae' - that is, archival people, both real (as they did live) and imaginary (in terms of my internal conversations with them) have come to life.

Writing the archive: the narrative fabric of archival research

As researchers we become entangled in a web of archival stories, irrespective of whether we do narrative analysis or not with the documents we find in archives. In considering stories in the archive, we are of course mindful of Steedman's provocative warning that 'archives contain practically nothing, just disconnected fragments of documents and lists, collected for purposes forgotten or not to be known' (*Dust*, 18). Archival research is indeed a process of finding fragments and working with discontinuities. It is here, however, that narrativity becomes a way of assembling disparate and sometimes disconnected pieces and fragments into a design that has a meaning.

What I want to highlight in this section is the difficulty of grappling with 'the return from the archive'. There are many issues to consider about 'the return'. There is the question of how to manage the welter of archival data that the researcher comes back with. There is the problem of how to reconnect with the world left behind while in the archive, while retaining the memories, affective bonds and imaginary travels that were experienced while in the archives. And also there is the small detail of writing, of creating the publications that were promised to funders but are also important to the academic self you hopefully still inhabit. This is where the importance of narrative sensibility emerges: stories are traces of human existence and human actions, Hannah Arendt has famously suggested; without stories there is no history, it is through stories that we are entangled in the web of human relations. (*The Human Condition*) Drawing on the Arendtian take on narratives, I suggest that it is through narrativisation that we create meaning in archival research.

By way of conclusion

What I have tried to show throughout this chapter, is that space, time and matter are crucial not only in our understanding of how an archive becomes, but also in how the researcher and the archive create an assemblage that fuses divisions and separations between the subjects and objects of the research and further problematises a range of dualisms, such as mind/body, texts/readers, reason/experience, memory/imagination, reality/representation, in short, the world as it is and the world as we perceive it.

In drawing on my experience of working at the New York Public Library with the papers of women trade unionists in the garment industry, I have shown the more general applications of this approach. Also, throughout the chapter I have emphasised that archival research is always a situated process with emerging questions, problems and issues, and these need to be addressed and dealt with in an ongoing way. This multi-modality of engaging with and raising questions about the archive in itself creates an archive of methodological approaches that can be drawn upon, by always bending 'previous rules' and charting new paths.

What I therefore hope readers will gain from this chapter is an understanding of archival research as an entanglement of intellectual and material practices with multiple points of emergence, some unforeseen destinations, as well as a wide variation of flows and rhythms (see Moore et al., *The Archive Project*). In this light, being-in-the-archive is both a journey and an adventure that needs a map and a compass, but it will certainly also open up its own paths. I hope that some of the analytical trails and methodological moves suggested in this chapter will be helpful in orienting researchers in their archival journeys to come.

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