

Feeling narrative in the archive: the question of serendipity

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Abstract:

In this article I consider serendipity and chance in engaging with narratives in the archive. Why is it I ask that serendipity has become a *sine qua non* of archival research? Without downplaying the rarity and preciousness of chance, my argument is that we should not conflate the gift of the chance with the dim area of perceptive experience, which may or may not be conscious. In positing this argument I draw on Whitehead's philosophy: more particularly I consider the notion of prehensions in exploring a particular storyline from my own archival research with the papers of Jeanne Bouvier, a French trade unionist in the garment industry. In juxtaposing serendipity with the Whiteheadian lens of imaginative freedom, I chart storylines in the archive on a matrix of rhythmical vibrations and finally I consider narrative work through the synthetic activity of symbolic reference.

Keywords: archive, narrative, serendipity, prehension, rhythm, Whitehead

The ancient doctrine that 'no one crosses the same river twice is extended. No thinker thinks twice; and to put the matter more generally, no subject experiences twice. (Whitehead, 1985: 29)

Over the years that I have worked as a narrative researcher (see Tamboukou 2008) I have persistently defended the idea that a story never 'is', but always 'becomes'. It is not that we have, listen to or think of a story and then we tell it or write it; the story becomes in the process of being narrated; it further 'becomes' as we perceive it, although what we narrate or feel can never be the same story. In this light narrative researchers should be aware of the incompleteness of any storyline or narrative mode and take this incompleteness, the becoming of the story, not as a defect but as its actuality, as what it is, a process. Here again and given the centrality of the Aristotelian poetics in how we make sense of narratives, process should not be understood as a procession of forms—beginning, middle and end—but as 'forms of process' (Whitehead, 1968: 140). Moreover, it is not simply 'us' who are telling, writing, reading or listening to a story: 'we' become subjects as situated writers/readers/tellers/listeners within the premises of a story and when we move away, we 'become other'. The story, of course, or rather our feeling of it, becomes part of the storyworlds we emerge from, a component of our historicity and endurance, a memory trace that the past carries with it. But apart from anchoring us in the past, the story is also a vector of force that throws us into the future, encompassed in the unity of how we remember and recognise ourselves in the present, which is always already in transition, or what Alfred Whitehead calls, 'a passage' (1985: 178). It is in the passage of stories that I raise the central question that I will explore throughout the article: why has serendipity become a *sine qua non* of archival research?

In addressing this question my departure point is that there is neither a person, a narrator who tells or writes a story nor a listener or reader who follows it: the story is a component of an

assemblage within which both 'the subject' either as narrator or narratee, as well as the plot and the meaning of the story are mutually constituted through their relation and never independent of or outside it. Many of these suggestions are not new of course: we have a rich tradition in post-narratology that has troubled and problematised the text/reader relation. (see McQuillan, 2000) However, we should move beyond a merely dialogic pattern, important as such interventions have been in narrative analytics (Riessman, 2008). Even the much celebrated and indeed fruitful angle of the Bakhtinian dialogic imagination (Bakhtin, 1981) stands on the premises of pre-existing entities, be they the listener and the interviewee, the writer and the reader, the story, its plot and its characters. In moving us away from this, what I suggest is that stories should be considered within the actuality of 'prehensions', modes of grasping the world according to Whitehead (1968:151). This is an area that has yet to be explored although there have been some important interventions in theorising the materiality of stories, particularly in terms of spatial relations as well as in their entanglement with objects.¹ Still, such approaches presuppose the autonomous pre-existence of subjects, objects and or spaces and are deployed within the problematic area of what Whitehead has identified as 'the bifurcation of nature', that is 'the nature apprehended in awareness and the nature which is the cause of awareness' (Whitehead, 1964: 30). It is on stories in/as becoming that I focus in this article drawing on Whitehead, whose philosophy of organism has offered insights in how we can interrogate long-held presumptions about the world and our modes of thinking about it beyond a range of dualisms, such as objects/subjects, facts/values, individual/society, reason/experience and agency/structure that are still prevalent in social theory in general and narrative understanding in particular.²

The article unfolds in four parts: first I discuss the idea of narrative as process through the crucial notion of 'prehensions', then I experiment with the idea of feeling narrative in the archive, drawing on a particular event from my own research with the papers of a French woman trade unionist in the garment industry, third I consider the problem of serendipity, within Whitehead's concept of imaginative freedom and chart it on a map of rhythmical vibrations; finally I consider narrative work in the archive through the synthetic activity of symbolic reference. What I argue is that Whitehead's philosophy illuminates links between serendipity, memory, imagination and narrative understanding within the archive.

Narrative as process or the becoming of stories

'The actual world is a process and process is the becoming of actual entities' Whitehead has famously written in his major philosophical work *Process and Reality*. (1985: 22) Process is a fundamental fact of experience for Whitehead and 'involves the notion of a creative activity belonging to the very essence of each occasion' (1968: 151). Whitehead differentiates however his own approach to process from the long philosophical tradition of flows and fluxes that goes back to Heraclitus. There are two kinds of fluency for Whitehead: the fluency of becoming a particular existent, which he calls 'conrescence' and the fluency whereby an entity that has already become enters a process of new becomings —what he calls 'transition'. (1985: 210) In marking conrescence and transition as two kinds of fluency in the constitution of reality, Whitehead keeps flux and permanence together in his philosophy of the organism. As Steven Saviro has pithily pointed out, Whitehead's understanding of reality as process moves the analytical interest from the philosophical question of 'why is there something rather than nothing' to the more sociologically driven one of 'how is that there is always something new?' (2012, x)

Whitehead's way of looking at the 'how' of becomings goes through the work of 'prehensions', a notion he uses to denote understanding not necessarily linked to cognition: 'I will use the word prehension for uncognitive apprehension: apprehension that may or may not be cognitive' (1967a, 69). Prehensions for Whitehead are 'ways of grasping the world' (1968: 151); they are used to configure how an 'actual entity' becomes through the awareness, that is the feeling of its environment.³ In this light 'prehensions' in Whitehead's vocabulary could be rendered as feelings. However Whitehead's insistence to use 'prehensions' instead of 'feelings' derives from the fact that he wants to differentiate his approach from a subject-centred understanding of feelings. For Whitehead it is not subjects who have feelings, it is actually in the process of feeling the world that subjects as actual entities are being constituted. Whitehead actually draws on the experience of listening to music to give a concrete example of how prehensions work: 'consider the audition of sound' he writes, and 'to avoid unnecessary complexity, let the sound be one definite note. The audition of this note is a feeling' (1985: 234). We follow Whitehead's example to this point, often wondering about what is new in this exposition of listening to music as a feeling. But here comes the unexpected twist: although 'the feeling has first an auditor, who is the subject of the feeling', this subject only emerges through listening to this note, he or she is constituted through the experience of listening to this note of music and cannot be perceived independently of or outside this particular experience: 'the auditor would not be the auditor that he is apart from this feeling of his'. (1985: 234)

The example of listening to the note of music thus lucidly fleshes out Whitehead's argument 'that every prehension consists of three factors: (a) the 'subject' which is prehending, namely the actual entity in which that prehension is a concrete element; (b) the 'datum' which is prehended; (c) the 'subjective form' which is how that subject prehends that datum' (1985: 23). It is within this schema of prehensions that the three factors cannot be considered separately or as pre-existent, irrespective of their relations and entanglements. In this light there are no 'subjects' or 'objects' in Whitehead's philosophy of organism, which is what makes it distinctive in the philosophical tradition:

The philosophies of substance presuppose a subject which then encounters a datum, and then reacts to the datum. The philosophy of organism presupposes a datum which is met with feelings, and progressively attains the unity of a subject. But with this doctrine, 'superject' would be a better term than 'subject.' (Whitehead, 1985:155)

I think Whitehead's lucid example of the feeling of listening to a note of music can be very well transposed in what I want to call the plane of narrative as feeling. Here let's start with an actual archive event: feeling a story, or to become even simpler, just a storyline, which in my current research of reading letters and papers of women trade unionists (Tamboukou 2013, 2014b, 2015), is what I mostly do: 'I hear saying that women should stay at home [...] I have never stayed at home, I have no home. I could not have one as I had to earn my bread'⁴ (BHVP/AMB/FJB)

Taking a short extract from an archived newspaper article that Jeanne Bouvier⁵, a French seamstress and ardent trade-unionist, wrote in 1922 in response to her comrades in the labour movement who had argued that women should stay at home and make it a haven in the world of capitalist exploitation, I want to map it on the chart of Whitehead's schema of prehensions as already explicated above. In seeking for meaning, which is what narrative analysis is about, what we have here is 'the subject' who reads or rather becomes a reader through her involvement with 'the datum'. But how, one can ask, is it the case that the subject becomes a reader through her encounter with the story and that the story becomes meaningful through its encounter with the reader? We know very well that the researcher is already 'a reader' working at the archives of

the Historical Library of the City of Paris, with Jeanne Bouvier's papers.⁶ But the point to consider here is not that there are no readers as actual entities; as a matter of fact, the library is the place par excellence to be populated by readers. However we are not interested in the abstract notions of the reader that has already become or the story that has already been written. The point of the schema of prehensions is to understand the process through which both the reader and the story emerge, as intra-actively constituted within the boundaries of a particular archival research project, what I have elsewhere discussed as the 'narrative phenomenon'.⁷

In looking at the constitution of the reader I want to consider Henri Bergson's idea of 'trance reading': as Isabelle Stengers has pointed out, Bergson 'asks readers [...] to agree to slow down, to let oneself be penetrated by the words, to release the grip that makes us think we know what they mean' (2011: 62). It is in the process of slowing down that the reader 'becomes', by prehending elements in the story line that she had not thought about before. In doing this, she reemerges as a reader with new ideas about meanings that the storyline carries with it. In this case it is not just the reader who becomes other, but also the story: they both become through their entanglement and 'intra-actions'. (Barad, 2007) Echoing Whitehead's philosophy of process, reinforced by the advances of atomic physics in the last eighty years since *Process and Reality* was first published, Barad has introduced the neologism of 'intra-actions' as a theoretical juxtaposition to the usual notion of interactions: while interactions occur between already-established and separate entities, 'intra-actions' occur as relations between components. Entities – both human and non-human – actually emerge as an effect of these intra-actions, without having stable points or positions, an argument that I have developed in relation to archival research in a previous article in this journal. (see Tamboukou, 2014a)

It is in this light that we can perhaps see why or rather how amidst the pile of newspaper clips and articles that the researcher encountered on opening one of the many overflowing files comprising Bouvier's papers on her desk at the Parisian Library, she was drawn to this line, having eliminated or disregarded many others. 'We experience more than we can analyse', Whitehead has written in discussing different forms of process within the historic world. (1968: 89) Since Whitehead's image of the historic world includes amongst others, 'molecules, stones, lives of plants, lives of animals and lives of men' (1968:86), archives can safely be included and examined under this light. Thus, the reader's 'decision' to focus on one particular line, 'prehending' or 'feeling' its value⁸ and consequently being entangled in the nexus of its possible meanings, is a very good example of the constant interplay between negative and positive prehensions in Whitehead's philosophy:

There are two species of prehensions: (a) 'positive prehensions' which are termed 'feelings', and (b) negative prehensions, which are said to 'eliminate from feeling'. Negative prehensions also have subjective forms. A negative prehension holds its datum as inoperative in the progressive concrescence of prehensions constituting the unity of the subject. (Whitehead, 1985: 23-24)

It is in the interplay of positive and negative prehensions that we 'feel narratives' I suggest, that is to say, we are drawn to certain storylines, topics, characters or themes and not to others and thus become situated readers or listeners. This is a process of narrative understanding where we feel the force of a story without necessarily following a sequence of events or statements. As Deleuze (1993) has put it: 'reading does not consist in concluding from the idea of a preceding state the idea of a following state, but in grasping the effort or the tendency by which the following state itself comes out of the preceding one by a natural force' (cited in Stengers, 2011: 467). Since we are considering the becoming of the reader and the story within the archive, this forceful process of 'feeling narratives' might also throw light on what Mike Featherstone has sketched as the archival flâneurie:

Yet once in the archive, finding the right material which can be made to speak may itself be subject to a high degree of contingency—the process not of deliberate rational searching, but serendipity. In this context it is interesting to note the methods of innovatory historians such as Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, who used the British and French national libraries in highly unorthodox ways by reading seemingly haphazardly ‘on the diagonal’, across the whole range of arts and sciences, centuries and civilizations, so that the unusual juxtapositions they arrived at summoned up new lines of thought and possibilities to radically re-think and reclassify received wisdom. Here we think of the flâneur who wanders the archival textual city in a half-dreamlike state in order to be open to the half-formed possibilities of the material and sensitive to unusual juxtapositions and novel perceptions. (Featherstone, 2006: 594)

Although I do not want to downplay, let alone disregard the role of serendipity, my point is that there is something more than pure serendipity in the methods of innovatory historians that Featherstone refers to. It is, I suggest, the ‘openness’ of possibilities for conceptual novelties that the interplay of positive and negative prehensions can illuminate. According to Whitehead this interplay corresponds to the two ways in which societies both sustain and renew themselves, namely: ‘(i) elimination of diversities of detail and (ii) origination of novelties of conceptual reaction.’ (1985: 102) In this light ‘innovatory historians’ emerge from the world of the archives as superjects: ‘For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism the subject emerges from the world- a ‘superject’ rather than a ‘subject’, Whitehead has written. (1985: 88)

Let us transpose the problem of serendipity to the reading of Bouvier’s article above: the reader has been drawn to one storyline at the same time of eliminating others. But it was not by mere chance that this happened: it is in this interplay of positive and negative prehensions that new conceptual ideas erupt and trains of thought are set in motion. Although such processes are not necessarily conscious or cognitive they create a plane of consistency for narrative meaning to emerge and mobilise trains of thought that will be elaborated after ‘the return from the archive’ (Farge, 1989:11). The latter is the analytical phase that researchers enter once they have returned to their desks away from the archive to immerse in the process of what Whitehead calls ‘conceptual analysis’ (1958: 17). But before considering ‘the return’ let us still stay within the archive, its fever and its dust, its pleasures and its seductions, ‘things gone by, which lay their grip on our immediate selves’, according to Whitehead (1958: 44).

Here I refer of course to the rich body of literature that has looked at the multi-faceted layers of the archive as a symbol and repository of power/knowledge, an institution of governmentality, a heterotopic place of archaeological excavation, a site of genealogical deconstruction, and most importantly, a laboratory of memory [and forgetting] par excellence.⁹ In this context, what is it that makes serendipity a symptom of the archive? Or is it more than a symptom or a chance ‘coming when it comes, as a free gift or not at all’ (James, 1912: 154)? Moreover how does serendipity relate to ‘the archival sensitivity’ (Valles et al., 2011)? I want to approach these questions by thinking with Whitehead about ‘the stubborn fact’ of the archive. (1985: 129)

Whitehead’s philosophy configures reality on both a microscopic and a macroscopic level. On the one hand there is the problem of following the process wherein each individual unity of experience is realised and on the other comes the recognition that there is some actual world out

there, already constituted, 'the stubborn fact which at once limits and provides' according to Whitehead (1985: 129). As we have already seen in the beginning of the paper there is always flux, but also permanence in Whitehead's philosophy of process. In this light 'the stubborn fact', which belongs to the past, inheres in the flowing present wherein actualities are being constituted. This co-existence of permanence and flux creates conditions of possibility for the future, which is anchored in the present but has not been actualised yet. Each actual entity is thus an organic process that 'repeats in microcosm what the universe is in macrocosm [and] although complete as far as concerns its microscopic process, is yet incomplete by reason of its objective inclusion of the macroscopic process.' (Whitehead, 1985: 215).

Whitehead's dual conceptualisation of process as microscopic and macroscopic is a useful configuration in terms of understanding process in narratives: a story maybe complete in terms of its microscopic actualisation as an Aristotelian beginning-middle-end, but incomplete in terms of the macroscopic process of being entangled in the web of stories that comprise 'the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors' (Arendt, 1998: 184). In the same vein a story maybe incomplete in terms of its microscopic process— incomplete, fragmented or broken narratives—and yet contributing as a condition in the macroscopic process of narrative understanding.¹⁰

But, attentiveness to 'the stubborn fact' is the weak link of all modern philosophies, Whitehead has remarked: 'Philosophers have worried themselves about remote consequences, and the inductive formulations of science. They should confine attention to 'the rush of immediate transition' (1985: 129), to the fact that 'we finish a sentence because we have begun it, we are governed by stubborn fact' (1985: 129). It is our adherence to 'the stubborn fact' that I have considered in thinking about serendipity and chance in the archive. My argument here is that we tend to perceive as serendipity, phenomena that are actually signs of an important process in Whitehead's analytics, what he has poetically described as 'the flight of experience': 'The true method of discovery is like the flight of an aeroplane. It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalisation; and it again lands for renewed observation rented acute by rational interpretation.' (1985: 5)

The Flight of imagination: rhythms and vibration

Imagination plays a crucial role in Whitehead's experiential philosophy: he actually argues that the process of experience in its complex and advanced phases emerges as an effect of a 'joint operation between imaginative enjoyment and judgement'. (1985: 178) It is through their encounter Whitehead argues that the method of imaginative rationalisation unfolds. But what we have in the above metaphor of the aeroplane flight is what Whitehead has also discussed as 'conscious imagination' and 'mutual sensitivity of feelings', (1985: 275). As Edward Casey explains, imagination in this context leaps from the situated position of a concrete experience, although it keeps the element of 'surprise as an unexpected gift' (1976: 69). Stories are important in congealing this process of imaginative rationalisation, as they facilitate the experience of landing: they ground abstractions, flesh out imaginative fabulations and carry traces of events. In relation to the role of stories, Whitehead has suggested that we should rethink the role of propositions—otherwise termed as 'theories' or 'tales' in his vocabulary (1985: 188). Although propositions are not actual entities in Whitehead's philosophy, they lure us into feeling such entities and thus become components of experience: 'horror, relief, purpose are primarily feelings involving the entertainment of propositions' (1985: 188). It is in this context that Stengers has configured propositions as vectors of abstraction (2011: 415), an approach that inevitably brings into mind Hannah Arendt's take on narratives as stories that ground abstractions, flesh out ideas

and thus create a milieu where thought can emerge from the actuality of the recounted incident: 'I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments appear, there are incidents and stories behind them, which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say'. (Arendt, 1960: 1) Arendt has actually drawn on Whitehead's notion of process in her analysis of how the human condition becomes tangible through the constant insertion of stories in the web of human relations: 'in the place of the concept of Being we now find the concept of Process', she has emphatically noted (1998: 296); she has further highlighted that 'the shift from the "why" and "what" to the "how" implies that the actual objects of knowledge can no longer be things or eternal motions but must be processes' (1998: 296).

It is therefore in considering the role of memory and imagination woven together through narrative in archival research that I will now turn. 'Imagining lies within our own power, when we wish', Aristotle¹¹ has famously suggested in a long line of philosophical thinking around imagining. Taking my starting point from the supposed link of imagination to a wishful self, I rather want to suggest the idea of the 'will to imagination'. In doing this I see imagination as a force that initiates something new in the process of archival understanding. What is important here is to rethink the link between imagination and perception and particularly what Casey discusses as 'the imaginative extension of perception' (1976: 140).

In this light the storyline of the archival document in Bouvier's papers above: 'I have never stayed at home, I have no home' has evoked for the reader particular feminist memories—Virginia Woolf's idea of the importance of 'a room of one's own' in this case. Memory provides here 'a ready stock of material on which we can draw in making an otherwise chaotic imaginative presentation more coherent', Casey has suggested (1976: 193) It is in the interface of remembering/imagining however that 'a room of one's own' was transposed from its initial bourgeois context—a space of creativity for [mostly] middle class women—to a kind of 'non-place'¹² for a single working class woman. Although Jeanne Bouvier was captivated by the desire to write and therefore to create, her space of creativity was not her home but the library: 'as soon as I had some free moments, I would go into the temple of wisdom' she wrote in her memoirs. (Bouvier, 1983: 233) Indeed by the end of her life and after she had retired from a life of work and trade union activism, Bouvier had become the author of four important historical studies and a memoir, published by prestigious academic publishers and prefaced by eminent scholars.¹³ Bouvier was one of the few women who had passed their life in the industry but had discovered freedom in the spaces of the National Library.

Thus, Bouvier's strange statement 'I have no home' erupted from a yellowish newspaper article as an event that drew my attention and made me stop reading and start thinking. Why did she write 'I have no home'? What did she mean by that? Bouvier did have a home: while reading her papers and particularly her letters I was actually struck by the persistence of the same address—10bis rue Antoinette—at the heart of the touristic Montmartre today, but a working class area, as well as a bohemian artists' colony in Bouvier's days.¹⁴ In a mood of always feeling as an ethnographer in the archive (see, Tamboukou 2015) I had promptly visited her home to establish its materiality and create a stage on which I could imagine Bouvier working, writing, acting, living.¹⁵ But the flat in rue Antoinette, where she lived for a very long time never became a home for her: 'I was caressing a sweet dream that I was not able to realise [...] to buy a small house in the country. Yes, I was dreaming of a house with a garden', she wrote in her memoirs. (Bouvier, 1936: 98)

The unfulfilled dream of a home in the country, as juxtaposed to the 'non-home' feeling of her Parisian flat thus initiated a conceptual theme: the importance of what I have elsewhere discussed as the home/work continuum in the gendered memory of work. (see Tamboukou,

2015) It was in the process of ‘prehending’ Bouvier’s valuation of home while reading the archive that such a conceptual novelty arose: the need to revisit the idea of home for single working women. As Whitehead has written, ‘in each concrescent occasion its subjective aim originates novelty [which] in the case of higher organisms amounts to *thinking* about the diverse experiences’ (1985: 102). In this process, imaginative extension enriches perception and therefore understanding through material enactments, the spatialisation of a storyline, in the particular case of Bouvier’s Parisian flat, which detaches it from abstraction and animates its intensity. This imaginative extension is both physical and mental, there is no such a distinction in Whitehead’s denial of the bifurcation of nature: ‘it is a matter of pure convention as to which of our experiential activities we term mental and which physical’ Whitehead has written (1958: 20).

In thus seeking answers to my questions I have imagined Bouvier through retracing her steps in the rue Antoinette, but also through rereading the relevant extracts from her memoir, experiences that were both physical and mental. It is in this process that I have felt her unfulfilled desire as expressed in the statement that she had never had a home—the phrase that had ‘accidentally’ captivated me in the archive. While there was not enough time for ruminations while still in the reading room, something did happen in the thickness of the archive: Bouvier’s storyline created an event, opening up vistas in the reader’s imagination, which would later become an element in her grasped unity of prehensions that ‘have essential references to other places and other times’ (Whitehead, 1967b: 65).

The geography of the archive, situated at the heart of Marais and relatively close to Bouvier’s epistolary address in Montmartre, has had a notable effect in creating conditions of possibility for the imagination of the reader to roam within and beyond the space/time extensive continuum of the archive. Spatial relationships ingress in our modes of knowledge and experience but we are not always consciously aware of such activities, based as Whitehead notes on the principle of relativity. (1958: 55) But hand in hand with geographical proximity, loneliness in the archive has also been identified as a *condition sine qua non* of archival imagination.¹⁶ As Casey has suggested, the autonomy of imagining ‘consists in its strict independence from other mental acts, from its surroundings, and from all pressing human concerns’ (1967: 191).

By freezing a moment in the archival process for the sake of dissecting its concrescence, what I want to highlight is that it is in this process of remembering /imagining that a story line from an archival document initiates for the reader a mode of understanding that is congealed as the beginning of a counter-narrative that is about to unfold. In the case of Bouvier’s storyline ‘I don’t have a home, I never had one’, what has flashed as an idea is that ‘home’ should not be considered as a socio-spatial entity but rather as an energy system whose rhythms and vibrations need to be followed and charted. Whitehead’s notion of vibration and of the vibrant existence is here illuminating: ‘Suppose we keep to the physical idea of energy: then each primordial element will be an organised system of vibratory streaming of energy [...] This system, [...] is nothing at any instant. It requires its whole period in which to manifest itself [like] a note of music [...]’ (1967b: 35) Here again, the analogy with the note of music is very succinct in making us understand the importance of vibration: ideas and knowledge emerging from archival research require a period in which to manifest themselves and this is why considering and analysing rhythms within the space/time continuum of the archive is important. But also the archival documents themselves, in my case women workers’ writings, are traces of the vibratory existence of their writers, who equally require a whole period in which to manifest themselves.

As readers in the archive we thus need to listen to its rhythms and feel its vibrations, while novel ideas in our understanding emerge from the phenomenon of ‘the imaginal ark’, a plane of possible actions constituted by the act of imagining. (Casey, 1976: 88) It is also important to remember that processes of imagination—in the archive and elsewhere—are short-lived and

discontinuous, as they occur in the 'rush of immediate transition' (Casey, 1976: 76); no wonder then that such novel ideas often feel as coming out of the blue, as the gift of a chance, an unexpected encounter, a serendipity. This is of course not to deny the possibility of pure chance, which is always, already there; it is just that sometimes when you read accounts of archival research serendipity emerges as a refrain, a rhythmical repetition which emits signs that there must be something different, something more [or less] than pure chance.

Symbolic reference in the archive

In digging deeper into the riddle of serendipity I will now draw on the concept of symbolism: 'the word is a symbol, and its meaning is constituted by the ideas, images, and emotions, which it raises in the mind of the hearer' Whitehead has written (1958: 2). By extension, stories as Whiteheadian symbols evoke experiences and carry possibilities that open up a diversity of meanings and interpretations for the reader or listener. 'We enjoy the symbol, but we also penetrate to the meaning', Whitehead writes, although we also need to know that 'symbols do not create their meaning [they simply] discover this meaning for us.' (1958: 57) In the same vein, Arendt has suggested that stories 'reveal meaning without committing the error of defining it'. (1968: 105) But how does this happen, how are symbolism and perception related in Whitehead's philosophy? It is here that the notion of experience comes under scrutiny as 'one of the most deceitful in philosophy.' (1958: 16)

There are three modes of experience Whitehead (1958: 19) argues: presentational immediacy, causal efficacy and conceptual analysis. The first two modes constitute perceptive experience through their fusion in the synthetic activity of 'symbolic reference': we perceive the present, with a sense of derivation from an immediate past and of passage to an immediate future'. (1985: 178) In making sense of the three temporal frames that Whitehead configures in explicating 'symbolic reference' we first need to look at the two modes of perceptive experience: presentational immediacy and causal efficacy. 'Presentational immediacy is our immediate perception of the contemporary world, appearing as an element constitutive of our experience' (1958: 21). But perceptive experience is more than what is merely presented and perceived in the moment; what is already given for experience carries with it past formations: 'causal efficacy [as] the hand of the settled past in the formation of the present.' (Whitehead, 1958: 50) As the second perceptive mode, causal efficacy anchors experience in the past, which however it drags into the present and throws it into the future: 'the immediate present has to conform to what the past is for it, and the mere lapse of time is an abstraction from the more concrete relatedness of "conformation" '. (1958: 36). Whitehead is insistent on the crucial role of 'conformation', as a primitive element of experience: 'we conform to our bodily organs and to the vague world which lies beyond them' (1958: 43) and in this light we do not just see, touch, hear or taste, but see with our eyes, touch with our hands, hear with our ears, taste with our palates, he has famously argued. (1958: 51)

Time is important in this interplay of perceptive modes: 'the causal efficacy *from* the past is at least one factor giving our presentational immediacy *in* the present. The *how* of our experience must conform to the *what* of the past in us'. (1958: 58, emphasis in the text) But what should be underlined here is that time is not conceptualized as succession but as *durée* in this configuration and Whitehead particularly highlights the argument that 'there is nothing which "simply happens" [as] such a belief is the baseless doctrine of time as "pure succession" '(1958: 38) The notion of causation is thus important for Whitehead, not as a logical mode, the way we think about the world, but as a visceral, living mode, the way we live the world. As Halewood succinctly puts it, causal efficacy 'points to the manner in which our material being *and* our beliefs and actions are always located within a realm of efficacy, of a passing-on of data, of

reasons, of motion, of feeling.’ (2013: 54-550, emphasis in the text) But some caution is needed here: by positing the importance of causal efficacy, Whitehead does not create a hierarchical relation between these two modes of perceptive experience.¹⁷ He actually thinks that presentational immediacy is a nobler way of experiencing the world:

The world, given in sense-presentaton, is not the aboriginal experience of the lower organisms, later to be sophisticated by the inference to causal efficacy. The contrary is the case. First the causal side of experience is dominating, then the sense-presentation gains its subtlety. Their mutual symbolic reference is finally purged by consciousness and the critical reason with the aid of a pragmatic appeal to consequences. (Whitehead, 1958: 49)

It is rather in terms of relation of externality and internality that Whitehead sees the interplay between the two modes of experience in the perceptive subject: causal efficacy comes from the outside, revealing the worldly conditions that we emerge from, while presentational immediacy comes from within, the intensities of feeling the world as it is. It is thus on the Whiteheadian plane of ‘symbolic reference’ that I situate my skepticism around serendipity and it is in agreement with the argument that ‘there is nothing which simply happens’, that I have charted lines of causal efficacy that have shaped the perceptive experience of the reader in her entanglement with the bulk of Bouvier’s papers. By heuristically freezing the moment—one of many —when the reader was grasped by the value of a single story-line, I tried to put flesh on the bones of ‘those periods in our lives—when the perception of the pressure from a world of things with characters in their own right, characters mysteriously moulding our own natures, becomes strongest.’ (Whitehead, 1985: 44) Bouvier’s line, ‘I have no home’ is here a tale of the ‘pragmatic aspect of occurrences’ (45) that play such a crucial role in apprehension. ‘When we hate, it is a man that we hate and not a collection of sense-data’, Whitehead writes (45). In the same line of thought, the abstract critique of the classed and gendered character of privacy and its differentiation from ‘the private’ or ‘domesticity’ (see Tamboukou, 2011), needs a storyline such as Bouvier’s to impress its value and importance on the reader: ‘we concentrate by reason of a sense of importance and when we concentrate, we attend to matter of fact’, Whitehead has written with clarity about ‘importance’ as a mode of thought. (1968: 4) In the same way that feelings cannot be abstracted from the subject and data cannot be abstracted from the feelings that feel it (Whitehead, 1985: 231), archival data cannot bear the abstraction from it of every feeling which feels it as such and the feeling cannot bear the abstraction from it of the unifying subject, the reader in the case of the archive.

It goes without saying that in dissecting the two modes of perceptive experience —presentational immediacy and causal efficacy— in the case of prehending a storyline that erupted as serendipity in the archive, we have many times passed to the third mode of experience, that of conceptual analysis. There is a strong interplay between these three modes of experience for Whitehead and although symbolic reference is antecedent ‘much of our perception is due to the enhanced subtlety arising from a concurrent conceptual analysis’ he has written (1958: 20). In this light, we do not perceive and then analyse, conceptual analysis always interferes with sense perception to the point of being an experiential mode on its own.

Work to be done

‘Each initial feeling is an “expressive sign”, giving rise to the creative process that will make it come into being as the feeling of a subject’ Stengers has beautifully written about Whitehead’s understanding of human experience. (2011: 427) In this article I have taken an instant from my archival research on women workers’ narratives to illuminate the emergence of an initial feeling and then think around serendipity and chance in the creation of novelties amongst the grey bulk

of documents of archival research. I have always been captivated by William James' famous scene of the always-evasive character of chance: 'it escapes and says, Hand off! Coming, when it comes, as a free gift, or not at all.' (1912: 154) It was not my purpose in this article to erase or deny the beautiful gift of chance. What I wanted to highlight though is that we should not trivialize the rarity of chance, when thinking about moments in the archive that had a catalytic role in how we feel narratives amidst the bulk of accumulated dusty documents we are surrounded by. What I wanted to show is that as researchers we are not always cognitively aware of how busily modes of perception function before we enter the phase of conceptual analysis where of course conscious knowledge emerges. My argument is that we should not conflate the gift of the chance with the often dim area of perceptive experience, although there are of course interplays between the two, since we constantly emerge from the world and not the world from us.

But no matter whether by the gift of chance or through uncognitive apprehension, once importance has emerged as a mode of thought that makes us concentrate, 'attend to matter-of-fact' (Whitehead, 1968: 4), there is a problem to be solved, questions to be answered, tasks to be fulfilled, work to be done. It is this anticipation of work to be done that sets off the flight of imagination Stengers (2011: 462) has commented drawing on Etienne Souriau's notion of 'work to be done' as an adventure of human experience:

if the poet did not already love the poem a bit before writing it, if all those who think of a future world that is to be brought in life did not find, in their dreams on this subject, some amazed premonitions of the presence called for, if, in a word, the waiting for the work was amorphous, there would no doubt be no creation... (Souriau, cited in Stengers, 2011: 462)

Despite its institutional constraints and limitations, archival research is a world enabling the flight of imaginative experience, giving form to 'work to be done', shaping new modes of thought and ultimately initiating creative processes in how we can understand ourselves and the world we emerge from.

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¹ See De Certeau, 1988; Miller, 2011; Bell, 2013 amongst others.

² For a clear introduction to Whitehead and his relevance to social theory, see the special section on Whitehead in *Theory, Culture and Society*, Halewood, 2008 and Halewood, 2013.

³ See Whitehead, 1985, Chapter 1 in Part III.

⁴ 'J'en entends qui disent, la femme doit rester au foyer [...] Je n'y suis jamais restée, moi. Je n'ai pas de foyer. Je n'ai pas pu en avoir, parce que il m'a fallu gagner mon pain'.

⁵ Jeanne Bouvier (1865-1964) was born to a peasant family in eastern France, she started working at age 11 and by the age of 21 she had become a skilled seamstress living and working in Paris. She became actively involved in the labour movement in France and was widely renowned in the international network of labour activists. In 1936, she published her memoirs recounting her industrial activities between 1876 and 1935. Her papers at the *Bibliothèque Historique de la ville de Paris (BHVP)* include 23 boxes of published and unpublished manuscripts, essays, personal writings and correspondence.

⁶ This story line emerges from my archival research in May 2013, as part of my overall project of working with women workers' narratives. See, Tamboukou 2013, 2014b, 2015.

⁷ For an extended discussion of 'narrative phenomena' in archival research, see Tamboukou, 2014a.

⁸ Value is a slippery note in Whitehead and should not be conflated with virtue. As Halewood carefully comments, 'for Whitehead values are not values in themselves, rather they are value-feelings [...] value is that which enables, or grounds, the differences between feelings (or prehensions) as developed by individuals. (2013: 71)

⁹ See amongst others, Farge, 1989, Derrida, 1998; Steedman, 2001; History of the Human Sciences, 1998, 1999; Burton, 2005; Kirsch and Rohan, 2008, Stoler, 2009; Valles et al., 2011, Stanley et al., 2013.

¹⁰ See, Tamboukou 2008.

¹¹ *De Anima*, 427b, 16-17

¹² Here as elsewhere in my work I have drawn on Mark Augé's concept of the 'non-place' as 'a space which cannot be defined as relational, historical or concerned with identity.' (1995: 77-78)

¹³ These include: *La lingerie et les lingères*, (1928), *Deux époques, deux hommes* (1927), *Histoire des dames employées dans les postes, télégraphes et téléphones, de 1714 à 1929* (1930); *Les femmes pendant la révolution* (1931).

¹⁴ Today 'Rue Antoinette' is called 'Rue Yvonne le Tac'. See <http://www.cparama.com/forum/paris-rue-antoinette-t12007.html> for images of the street in Bouvier's days.

¹⁵ She finally moved to the Galignani retirement home in Neuilly-sur-Seine, specifically established in 1889 for intellectuals.

¹⁶ Of course this romantic image of the lonely researcher in the archive, beautifully narrated by Arlette Farge (1989) and Carolyn Steedman (2001) amongst others, radically changes when the archival space becomes your desk, your room and your computer. Still I argue, there is an uncanny feeling of dizziness or frenziness when you feel you have prehended something in your 'data', which makes you forget your world and its concerns, whether around or far away from you.

¹⁷ Whitehead particularly criticizes the view of Hume's followers that 'presentational immediacy is primitive and the causal efficacy is the sophisticated derivative'. (1958: 52)