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Theorizing Shiny Things: Archival Labors

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Theorizing Shiny Things: Archival Labors

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I. Introduction

During the last few decades, numerous scholars have become alarmed and suspicious of archives. No longer simply a tool of the historian's

trade, the archive, Ann Stoler explains, "has been elevated to new theoretical status, with enough cachet to warrant distinct billing, worthy of scrutiny on its own."¹ Derrida famously declared archives to be fever, trouble, patriarchy, violence, even "radical evil."² Mike Featherstone suggests ominously that we live "in the shadow of the archive."³ Jane Taylor, curator of *Holdings: Rethinking the Archive* at the University of Witwatersrand, asks, "Do we possess the archive or does it possess us?"⁴ Archives are frequently tools of the powerful: in their remarkable collection of essays on archiving practices in South Africa during and after apartheid, Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris and Graeme Reid see archives as "the best way to ensure that the dead do not stir up disorder" by containing them within the dominant instituting imaginary.⁵ When scholars find archives attractive, that too is coded as a kind of peril, suggesting we have fallen for their wiles: archives "seduce."⁶ The language of seduction suggests coyly that the scholar is unwilling, but the archive insists. The "seductive charms" of the archive conceal its "destructive powers."⁷ At the very least, archives confuse us: Derrida claimed, "Nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive.'"⁸

Others scholars, in contrast, have reflected on archive joys. For Carolyn Stedman, "The archive is also a place of dreams."⁹ For Appadurai, archives can be "important vehicles for building the capacity to aspire among those groups who need it most."¹⁰ Verne Harris, director of the South African History archive documenting struggles against apartheid, finds that in archives, "pleasures are guaranteed."¹¹ The archive is an "invitation to enchantment, to the play of ecstasy and pain, as we exercise that immemorial passion for the impossible."¹² The excess of the archive invites and enables creativity. For literary scholar Sarah Natal, archives "are open to the order of the imagination. They turn us towards life. Imagination can keep excising the archive, replenishing it with things that were not there at the beginning."¹³ Ronald Roberts expresses hopes that the "cemetery ethos of the archive" can be undone, that it can be "more womb (site of unborn art, unpublished manuscripts, nascent ways of being embodied in print) than tomb."¹⁴

The purpose of this paper is to intervene in this confrontation over the dangers and delights of archives by considering the various paradoxes that face the users of archives, not in order to resolve them but to inhabit them in ways that nudge our thinking in a more Dionysian direction. My example is the intellectually rich, politically radical, fiscally endangered Emma Goldman Paper's Project at the University of California, Berkeley. This small, cluttered site of accumulation represents a different kind of archive, a deliberately counter-hegemonic collection centered on a radical critic of the status quo. While respecting the political trouble that archives can cause, and maintaining the energy generated by archival tensions, I look to the political and intellectual possibilities of the Goldman archive to recalibrate the affective valence of our reflections, making it possible to lead with the excitement, the invitation, the joy of archives while still attending to the troubles they foster.¹⁵

One reason for contemporary archive panic is the vast expansion of archiving and archivable materials via electronic technologies; another is the anti-foundational turn in theory, which problematizes the production of memory and the systems of discursivity that identify some materials as "in" and others as "out." Yet another is the emergence of critical postcolonial scholarship identifying empire's archive as an instrument for regulating colonial populations and enacting disciplinary power. As Stoler notes, archives can no longer be treated simply as "sites of storage and conservation," and their use has to become more "ethnographic," less "extractive."¹⁶

These are all worthy concerns, but the stress on archives as dangerous can itself be dangerous, in the sense that it crowds out more affirmative possibilities. Archives are unsurpassed intellectual playgrounds; they have a...



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