Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid

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Abstract

The authors argue that finding aids present only singular perspectives of the collections they describe and fail to represent the impact of archivists' work on records and subsequentreinterpretations of collections by archivists and researchers. The authors place these criticisms within the burgeoning postmodern discourse in archival studies and make two concrete suggestions for finding aids that would allow practicing archivists to acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of archival work and to incorporate multiple perspectives into the description of records.

The finding aid has long held a central and often unquestioned place as an access tool for archival materials. While the development of EAD and other Web technologies has brought great changes to how finding aids are discovered, accessed, delivered, and structured, the types of information in finding aids and the underlying assumptions regarding their creation have gone largely unchallenged.[1] This is partially true because finding aids do an excellent job. They provide important contextual information about the collections they describe and represent the cohesive nature of records in a collection or record group.[2]

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[1] While the scope of what is meant by a "finding aid" can be construed broadly, we have limited our definition of the finding aid to that of archival inventories and registers, generally including the components and structures defined in standards such as EAD, RAD, or ISAD(G).

[2] In its development, EAD embraced the "familiar and functional" design of traditional finding aids, partly in an attempt to accommodate legacy data, while also seeking to impose greater structural uniformity and consistent informational elements. While EAD was not meant to be a data content standard, its developers recognized that certain key features should be part of any finding aid. See Janice E. Ruth, "Encoded Archival Description: A Structural Overview," *American Archivist* 60 (Summer 1997): 313–14. Hence, EAD has challenged some repositories to reexamine the components and structure of their finding aids. For example, the Minnesota Historical Society discovered that "our previous finding aids did not explain themselves, their purpose, or their contents well enough to permit a reasonably intelligent customer to understand and use them effectively without the intercession of an archivist." Dennis Meissner, "First Things First: Reengineering Finding Aids for Implementation of EAD,"

But as effective representations of collections, finding aids fall short on at least two counts. First, although a central concern of archivists creating finding aids is to provide context for a set of records, we generally omit extremely important contextual information: the impact of the processor's work. When a researcher reads a finding aid or works with a neatly refoldered and arranged collection, she sees a clean and clear representation of what is in a collection, but she is not privy to the sorts of appraisal, arrangement, and description decisions that were made when it was processed. As a profession we extol the virtues of provenance, that the context within which records were created should be preserved to the greatest extent possible. We endeavor to adhere to this concept whenever practical by retaining the original order of materials. But we do not go as far as revealing our own impact on collections, leaving researchers to assume falsely that we have no transformative impact or to guess about the nature of the work we have done.

Second, although all archivists are taught that we must strive to be as objective as possible when processing, finding aids present but one viewpoint on a collection. Different individuals make different decisions about what to retain and discard, how to preserve, restore, or create order, and what to highlight in descriptive systems. These decisions are influenced by opinions, intellectual backgrounds, and areas of expertise, which by necessity vary from archivist to archivist. These subjective perspectives have a fundamental impact on how researchers identify and understand the records they use. While this is common sense, finding aids represent records in a single way, backed by the inherent authority of the institution in which a collection is housed. Differing opinions regarding the importance of a collection, be they held by researchers, other archivists, or even the original processor whose understandings have changed over time, are often not incorporated into or added to the official finding aid.

These criticisms of the singular, unchanging perspective of the finding aid and its status as an impartial, truthful representation of a collection are rooted in postmodern thought. Postmodern theory emphasizes the inherent relativism and subjectivity of observation and representation. It rejects objective truth and grand historical narratives, preferring instead plural, provisional, and interpretive perspectives. Most significantly, postmodern thought challenges archivists, as individuals and social actors unable to separate their own viewpoints and decisions from their contexts, to consider and acknowledge our mediating role in shaping the historical record.

American Archivist 60 (Fall 1997): 375. But the canonical finding aid has been challenged in more fundamental ways as well. For example, ISAAR(CPF) developed in reaction to how ISAD(G) included contextual information about record creators within the description of the archival fonds, series, and items. ISAAR(CPF) allows the maintenance of this contextual information independently from description of records, and points to possibilities for building dynamic provenance-based access systems. See the International Council on Archives, *ISAAR(CPF): International Standard Archival Authority Record for Corporate Bodies, Persons and Families,* (Ottawa: Secretariat of the ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards, 1996).

There is a burgeoning postmodern discourse in archival literature and at conferences, seminars, and symposia.[3] In a recent article written from a postmodern perspective, Francis Blouin exhorts archivists "to become much more aware of our role as mediators, that is, mediators between records creators and records repositories, between archives and users, between conceptions of the past and extant documentation."[4] Mediation has been a troubling concept for archivists because the foundations of archival practice are predicated on decidedly modernist ways of understanding order and truth. Traditional, modernist archival theory, represented most prominently by Jenkinson and the Dutch trio of Mueller, Feith, and Fruin, posits that the archivist is an impartial, passive keeper of records, an "invisible bridge"[5] between the past and present, with professional methodologies that preserve the truthful, authentic connections between act and evidence, and ensure the orderly, transparent transmission of evidence between the creator and the archives. In a postmodern climate, as Terry Cook insists, "the traditional notion of the impartial archivist is no longer acceptable. . . . Archivists inevitably will inject their own values" into all stages of archival practice.[6] Many authors have used postmodern ideas to draw attention to the value-laden, subjective, and mediating nature of archival processes.

While postmodern thinkers have considered many archival functions, they have focused most directly on the mediating and subjective role we play in building and preserving the historical record. Indeed, our personal, professional, political, and cultural biases are most obvious, and controversial, in the practice of selection and appraisal, and the profession has been struggling with these issues for more than a generation. In 1970 Howard Zinn criticized the notion that archivists were objective and neutral, pointing out the large absences of archival material documenting women, minorities, dissidents, peasants, etc. He argued that, by and large, selection and appraisal decisions served and reinforced dominant social and political structures, writing "the archivist, in subtle ways, tends to perpetuate the political and economic status quo simply by going about his ordinary business. His supposed neutrality is, in other words, a fake."[7]

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[3] For an overview of postmodernism contributions to archival literature, see Terry Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts" *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 3–24. Cook provides extensive citations to articles that address the implications of postmodern criticism on archival theory and practice.

[4] Francis X. Blouin, Jr., "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," *Archival Issues* 24, no. 2 (1999): 111.

[5] Terry Cook, "Remembering the Future: The Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory" (paper delivered at the Sawyer Seminars on Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Mich., January 2001): 3.

[6] Cook, "Remembering the Future," 13.

[7] Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest," in *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997), 522. Originally published in 1977 as "The Archivist & the New Left" in the *Midwestern Archivist*.

Rather than neutral assemblers of evidence, archivists' decisions are affected and directed by their own contexts. Contemporary authors have also questioned archivists' subjectivities as they gather historical documentation. Terry Cook and Francis Blouin both provide examples. Cook criticizes traditional approaches to archives that privilege official documentation of the state over that of individuals or private organizations in communities.[8] Blouin examines how power relationships and political structures have influenced the creation, selection, and exclusion of records in archives, essentially corrupting the archive as a repository of human memory. He writes, "If we are to grasp all the dimensions of human memory and its component particular pasts, then we must distrust the archive and archivists."[9]

Throughout the last few decades, archivists who work within the manuscript tradition have endeavored to balance the historical record through collecting the records of under-documented groups. However, even these collecting efforts, whether they are based on content, documentation area, or formal methodologies, are acts of mediation and products of cultural and local contexts. In the very act of soliciting and preserving the records of under-documented communities, archivists actively legitimize the experiences of these groups as worthy to remember and integral to understanding society as a whole. Ensuring a lasting historical memory is an act of empowerment, which is certainly not removed from the concerns of our times, local social orders, or individual interests. Both the absence of documentation of under-represented groups and efforts to correct the situation belie the extent to which values of individual archivists and the profession as a whole influence the historical record. Archives and archivists are not disinterested bystanders documenting human experience, but active agents in creating very specific views of historical reality. In the end, as Mark Greene and Todd Daniels-Howell have put it, "all appraisal is local and subjective."[10]

Aside from appraisal and more relevant to a discussion of the finding aid, some authors have also explored the subjectivity and pluralistic possibilities of archivists' work during arrangement and description processes, and the techniques and principles used to disguise it. At their heart, respect for original order and provenance address our mediating role in arrangement and description. They strive to reduce the archivist's meddling impact and influence on the records, so that the context of the records' creation and use is preserved and

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[8] Cook, "Remembering the Future," 11.

[9] Blouin, "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," 106. Blouin partly bases this conclusion on the work of Carolyn Steedman, "The Space of Memory: in an Archive." *History of Human Sciences* 11, no. 4 (1998): 65–67 and James O'Toole, "Cortes's Notary: The Cultural Meanings of Record Making," *RLG News,* Fall 1999, 10–11.

[10] Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, "Documentation with an Attitude: A Pragmatist's Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records," in *The Records of American Business,* ed. James M. O'Toole (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1997), 162.

the authenticity of the records' evidence is maintained. Yet even strict adherence to these concepts does not prevent the archivist from significantly influencing the transmittal of information through different steps of the records' life cycle. Brien Brothman argues that through "record grouping" and the application of original order, archivists have a transfigurative and transformative impact on records.[11] First, by separating and establishing the identity of records with the record group concept, archivists not only disguise the complexities of reality, but also impose socially constructed, information ordering schemas, essentially of archivists' own creation, for effective management. Brothman argues that this understanding of provenance for arrangement and description produces "a version among other possible versions of the information universe."[12] Second, he contends that truly maintaining original order is impossible, since it is upset whenever certain records are destroyed, transferred, or brought together into series. Instead, original order "caters to institutional requirements for a serviceable, idealized archival intellectual order rather than original order."[13]

Terry Cook and Tom Nesmith join Brothman in highlighting the mediating role of the archivist in arrangement and description. Cook is critical of the application of original order. Instead of allowing "several orders or even disorders to exist," he asserts that archivists seek or impose one order, then describe that order as natural and absolute. Researchers are presented with a "well-organized, rationalized, monolithic view of a record collection that may never have existed that way in operational reality."[14] Making a similar point, Nesmith describes the arrangement work of Douglas Brymner, first National Archivist of Canada, as a "type of authoring or creating archival records."[15] Although Brymner viewed arrangement as a "mechanical" process that cleared away "obstructions," Nesmith shows that Brymner indeed had a pivotal, personal impact on collections when he chose to adopt chronological schemes of organization or provided subject indexing.[16] It is an all too obvious point that the process of classi-

[11] Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 84–85. Although not writing from a postmodern perspective, Max Evans also speaks out against the record group concept, as practiced by the National Archives, for arranging and describing records according to static, fixed conceptions of organizational hierarchies. While he acknowledges that it is a useful management tool, he criticizes how the resulting inventories simplify and obscure the dynamic, fluid nature of actual records-creating contexts and entities. Max J. Evans. "Authority Control: An Alternative to the Record Group Concept." *American Archivist* 49 (Summer 1986): 251–53.

[12] Brothman, "Orders of Value," 84.

[13] Brothman, "Orders of Value," 85.

[14] Cook, "Remembering the Future," 11.

[15] Tom Nesmith, "Postmodern Archives: The Changing Intellectual Place of Archives" (paper delivered at the Conference for the Society of American Archivists, Pittsburgh, Penn., August 1999), 3.

[16] Idem.

fying, imposing order, and selecting index terms is a subjective and culturally determined endeavor.

Furthermore, our professional descriptive standards mask our subjectivity and influence. Descriptive standards are laudable in their roles of facilitating broader information exchange; promoting comprehensive, consistent, high quality description; enhancing the management of and access to data about our collections; and advancing the professionalization of archivists with a shared body of expert knowledge and practice. However, the application of a learned canon of rules, vocabulary, and procedures to produce varying degrees of uniformity does lend a certain aura of objectivity to our descriptions. Richard Harvey Brown and Beth Davis-Brown, echoing Zinn's criticisms above, argue that archivists' technical-rational processes tend to hide the true social and political implications of our work.[17] These social and political dimensions are deflected to technical discourse or explained as routine decisions, only available to and understood by initiated experts.[18] The finding aid, produced out of such a technical-rational process, is a self-effacing document. Elisabeth Kaplan notes, we are trained to "avoid editorializing in our finding aids," even though we are "surrounded by examples of our own blatant participation in the creation of the historical record."[19] As technical, stylistically neutral descriptions of collections produced after the transformative impact of appraisal, arrangement, and preservation, finding aids hide from users the subjective, mediating role we have on collections.

So What's an Archivist to Do?

These ideas force archivists to recognize and acknowledge our own subjectivity and the role we play in mediating the transmittal of knowledge about the past. Unfortunately, this discourse normally plays a critical rather than constructive role; postmodern critics have never been accused of being too pragmatic. While this critical stand can be taken, most archivists are still left with records to accession and preserve, collections to process, patrons to help, and other work to be done. But while we largely remain an applied profession, there are extremely important theoretical aspects to our work. There is a great deal to be done to determine appropriate changes of methodologies to respond to this critical discourse.

[17] Richard Harvey Brown and Beth Davis-Brown, "The Making of Memory: The Politics of Archives, Libraries, and Museums in the Construction of National Consciousness," *History of Human Sciences* 11, no. 4 (1998): 22.

[18] Brown and Davis-Brown, "The Making of Memory," 30.

[19] Elisabeth Kaplan, "Practicing Archives with a Postmodern Perspective" (paper delivered at the Sawyer Seminars on Archives, Documentation, and the Institutions of Social Memory, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, January 2001), 10.

In order to better communicate with users about the role archivists have in shaping the historical record, some critics do have suggestions that address the postmodern perspective. Cook sees opportunities to act within the Canadian total archives approach and his macro-appraisal techniques. Macro-appraisal seeks to document "the total historical human experience" and strives to capture multiple narratives and perspectives.[20] It is self-consciously subjective, although it has a "defendable intellectual framework."[21] In order to make appraisal decisions transparent to the future and allow researchers to see what archivists saw before their appraisal decisions, he argues that archivists should make their research, actions, and personal values known. He makes two suggestions: first that archivists place negative entries in inventories to show researchers what records were not acquired, and second that archivists document themselves with a vita and other biographical details to make the nature of their subjectivity more obvious.

Kaplan presents a different example for acknowledging the subjective role of the archivist. She points to Helen Samuels' project to document teaching and learning at MIT as a model for how archivists can own up to their subjectivity in appraisal and selection. Kaplan writes that Samuels self-consciously pursued and recognized her role as documenter, and kept careful record of her perspective, methods, bias, and decisions for later scrutiny.[22] Kaplan goes on to press archivists to "reveal our methods and our perspectives on all levels of archival endeavor." She includes the challenging question, "What kinds of additional information do our finding aids need to include?"[23]

If we recognize our role as mediators and transformers in our professional literature, why do we continue to efface our contexts and decisions in those very tools we employ to communicate with researchers about what we do and what they use? To address Brown and Brown's criticism of archivists hiding behind specialized archival processes, we need to be more open. Answering Kaplan's challenge, the finding aid is an excellent place to start. The remainder of this essay will advocate two changes to the finding aid that will enable us to better acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of our work and our role as mediators in the production of knowledge.

[20] Cook, "Remembering the Future," 16–17.

[21] Cook, "Remembering the Future," 23. This argument is now more readily available in published form in Terry Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (2001): 32–35. In this more recent article, Cook also sees postmodern archival description increasingly moving away from the "flat, mono-hierarchical, and static fixation on a final creator," as found in the traditional finding aid, and moving more towards provenance-based access schemes, with multi-dimensional architectures that support multitudes of relational links among contextual descriptions of the functions, structures, and activities of record creators, and the bodies of records to which they contributed.

[22] Kaplan, "Practicing Archives with a Postmodern Perspective," 11–12.

[23] Kaplan, "Practicing Archives with a Postmodern Perspective," 13–14.

Colophons

Although perhaps not intentionally, finding aids conceal archivists' decisions and work on collections. Honestly revealing our impact on collections is important, even for straightforward processing projects, and becomes even more important for collections in which significant appraisal and arrangement have been carried out. The addition of a new section at the end of the finding aid would at least partially address this shortcoming. Although not common today, the colophon provides an excellent framework for such a component to the finding aid.

Stated succinctly, colophons are statements regarding the creation of a work, written or printed after the main text has concluded. According to David C. Weber, the colophon has a history as long as recorded information itself, dating back at least as far as Babylonian and Assyrian texts of the Seventeenth century B.C.E. and also having its place in Greek, Chinese, and medieval European manuscripts.[24] Throughout history it has taken many forms. Medieval scribes used colophons to celebrate the completion of a work, praise their god, apologize for mistakes, ask for a reward, and even curse individuals who may have misused the text or information in unauthorized ways.[25] The colophon also played a prominent role in early book printing, initially providing both title and author information (before the inception of title pages), along with facts concerning the production of a text. Its role in book publishing leads to the most commonly known definition of the colophon, as "the inscription at the end of a book which gives its production information, with the names and roles of its chief physical creators, sometimes including personal comment from the craftsman who made it."[26] The many manifestations of colophons have one thing in common: they all provide contextual information regarding the production of a text.

The idea of a finding aid colophon presupposes that the archivist has an analogous role to a collection as printers or scribes have to the texts they are producing or reproducing. When processing, archivists shape and mold collections that are created by others, much in the same way printers and scribes shape and mold the appearance of texts, also usually created by others. Each party works with preexisting texts to make them available to a wide range of readers. Within this analogy there is an important distinction to be made. A colophon in a finding aid should be understood as a note about the collection, not only about the finding aid itself. A printer or scribe reproduces and represents a text, while the archivist's role is more about representation and inter-

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[24] David C. Weber, "Colophon: An Essay on its Derivation," *Book Collector* 46 (Autumn 1997): 380.

[25] Lynn Thorndike, "More Copyists' Final Jingles," *Speculum* 32 (April 1956): 321–28. For examples of curses in colophons, see Marc Drogan, *Anathema! Medieval Scribes and the History of Book Curses* (Montclair, N.J.: Abner Schram, 1983).

[26] Weber, "Colophon," 379.

pretation of a collection. In this way, a finding aid colophon would also acknowledge our editorial contributions.

A proposed finding aid colophon would be more ambitious than its traditional predecessors and could include a variety of information. Because its primary goal is to exist as a space where archivists can acknowledge and explain their impact on the transmission and representation of a collection, it should by nature be as flexible as possible. Without being prescriptive, archivists could use a colophon to record what they know about the history and provenance of a collection and to reveal appraisal, arrangement, description, preservation, and other decisions they made while working on a collection. The colophon could also be used to record biographical information about a processor, as well as any perspective they would like to contribute to the finding aid.

The sample colophon for the Frank Donner Papers, provided as an example in Appendix A, follows these loose suggestions.[27] It provides information about the processors of the collection and authors of the finding aid, the condition the collection was in when it arrived in the archives, how the collection existed in its previous environments, the focus of the work performed on the papers, and the decisions made while processing. While some of this information may seem obvious, routine, and even unimportant to archivists, it does give researchers potentially important information that has been obscured by the intervention of archival processes. For instance, the arrangement work on the collection completely obscured the disorganized and fragmented nature of the papers upon their arrival, and suggests incorrectly to a researcher that Donner himself kept his files in this order.[28] Moreover, the deaccessioning of Donner's clippings, while a perfectly sound and defensible archival decision, erases the fact that they existed. Acknowledging appraisal decisions in the colophon at least alerts researchers into Donner's methods and gives them direction to find research materials in other related sources.

Most archives keep track of this information but keep it in the privileged spaces of collection and/or donor files, which are off limits to researchers. While obviously these files should be kept private for reasons of confidentiality and donor agreements, we should make information in them available as much as possible, because hiding it also hides a good deal of context about the collection.

A new user study by Wendy Duff and Catherine Johnson suggests that users consider the viewpoint of the archivists behind finding aids and would there-

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[27] It should be noted that this colophon has not been included in the public copy of the finding aid for the Frank Donner papers. It was created as an example to spur a discussion.

[28] A Jenkinsonian purist may charge that we should not have arranged the papers at all. But following Frank Boles' defense of arranging manuscript collections without a useful order, we remain confident that our arrangement work in cases such as this provide researchers with a much more usable collection. See Frank Boles, "Disrespecting Original Order," *American Archivist* 45 (Winter 1982): 26–32. It just remains important to acknowledge our work in this area.

fore benefit from a colophon. As part of an interview for their study, they quote a historian as saying:

> Oh, generally speaking, within the finding aid I usually look at the general introduction to see the way in which the archivist has set it up, what the code words are and what the language of the aid is because that seems to vary from archivist to archivist. Or what was of great concern at the time when the papers were catalogued, because they have a history, themselves. The cataloguing process has built in historical problems.[29]

The use of a colophon would allow archivists to make our technical processes more transparent, thereby supplying researchers with a fuller understanding of a collection.

Arguably, existing standards already have containers for the kinds of information that the colophon proposes.[30] EAD's ⟨processinfo⟩ tag could encompass a great deal of the colophon's content. This tag may include the name of the processor, the date a collection was processed, documentation of routine processing activities, and a whole spectrum of information about accessioning, arranging and describing, preserving, and making a collection available. Other specific standard containers exist as well. ISAD(G)'s "3.2.3 Archival history" element, EAD's ⟨custodhist⟩ tag, and RAD's "1.7C Custodial history" element provide information about the history of a collection that may be significant for its authority, integrity, and interpretation. To capture how appraisal, disposition, or scheduling may affect the interpretation of a body of records, ISAD(G) has the "3.3.2 Appraisal, destruction, and scheduling information" element, while EAD has the ⟨appraisal⟩ tag. Information about the circumstances of a collection's acquisition can be captured in ISAD(G)'s "3.2.4 Immediate source of acquisition or transfer" element, "EAD's "⟨acqinfo⟩" tag, or RAD's "1.8B12 Immediate source of acquisition" element. RAD's "1.8B13 Arrangement" element allows the archivist to account for any significant reorganization or reconstitution of original order. ISAD(G)'s "3.7.1 Archivist's note" element allows archivists to explain who processed a collection and how the description was prepared.

However, distinct from any of the examples used to illustrate the suggested content for these fields, the colophon for a finding aid, like its pre-modern antecedents, represents a certain self-conscious perspective that acknowledges the processor's role in shaping a collection and presenting a specific view of it

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[29] Wendy Duff and Catherine Johnson, "Accidentally Found on Purpose: Information Seeking Behaviour of Historians in Archives" (paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Washington, D.C., September 1, 2001).

[30] International Council on Archives, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description* (Ottawa: Secretariat of the ICA Ad Hoc Commission on Descriptive Standards, 2000); Canadian Committee on Archival Description, *Rules for Archival Description,* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990), available on the Internet at <http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/rad_part1.pdf> (October 1, 2001); *EAD Application Guidelines for Version 1.0* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1999), available on the Internet at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/ead/ag/aghome.html> (October 1, 2001).

to patrons. It signifies an approach that may call a researcher's attention to the mediating "I" present in both the finding aid and the materials it describes. In this way, the suggestion for a colophon is not so much a challenge to existing data structure standards, but rather a push towards reconfiguring the tone, intent, and honesty of their content.

A n n o t a t i o n s

While the colophon may self-consciously alert the researcher about the subjective and mediating role of the processor in appraising, arranging, and describing a set of records and recognizes their singular perspective, annotations to finding aids would allow multiple voices to express different perspectives and readings of a collection after processing is complete. Over time, as reference archivists and researchers use a processed collection, they come to know more about the records or understand them in new ways. Reference archivists and researchers carry on many of the same processes of discovery, interpretation, explanation, valuation, and understanding as those archivists who initially undertook arrangement and description. Each may gain new insight into the context and content of the collection, the significance of certain records, and the relationships among the records within the collection and their relationships to other collections. Furthermore, each may have radically different perspectives and interpretations. Yet the finding aid privileges the first reading of a collection, arresting its evolution at a particular moment in time. Other valid or accumulative readings, which may be useful for discovery and analysis, are lost or recorded in disparate places removed from the collection. Why not capture and accumulate the experiences of re-readings as well? With Web-based annotations to online finding aids, archivists can exploit their roles as mediators and producers of knowledge to create a powerful tool for description, revision, reference, and research.

Web-based annotations are a means by which group members create and share commentary about documents.[31] Annotations have been described as a "fundamental aspect of hypertext" because they can allow readers to "respond to hypertexts with new commentary, make new connections and create new pathways, gather and interpret materials, and otherwise promote an accretion of both structure and content."[32] Annotations allow documents to grow, respond, and increase in value for a community of users. There are already many systems and encoding schemes in existence for this form of textual com-

[31] Martin Röscheisen et al., "Shared Web Annotations as a Platform for Third-Party Value-Added Information Providers: Architecture, Protocols, and Usage Examples," *Technical Report STAN-CS-TR-97-1582* (Palo Alto: Stanford Integrated Digital Library Project, 1995).

[32] Catherine C. Marshall, "Toward an Ecology of Hypertext Annotation," in *Proceedings of the Ninth ACM Conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia,* (New York: ACM, 1998): 40–49; also available on the Internet at <http://www.csdl.tamu.edu/~marshall/ht98-final.pdf> (October 1, 2001).

munication.[33] Most annotation forums allow users to make meta-information accessible to others at specific reference points in a document; the annotations are kept separate from the document itself, giving other users choice in which annotations to view. The character of annotation systems may vary according to how annotations are classified, what kinds of information an annotation captures about the contributor or comment, and how a community of annotators and readers is governed or restricted.

An annotation system need not be overly technical, and there are already many analogous systems in use that archivists could draw upon for guidance. These systems can be as simple as a bulletin board of reviews or comments, such as those appended to book entries at ⟨www.amazon.com⟩ or to recipes at ⟨www.recipezaar.com⟩. At both sites, reviewers submit their evaluations and other comments, and other readers then may vote about how helpful they find the review. Annotation systems have also been employed for academic and research purposes. CalPhotos is an image reference collection, maintained by the UC Berkeley Digital Library project, containing images of California plants. Because identification of the plants is subject to error, an annotation system was developed to allow registered users to correct, verify, update, and add commentary to any image in the database.[34] The DEBORA (Digital Access to Books of the Renaissance) project has experimented with adding annotations to digitized images of Renaissance books as a means of promoting collaboration and sharing among scholars. Annotations are placed and available at specific reference points in a text.[35] The COLLATE (Collaboratory for Annotation, Indexing and Retrieval of Digitized Historical Archive Material) project, currently under development, seeks to build a collaboratory space for archivists, researchers, and patrons using digitized historical material. In this system, annotations are central to building a rich knowledge base about the digitized objects and for enhancing indexing functionality. In the XML-based testbed project, three European film archives are contributing source material, as well as transcriptions, translations, summaries, keywords, and comments. Each annotation is marked with a digital signature to ensure the authenticity and integrity of the data.[36] These examples may provide inspiration for envisioning how finding

[33] For a general overview, albeit outdated, of annotation research projects and systems, see Rachel M. Heck et al., "A Survey of Web Annotation Systems," available on the Internet at <http://www.math.grin.edu/~rebelsky/Blazers/Annotations/Summer1999/Papers/survey_paper.html> (October 1, 2001).

[34] University of California, Berkeley Digital Library Project, "CalPhotos: Annotations and Corrections," available on the Internet at <http://elib.cs.berkeley.edu/photos/annotations.html> (October 1, 2001).

[35] David M Nichols et al, "DEBORA: Developing an Interface to Support Collaboration in a Digital Library," available on the Internet at <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/computing/research/cseg/projects/ariadne/docs/ecdl2000.html> (October 1, 2001).

[36] Adelhiet Stein, et al., "Going Beyond Traditional Digital Libraries for Cultural Heritage: The COLLATE Collaboratory." *Cultivate Interactive,* 6, no. 11 (2002), available on the Internet at <http://www.cultivate-int.org/issue6/collate/> (October 1, 2001).

aids can incorporate annotations that augment description and foster better communication among users and archivists.

For enhancing description in a finding aid, annotations could capture increasing amounts of detail about a collection or offer different perspectives on it. For instance, archivists and researchers might call attention to specific items within folders. They might elaborate on what can be found in a series, section, or folder. This would promote discovery by augmenting the existing form of access or by offering alternative descriptive language that may lead researchers to places they might have overlooked otherwise. The revision or accretion of descriptive terms would allow the finding aid to communicate multiple interpretations about the content, context, and significance of the records. At a broader level, archivists and researchers could continue to develop or correct biographies, administrative histories, and scope and content notes. Annotations could also accommodate revisionist understandings for how the collection was originally ordered or used, or how the collection might also have been arranged to enhance its meaning. Utilizing hypertexts, archivists and researchers could not only develop webs of cross-references to other items, collections, or pieces of scholarship, but also map contextual relationships among individuals, families, and organizations that are relevant to an understanding of the records.

Annotated finding aids could also assist in the work of the reference archivist. Reference archivists could track their discoveries when answering reference requests with annotations. Other archivists and researchers could then exploit this knowledge repeatedly. Reference archivists might also explain how previous researchers have used a collection, hence giving researchers insight into the significance and potential research value of a collection. The finding aid, in its enriched form, could truly become the center for the accumulation of knowledge about a collection, instead of residing in the experience and knowledge of seasoned reference archivists.

As a tool for research, annotated finding aids could become a meeting space for a textual community to share experience, form arguments, and exchange and review each other's citations. If annotations were possible in a union database or other shared space of encoded finding aids, then researchers could build a web of relationships based on their discoveries among collections and repositories. Researchers might also annotate finding aids to show where they found records that contributed to their arguments. This could be useful for managing citations and fostering the peer review essential to scholarship. Furthermore, annotations within a finding aid might even become a locus for sharing researchers' interpretations about certain records that the finding aid describes.

Annotations raise many troubling questions because they would capture and incorporate different archival processes and areas of expertise into our basic descriptive tools. By opening up descriptive tools for comment, criticism, and review, not only from other archivists but also from researchers, annotations could threaten archival professionalism. In addition to criticism, annota-

tions raise possibilities for abuse and degradation; archivists may have to make weighty decisions concerning which archivists or researchers would be allowed to comment, or if comments were subject to verification or censure. Admittedly, this may add another level of mediation to archival decision-making, but this fact does not erase the benefits of including a plurality of perspectives about records and collections. Furthermore, the usefulness of annotations would have to be explored. For instance, would they be more useful as administrative tools for reference work or as research tools for historians and genealogists? Finally, we must ask if finding aids are the most appropriate archival tool for the formation of a document-based community. As a means of communication among collections, archivists, and researchers, the finding aid seems ideally poised for sharing perspectives and comments; however, annotations could transform the finding aid beyond recognition and its original purpose.

Yet despite potential drawbacks, annotations raise exciting possibilities for a postmodern intellectual climate. The annotated finding aid could support the evolving, radically changing, or contrary understanding of the context, significance, and meaning of a body of records. Instead of privileging the processor's own context and perspective in interpreting and describing a collection, annotated finding aids would enable description to grow richer and remain relevant over time. It could encourage acknowledgment, review, and criticism not only of the processor's impact and view of the records, but also those of subsequent archivists and researchers. In essence, the annotated finding aid would be both a recognition of and continuing tool for the mediating role archivists in the production of knowledge.

Conclusion

Colophons and annotations represent suggestions for shifts in archival methodology as a response to postmodern criticism. If employed, they would allow us to be more open about our techniques, to incorporate multiple perspectives about the content of collections, and to provide a structure for recording growth in meaning of collections. They would also force researchers to acknowledge the value we add to collections and spark more dialogue between the keepers and users of archives, which will in turn lead to greater understanding of the historical record. By revealing the nature of our decisions and opening them up to a broader community for further interpretation, we fulfill to a greater extent our responsibility and role in the transmittal of cultural and social memory.

A p p e n d i x :   C o l o p h o n   f o r   t h e   F r a n k   D o n n e r   P a p e r s

The Frank Donner papers were processed by Michael Cohen, a Ph.D. candidate in American Studies with particular expertise in the history of leftist political movements in the United States, and me during a ten-month period (May 2000-March 2001) in roughly two stages. Michael began by working on the sections that eventually became the Writings and Informers series. He also drafted the biographical sketch and description of the papers, which were subsequently edited. After he finished his part-time appointment in July 2000, I took over processing the collection, finishing his parts and working on the sections that became the Subject Files. I wrote the finding aid with editorial contributions from Christine Weideman, Nancy Lyon, and Carol King.

The papers came to Manuscripts and Archives in two different accessions, one from his office in the Yale Law School and the other from his home office. These accessions have subsequently been merged into one coherent collection, as they overlapped greatly in content and type of material. Though mostly in folders when we began, the files were exceedingly disorganized and most of the order of this collection in its current state has been imposed. Writings by Donner about his collection suggest that the files had at one point had a discernible order, which was useful to researchers, perhaps with his assistance, but the logic of his arrangement scheme did not survive. The most time and intellectual energy was put into culling together information on the various informers and surveillance activities, as Michael and I agreed that this was the most important and substantive section of the collection and also the area for which Donner was best known as an expert.

Through the course of processing this collection, we also removed approximately eight boxes of materials and designated them for destruction. Most of this material was either duplicates or widely available elsewhere in the Yale University Library. Folders filled with articles Donner clipped from major newspapers and magazines (e.g. *The New York Times, Washington Post, Christian Science Monitor, The Nation*) comprised a majority of the separations. Most of these clippings came from the 1980s and concerned scandals and wrongdoings of the Reagan and Bush administration. Clippings from more obscure publications were generally retained and filed among the topical headings of Series III. The separations also included many published copies of Supreme Court proceedings that are widely available elsewhere.

Tom Hyry, June 2001

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