



Tracing the archival turn: genealogies, dimensions and implications

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47989/ir30CoLIS52276>

Abstract

Introduction. The archival turn, emerging in the 1990s, signifies a shift in how scholars conceptualise and engage with archives across disciplines. This study examines the theoretical origins, ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of the archival turn and its implications for archival theory and practice.

Method. This research employs a theoretical and conceptual analysis, synthesising literature from history, philosophy, cultural studies and archival science. It traces key intellectual influences, including Ranke's historiographical methods, Foucault's discourse theory and Derrida's concept of archive fever, to contextualise the archival turn's evolution.

Analysis. The archival turn is analysed through its ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions. These dimensions highlight how the turn redefines the concept of archives, challenges traditional assumptions and encourages more critical approaches to archival materials.

Results. The archival turn has led to ontological shifts, expanding the definition of archives beyond institutional repositories. Epistemologically, it has reframed archives as sites of knowledge production and power rather than neutral collections. Methodologically, it has encouraged critical archival engagement, rethinking provenance and addressing archival silences. However, scholars debate whether the archival turn has substantively transformed historiographical methodologies or if it remains primarily a theoretical abstraction disconnected from archival practice.

Conclusion. The archival turn has enriched interdisciplinary scholarship and challenged traditional notions of archives. However, tensions persist between theoretical conceptualisations in the humanities and the practical concerns of archival studies. While it has reshaped scholarly perspectives on archives, its impact on archival methodologies and professional practice remains a subject of ongoing debate.

Introduction

The word *turn* refers to a shift or change in direction, as well as a transformation in perspective or stance. In the context of research in the humanities and social sciences, a turn typically signifies a change in the core concepts, methodologies or focal points of a discipline. It often introduces new theoretical frameworks, research methods or paradigms, thereby driving the field towards new directions. Examples include the linguistic turn, the sociological turn and the corporeal turn. Around the 1990s, the archival turn emerged as part of this series of disciplinary reorientations within the humanities and social sciences (Arvatu, 2011). Broadly speaking, the archival turn refers to an academic or practical trend across various disciplines that emphasises the critical use or examination of archival materials. This shift has become a prominent topic of discussion in disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, media studies, literature and art, establishing itself as a significant trend across multiple fields.

Current research has demonstrated considerable interest in the archival turn across several domains. In cultural studies, the archival turn has been explored in feminist theory (Eichhorn, 2013), queer studies (Marshall and Tortorici, 2022) and postmemory research (Eigler, 2021). Within literature and the arts, scholars have examined the archival turn in contexts such as visual arts (Simon, 2002), contemporary art (Callahan, 2022) and documentary filmmaking (Kim, 2020). The social sciences have also contributed to this discourse, with studies addressing its relevance to psychology (Brannigan, 2021), political science (Erlenbusch-Anderson, 2024), legal studies (Mawani, 2012) and the history of science and technology (Portuondo, 2016). Moreover, postcolonial studies have placed particular emphasis on the archival turn, investigating how colonial archives marginalise Indigenous voices (Sabbagh-Khoury, 2024), the role of archives in narrating histories of colonisation (Chivallon, 2016) and the neoliberal archival turn in the Caribbean (Muñiz, 2022). While the archival turn has been explored through cultural, historical and postcolonial lenses, there has yet to be a systematic discussion on its genealogies, core dimensions and implications for archival studies.

This study explores three key questions: (1) What are the theoretical genealogies of the archival turn? (2) What are its core manifestations across the ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions? (3) What are the implications of the archival turn for archival studies? To address these questions, this paper analyses relevant scholarship, identifying major intellectual traditions and disciplinary intersections that have shaped the development of the archival turn. Rather than treating the archival turn as a singular theoretical framework or a directly observable phenomenon, this study approaches it as a heuristic tool for understanding broader shifts in scholarly discourse on archives. By tracing its genealogies and dimensions, the paper examines how the archival turn has been articulated across disciplines and what implications it holds for archival studies.

Genealogies of the archival turn

The rise of archives in nineteenth-century historiography

In the tradition of historiographical research, archives have long been regarded as an indispensable foundation, as history in the nineteenth century, in its quest for scientific legitimacy, turned to a fascination with archives in an effort to outline the *true contours* of the past. In the nineteenth century, with the professionalisation of academic disciplines and the advancement of scientific methods, many emerging fields sought to define their disciplinary boundaries and legitimacy by establishing and controlling specific sites of knowledge production, such as universities, laboratories and museums (Eskildsen, 2008), which served to differentiate one discipline from another while providing spaces for training new professional practitioners. During this period, particularly in German-speaking countries, historians were eager to elevate history to the status of a science (Lustig, 2020), and under this intellectual pursuit, history needed to clarify its research methods and objectives to delineate its disciplinary boundaries.

In this context, Leopold von Ranke placed significant emphasis on archival research. Between 1827 and 1831, Ranke travelled through Germany, Austria and Italy, seeking documents and archives; during this time, his work *Ueber die Verschwörung gegen Venedig* came to be seen as emblematic of the archival turn in his historiographical approach (Eskildsen, 2008). It was during this journey that Ranke established his historiographical principle of '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*' (to write history as it actually happened), asserting that the historian's primary duty was to reconstruct past events as objectively as possible. This required rigorous analysis of primary sources and a faithful presentation of historical facts, rather than interpretations shaped by modern values or personal biases. Following his engagement with archives, Ranke firmly believed that the archive was the only legitimate site for the production of historical knowledge: he declared that the writing of modern history should abandon the traditions shaped and passed down by earlier writers and instead be grounded in original archival sources (Eskildsen, 2008). Ranke's methodological emphasis on the analysis of archives and the presentation of objective historical facts had a profound impact on the professionalisation of historical research: during this period, the archive came to be understood as a *laboratory of history*, mirroring the scientific laboratory's aspiration for reproducibility of results. This emergent archival practice underscored the pursuit of a certain *objectivity* in historiographical research through the examination of traces and relics of the past (Lustig, 2020).

Twentieth-century critiques: rethinking objectivity in historiography

In the twentieth century, German critical theorist Walter Benjamin critiqued historicism's linear view of progress and its assumption of objective historical reality, rejecting the idea of history as merely an accumulation of past facts. Opposing historicism with his historical materialism, Benjamin distanced himself from Ranke's goal of showing things as they actually were, which he called '*the strongest narcotic of the century*' (Benjamin, 2002). For Benjamin, history is not a continuous chain of objective facts tied to the empty linearity of past, present and future, but rather a series of '*sudden appearances*' (Ji, 2008). In *Theses on the philosophy of history*, he argued that '*history is not constructed on homogeneous, empty time, but on a time filled with the presence of the now (Jetztzeit)*' (Benjamin, 2003). This concept frames history as the occurrence of events, not a process, with historical events requiring reinterpretation within each specific *now*. For Benjamin, the truth of history lies not in reconstructing a past objective image but in uncovering marginalised, forgotten or suppressed voices, advocating a historiography for the oppressed (Wang, 2018).

Benjamin's cultural analysis also shaped the archival turn. His essays on mass media, art and cultural transformation introduced an archival approach central to his unfinished *Arcades project*. Similarly, *One way street*, a fragmented collection of aphorisms and observations, mimicked the randomness of clippings, reports and images. Both works, deeply inspired by photography, used montage structures to reinterpret the present through the past. On a deeper level, they reveal a temporal logic akin to photography, emphasising how revisiting the past clarifies the present (Simon, 2002). Benjamin's historiographical and cultural theories profoundly influenced later developments in historical and cultural studies. His view of history as something that can be engaged, reinterpreted and reconstructed in the present embodies his montage theory, providing a foundation for postmodern historiography, cultural studies and memory studies, offering new perspectives and methodological innovations for historical research.

Power, knowledge and memory: Foucault and Derrida on the archive

It is widely acknowledged that the archival related theories proposed by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have marked a significant shift in academic research, inspiring scholars across numerous disciplines to engage in an ever-expanding intellectual dialogue on archives (Manoff, 2004). It is necessary to highlight their critical contributions to the archival turn, given that their theories have stimulated profound debates and garnered extensive attention in both theoretical and artistic scholarship, thereby advancing the scholarly focus on archives. In Foucault's *The*

archaeology of knowledge, the archive is not merely a physical repository of documents or a collection of historical records. Rather, it is a system of rules governing discursive practices and the production of knowledge, determining what can be said, written and accepted as truth or knowledge (Foucault, 1993). Foucault's theory on archives underscores the relationship between power and knowledge, positioning archives as key to understanding this dynamic. Archives reveal how discourses are formed, dictate the narratives of history and shape the production and dissemination of knowledge. They function as mechanisms of historical and cultural production, reflecting societal structures and cultural norms.

Derrida's understanding of the archive, primarily articulated in *Archive fever: a Freudian impression* (1995), draws on Sigmund Freud's theories. Derrida conceptualises the archive as being driven by two conflicting forces: on the one hand, the death drive (Thanatos), which entails forgetting, erasure, oblivion and the annihilation of memory; and on the other, the life instinct (Eros), which seeks to preserve and archive, attempting to safeguard and protect historical memory (Derrida, 1998). Here, the term *fever* is not a medical condition but a philosophical and psychological metaphor, representing a deep desire for the archive – a relentless pursuit of collecting, preserving and uncovering the truths that archives might hold. For Derrida, '*archive fever*' reflects humanity's obsession with the past and the desire to control memory, history and the future. It points to a fundamental human impulse: the dual drive to preserve memory and traces while simultaneously selecting, organising and interpreting them. This impulse is not merely nostalgic but inherently tied to the pursuit of power, as controlling archives and memory equates to controlling the narratives of knowledge and history.

As discussed above, during the establishment of modern historiography, particularly in the context of Ranke's historical methods, historians emphasised the authority and use of archival materials, seeking to access the past and uncover the *true* face of history through documentary evidence. However, from the mid-twentieth century onwards, scholars such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Hayden White and Carlo Ginzburg began to critique traditional historiography's pursuit of *objective truth*. Instead, they emphasised the power-dependent and constructed nature of archival materials and their role in the production of knowledge, arguing that archives are not neutral repositories but sites of discursive and ideological contestation. This suggests that traces of the archival turn were already present in the rationalisation process of historiography, but it was only with the intellectual and philosophical developments of the twentieth century that the archival turn re-emerged, revealing its varying implications across different historical periods. As related research has pointed out, the motivations behind the archival turn in modern archival theory and its broader studies are not rooted in a desire to restore history as it once was (Eichhorn, 2013), but rather in a transformation of the archive into an innovative field of practice – an active space of knowledge production and cultural creation. In examining the theoretical antecedents of the archival turn, one can discern the tension between these two phases of the archival turn.

Dimensions of the archival turn

Since the 1990s, the archival turn has emerged as a significant trend across various academic fields, including history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, literary criticism and cultural studies (Mawani, 2012). However, this study does not aim to exhaustively examine the specific contexts or meanings of the archival turn within each discipline. Rather, it seeks to identify and analyse the shared characteristics of the archival turn across disciplines, with the goal of illuminating how this phenomenon reflects broader shifts in interdisciplinary approaches to archives and the evolution of knowledge. Ketelaar (2017) has highlighted two key aspects of the archival turn: first, a shift from viewing archives as mere sources of information to understanding them as epistemological spaces and products of cultural practice; second, the use of the archive as a metaphor, often leading to ontological reconceptualisations of the archive itself. Through a review and analysis of relevant

literature, this paper argues that the archival turn can be examined on three interconnected dimensions: ontological, epistemological and methodological.

Archive in flux: the ontological shifts in the archival turn

The ontological dimension of the archival turn is reflected in the continuous expansion of the concept of the archive. As Derrida critically observed, '*Today, nothing is more unreliable or unclear than the word archive*' (Derrida, 1998). The classical definition of the modern archive is found in T.R. Schellenberg's *Modern archives*, where archives are described as

Those records of any public or private institution which are adjudged worthy of permanent preservation for reference and research purposes and which have been deposited or have been selected for deposit in an archival institution (Schellenberg, 1956, p. 16).

However, with the advancement of the archival turn, the archive has taken on increasingly metaphorical meanings. It is now regarded as elastic and dynamic, capable of absorbing new elements and interpretations while also undergoing destruction, denial and decay, which showcase the expansion and contraction of its conceptual boundaries.

For instance, in Ann Cvetkovich's *An archive of feelings* (2003), the archive refers to community-based collections that encompass not only documentary materials but also a broader range of collected objects (Cvetkovich, 2008). Similarly, Jack Halberstam, in *In a queer time and place* (2005), calls for imagining the archive as a '*floating signifier*', casting a net wide enough to include almost any form of accumulation. Halberstam further argues that the role of the archive must go beyond traditional document repositories to become active participants in theories of cultural relevance, the construction of collective memory and the complexity of records (Halberstam, 2005). Nowak (2022) analyses the concept of the '*natural archive*', suggesting that materials such as plant specimens, tree rings and ice cores can also be considered archives, complementing historians' traditional documentary sources. Burgum (2022) proposes the '*city as an archive*'. Sue McKemmish similarly expands the concept of the archive, advocating for the inclusion of oral and written records, literary works, landscapes, dances, artworks, built environments and artefacts within its scope (McKemmish, 2005). As Cook (2011) has observed, these new interpretations and practices reveal a duality: the modern archive is increasingly understood as symbolic, metaphorical and discursive, rather than merely institutional, cultural or administrative. This duality challenges traditional notions of the archive while simultaneously broadening the ways in which archives can be understood and utilised.

The ontological dimension of the archival turn is further reflected in the emphasis on the *materiality* of the archive, which opens up avenues for examining its technological and media dimensions. From the perspective of New Materialism, the material world is not a passive object awaiting transformation but an active participant in social and cultural processes, highlighting the intersubjectivity between the material and human worlds. Within this framework, archives are imbued with agency – a force that actively shapes and participates in social and cultural dynamics. Consequently, the archive transcends its role as a mere repository of records and emerges as a site of complex technological practices embedded in broader sociocultural contexts. Such practices underscore the archive's nature as a form of *Kulturtechnik* (cultural technique), a concept that emphasises that technology is not merely a collection of physical tools or machines but encompasses all means and methods through which culture is created and disseminated. For Friedrich Kittler, technology inherently embodies the social dimensions of power and knowledge. In other words, media apparatuses are not neutral in their operation; rather, they impose an intrinsic framework of rules, often in concealed ways. While we appear to use or control media, our usage is predicated on accepting the internal logic of their operations (Yu, 2023). This reflection on the power of technology resonates with Derrida's insight on the process of '*archivization*': the technical structure of the archive determines not only the archivable content

but also the structure of its emergence and its relationship to the future. The archive produces as much as it records the event (Derrida, 1998).

Site of knowing: the epistemological shifts in the archival turn

Archives and archival institutions can be understood in two ways: first, as physical repositories for the storage of historical and administrative records; and second, as frameworks and principles that shape and regulate systems of knowledge. The archival turn represents a shift toward the latter understanding, emphasising the archive as an active participant in the dynamic processes of knowledge production and the construction of social memory.

At its epistemological core, the archival turn highlights the archive as an active historical construct requiring critical interpretation and analysis. The archive is not merely a tool for historical research but an independent and significant field of study within history and the humanities, demanding a critical and interpretive approach. Arlette Farge, in *The allure of the archives* (1989), reflects on her experiences in French archives, describing the overwhelming power and allure of archival materials:

It is excessive and overwhelming, like a spring tide, an avalanche, or a flood. This comparison with natural and unpredictable forces is not arbitrary. When working in the archive you will often find yourself thinking of this exploration as a dive, a submersion, perhaps even a drowning ... you feel immersed in something vast, oceanic. (Farge, 2013, p. 4)

Farge also warns against treating archives as mere sources of information or definitive evidence, cautioning scholars to maintain critical distance and avoid assuming that archives inherently offer the full meaning of the documents they contain (Farge, 2013). Similarly, Carolyn Steedman's *Dust* (2001) offers a profound reflection on the archive, arguing that it consists of fragmented remnants of history, often preserved by chance rather than intent. These fragments, through their orderly arrangement in files, ledgers, lists and indictments – and even through their absences – quietly reveal the workings of state power (Steedman, 2002). Steedman further explores the symbolic significance of *dust*, both as a physical presence in the archive and as a metaphor for the ways historians interpret and engage with archival materials (Zhang, 2009). Natalie Zemon Davis, in *Fiction in the archives* (1990), focuses on the microhistorical events and individual cases revealed in archival records. Her work, in part, responds to the medieval chronicle tradition's long-standing neglect of humanistic content, instead emphasising the historical value of individual experiences. Davis's approach embodies the core spirit of the archival turn: the archive is not merely a container of history but a constructed entity that must be critically interpreted.

The epistemological dimension of the archival turn also emphasises that archives are not static entities but dynamic processes – essential sites and practices for knowledge creation, cultural production and activism. Markus Friedrich conceptualises archives as '*sites of knowledge*', arguing that they not only preserve and provide knowledge but actively produce it. He posits that a modern history of knowledge must pay close attention to archives themselves while recognising their deeply localised nature, as archives function as knowledge infrastructures shaped by their specific historical and cultural contexts (Friedrich and Dillon, 2018). Similarly, Osborne (1999) draws an analogy between archives and scientific laboratories, suggesting that both serve as '*sites of knowledge production*'. However, this laboratory metaphor extends beyond the notion of the *laboratory of history* associated with the establishment of modern historiography, instead imbuing it with a more dynamic and expansive meaning. Archives are not merely spaces for retrospection or knowledge production but also pathways for examining and deconstructing contemporary legacies, consciousness and traumas. This perspective is evident in recent social movements and cultural practices, such as the proliferation of visual archives in East Asia since the 2000s, which are closely tied to social activism, community engagement and alternative cultural practices (Pan,

2018). These visual archives diverge from official narratives and mainstream media, offering new ways to define the forms and representations of society and community. Unlike historical archives, visual archives aim not only to document and preserve but also to establish institutions and provoke critical reflection. Similarly, the field of archival studies has increasingly engaged with *archival activism*, although within the context of the archival turn, it becomes difficult to discern whether this represents a turn towards activism within archival studies or a turn towards archives within activism.

Archives have also become a prevalent and significant theme in contemporary art practices and exhibitions. For instance, in *The watcher files project* (2013–2015), artists Sand and Imatani transformed their encounters with police archives into a series of artistic works, including oral and physical performances, poetry, photographic triptychs, graphite drawings, graphic texts and sculptures. Their project explored the dynamic relationships between police archives and the citizens who constitute and intersect with them, examining how such archives participate in shaping history and memory (Carbone, 2017). The archival turn in the arts, of course, brings with it unique aesthetic strategies. Artists frequently rework archives to reinterpret historical narratives through techniques such as deconstruction, collage, juxtaposition, rearrangement and even fabrication, thereby creating and disseminating alternative stories.

Beyond the repository: the methodological shifts in the archival turn

Robert Darnton has described the experience of archival research as intellectually stimulating because it challenges preconceived notions – you enter the archive with certain conceptions, patterns and hypotheses, but you may encounter anomalous materials that conflict with them, prompting you to reconsider your previous understanding of the past (Buchanan, 2010). This demonstrates the critical and reflective nature of knowledge discovery in archival research, which has gained increasing attention in the social sciences under the framework of the archival turn. The rapid expansion of archival research across disciplines has prompted methodological reconsiderations, disrupting the conventional view of archives as mere repositories of documents. In *The archive project* (2017), Niamh Moore and colleagues propose the concept of a *contemporary archival sensibility* as a framework for engaging with archival research. According to Moore et al. (2020), this sensibility is based on four key principles. First, it involves rethinking *provenance* by examining the origins of archives, exploring new modes and formats of collection, preserving the coherence of archival structures and considering the relationships between individual items and their broader contexts. Second, it expands the definition of the archive, shifting the focus from the archive as an inherent property of certain materials or groups to its processes and the role of the collector. This broader approach positions archives not as static objects but as dynamic constructs tied to their creation and use. Third, it addresses the *black box* of archival practices and research, critically analysing operational processes and the entanglement of materiality and meaning in interpretation. Fourth, it reconsiders the impact of digital technologies, arguing that digitisation fundamentally reshapes concepts such as documents, collections, databases and archives. These principles of contemporary archival sensibility reconceptualise archives as social constructions and cultural practices. They encourage a critical approach to archival work, promoting a re-examination of traditional concepts and methodologies while engaging with the profound transformations brought about by digitisation. Overall, this shift presents a more dynamic and reflexive understanding of archives as living and interactive entities, deeply intertwined with the contexts in which they are created and used.

The development of archival research methodologies relies on a deep understanding of the archival turn's ontological and epistemological dimensions. Key questions include: How can we uncover the *silences* in archives and the histories they obscure? How can we balance respect for the original cultural contexts of archival materials with their relevance to contemporary society? What determines our focus on specific groups or events? What forms of translation, transcription,

or transformation are necessary, and how can we filter vast archival materials to identify the most critical information? How do researchers' identities shape their engagement with archives, and who ultimately benefits from archival research? Finally, what is the purpose of archival research, and how does it shape the questions we ask and the knowledge we produce (Callahan, 2022)?

The implications of the archival turn for archival studies

Fostering broader scholarly dialogue

The preceding analysis reveals a noticeable disconnect between the interpretation and application of archives in the humanities and the theoretical frameworks and practical operations within archival studies. Discussions of the archival turn in the humanities and the research conducted within archival studies often seem to develop along two parallel and largely independent trajectories, suggesting a significant lack of interaction and knowledge exchange between the two fields. Michelle Caswell observes that theoretical works on the archival turn within the humanities frequently overlook critical contributions from archival studies. She argues that this omission is not incidental but indicative of a deeper issue: scholars in the humanities often resist engaging with the academic work produced within archival studies (Caswell, 2023). Caswell calls for greater collaboration between humanists and archival scholars. Similarly, Sara Callahan acknowledges that archival practitioners are almost entirely absent in her own research on archival theory; when they are mentioned, it is often in metaphorical terms (e.g., artists doubling as archivists) or as uncritical enforcers of contemporary power structures (Callahan, 2022).

This distinction underscores a fundamental challenge in fostering interdisciplinary dialogue: while humanities scholars often conceptualise archives in theoretical and metaphorical terms, archival practitioners engage with them as tangible, managed entities. Bridging this divide requires mutual engagement – humanities scholars need to incorporate archival theory and practice into their analyses, while archival scholars must also make their research more accessible to interdisciplinary audiences. One approach to achieving this is recognising the plurality of archival perspectives across disciplines, as encapsulated in Anne Gilliland's concept of the '*archival multiverse*'.

Anne Gilliland introduces the concept of the archival multiverse, which she defines as encompassing '*the diversity of evidentiary texts, memory-keeping practices and institutions, bureaucratic and personal motivations, community perspectives and needs, as well as cultural and legal frameworks*' (Gilliland et al., 2017). This concept challenges the notion of a single, universal archival framework and instead acknowledges that different disciplines, communities and cultural contexts engage with and interpret archives in diverse ways.

Within the field of archival studies, recognising this pluralistic nature of archives is crucial for fostering interdisciplinary dialogue. Rather than insisting on a singular definition of *the archive*, the archival multiverse encourages scholars to engage with multiple archival traditions, theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. By embracing these diverse perspectives, archival scholars and humanists can create a more inclusive and productive scholarly discourse, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Rethinking archival theory

The archival turn emphasises that archives are not static entities but dynamic processes – essential sites and practices for knowledge creation, cultural production and activism. Within the static-dynamic relationship, this perspective shifts the focus from the provenance of records to their broader contextual background. As social, cultural and technological environments continue to evolve, the concept of archival provenance has also undergone significant transformation. Traditionally, provenance referred narrowly to the originating institution responsible for creating records, often described as *entity-based provenance*. However, this understanding has expanded to encompass a more inclusive notion of provenance, involving multiple actors throughout the

entire lifecycle of records. This revised view of provenance extends beyond the traditional single institutional creator to recognise multiple creators, including not only the original creators of the records and the individuals involved but also the archivists and researchers who preserve, process and interpret these materials. This approach highlights the processual, dynamic and multi-subjective nature of provenance, drawing attention to the complex interactions between records and the various actors engaged with them throughout their existence. Under this framework, archives are no longer seen as passive reflections of history but as vibrant spaces of dialogue – a constantly reinterpreted and reassembled collection of narratives. Archives, in this sense, become active sites where stories are woven, unravelled and reimagined over time.

The archival turn builds upon the insights of postmodern archival theory, extending its critical reflections into new areas of practice. While postmodern archival theory challenges traditional notions of objectivity, neutrality and authenticity, the archival turn pushes these critiques further by exploring how archival practices actively shape social memory, cultural identity and historical narratives. Rather than being opposing frameworks, these perspectives mutually reinforce one another. Postmodern archival theory provides a crucial theoretical foundation for understanding the power structures within archival processes, while the archival turn applies these insights to engage with contemporary issues such as participatory archives, community memory and social justice. As Ketelaar (2017) suggests, the innovations prompted by the archival turn are not a rejection of past theoretical developments but rather a continuation of the broader evolution of archival thought—what he terms '*archival returns*'.

Some scholars argue that the archival turn risks overlooking the substantial contributions of foundational disciplines such as library and information science (LIS), archival management and history, where archival theory and practice have historically been most robust (Marshall and Tortorici, 2022). However, this perspective is somewhat reductive. The archival field has long been engaged in self-reflection and renewal, continuously evolving its practices and theories. In dialogue with the archival turn, archival scholars have increasingly addressed issues of social justice, human rights, identity and inclusion (Ghaddar and Caswell, 2019). Rather than being a rupture from archival tradition, the archival turn represents both a challenge and an opportunity. It compels archival scholars and practitioners to critically reconsider archival methodologies while fostering theoretical innovation and practical transformation. By integrating insights from postmodern archival theory, the archival turn repositions archival studies as a field that critically engages with the diverse ways archives are constructed, contested and mobilised in the contemporary world.

Conclusion and discussion

Since the 1990s, the archival turn has emerged as an influential trend within the humanities and social sciences. Inspired by the archival theories of intellectual figures such as Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, this turn has prompted a renewed recognition of the significance of archives across multiple disciplines. The ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of the archival turn have not only deepened inquiries into the nature of archives but also fostered interdisciplinary dialogue and stimulated new reflections on disciplinary theories.

On an ontological level, the archival turn re-examines the concept of the archive and its material existence as a medium of history and memory, challenging traditional assumptions and moving archives from the margins to the centre of scholarly inquiry. Epistemologically, it explores how archival materials shape our understanding of the past and influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed. Methodologically, the archival turn encourages scholars to adopt more critical approaches to studying archives, recognising them not merely as repositories of information but as sites of power, memory and identity production.

However, despite its contributions, some scholars question whether the archival turn has led to substantive methodological transformations in historical research. Mawani (2012) argues that, despite extensive critique, the archive continues to function as a domain of historical objectivity, suggesting that the archival turn has expanded theoretical perspectives without necessarily altering historiographical methodology. This raises an important question: while the archival turn has reshaped how scholars conceptualise archives, has it truly changed how history is written?

Similarly, some scholars caution that the *archive* that captivates humanities scholars is often a Foucauldian, hypothetical and metaphorical construct, rather than the tangible, managed information resources that archivists engage with in practice (Bastian, 2016). This distinction underscores a broader challenge: while the archival turn has encouraged more critical engagement with archives, its emphasis on theoretical abstraction has, at times, widened the gap between archivists and scholars in the humanities. This tension highlights the need for greater interdisciplinary collaboration, ensuring that theoretical advancements in the humanities are meaningfully integrated into archival practice.

Nonetheless, for archival studies, the archival turn has provided valuable insights for fostering academic dialogue and rethinking theoretical frameworks, offering opportunities for both theoretical and practical innovation. As the Indo-European root of the word turn – *tere* – suggests, conveying meanings such as friction, drilling, piercing and twisting, the archival turn embodies a continuous, dynamic process of transformation (Marshall and Tortorici, 2022).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professor Zhiying Lian for her invaluable guidance and support on this paper. The author also appreciates the anonymous reviewers and editors for their helpful feedback.

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